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Karimi, Hengameh (2023) Discerning the relationship between educational leadership and school improvement before and during the Covid-19 crisis in London primary schools. Doctoral thesis, University of West London.

10.36828/thesis/13691

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DISCERNING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19 CRISIS IN LONDON
PRIMARY SCHOOLS

HENGAMEH KARIMI

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements of The University of West London
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2023

Declaration

I certify that this thesis has been written by me. No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification at this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Hengameh Karimi, March 2023

Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the role of school leadership in driving school improvement before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. My aim is to understand how leadership models, styles, and strategies evolved in response to systemic challenges, with a particular focus on instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership. Through a dual-timepoint approach, I compare leadership practices in stable pre-pandemic contexts with the adaptive strategies employed during the crisis. Guided by a theoretical framework built on leadership theories, I emphasize the importance of resilience, collaboration, and equity in fostering sustainable school improvement.

To achieve this, I adopted an interpretivist paradigm and employed a multiple case study approach across six primary schools in London. I conducted semi-structured interviews with headteachers, school leaders, and classroom teachers, generating rich qualitative data. The data were thematically analysed, allowing me to uncover insights into leadership practices and validate my findings through participant feedback. This methodological design provided an in-depth exploration of leadership behaviours within diverse school contexts, offering nuanced perspectives on school improvement processes.

My research makes significant contributions by introducing the Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI) model. This model integrates resilience, equity, and innovation to guide leadership practices in times of uncertainty. I also propose the Holistic Approach to Student Success (HASS), a framework that emphasizes well-being, collaboration, and inclusive education to enhance student outcomes beyond

academic performance. These models offer practical strategies for policymakers, school leaders, and leadership development programmes.

My findings highlight the pivotal role of teacher leadership in fostering collaboration, the shift toward distributed leadership during crises, and the limitations of accountability-driven models under New Public Management (NPM). I argue that policy reforms, professional development for leaders, and enhanced school-family partnerships are essential to address systemic inequalities and build resilience within educational systems. This thesis contributes to theoretical, methodological, and practical advancements in educational leadership. By bridging the gap between research and practice, I demonstrate the importance of adaptive leadership, collaborative cultures, and stakeholder well-being in navigating complex educational challenges. My research offers a roadmap for sustainable school improvement in a post-pandemic world.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement and thanks are given to those enabling completion of this thesis: Each of my PhD supervisors who took a relay stint to see me through: Professor Maddie Ohl, very much involved at the confused beginning of Covid-19 crisis, keeping a weather eye during the middle, and providing immeasurable encouragement, significant expertise, and moral support at the later stages; Dr Viktoria Magne for her invaluable guidance through the first year progression board. Without them, I could not have undertaken this journey. I am also grateful to my previous supervisor and current mentor, Professor Stylianos Hatzipanagos, who generously provided knowledge and expertise. Thanks should also go to the university's Senior Administration Officer (Graduate Centre), Ms Maria Pennells for her effective communication and organisational skills.

Andrew Kalkhoran, my partner, who encouraged my embarking on the PhD and provided support throughout the journey. Everyone needs a critical friend and I have been fortunate to benefit from the support of my sister Minoo, who from 6000 miles distance has encouraged me to develop my clarity of thinking and writing style. In particular, I would like to give a special thanks to my mother for her moral support. Her belief in me has kept my spirit and motivation high during this journey.

I would like to thank the six Headteachers and their colleagues for their participation and insights helping me understand their perceptions of an effective leadership perspective. Lastly, I would like to thank the Internal and External Examiners and ask them to consider Silverman's (2005, p. 73) perceptiveness that certainly applies in this case: *"A successful dissertation does not require genius."*

Hengameh Karimi, March 2023

List of Abbreviations

ARP	Additional Resource Provision
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
CAHSS	College of Arts, Humanity and Social Sciences
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
COP	Community of Practice
DfE	Department for Education
DL	Distributive Leadership
ECT	Early Career Teacher
EI	Emotional Intelligence
EdD	Doctor of Education
FME	Free Meal Entitlement
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GPD	Great Professional Development
LEA	Local Education Authority
LfM	Leading from the Middle
LiM	Leading in the Middle
LS	Lesson Study
MAT	Multi Academy Trust
MLD	Moderate Learning Difficulties
MLT	Middle Leadership Team
NAHT	National Association of Headteachers
NCSL	National College for School Leadership
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NGA	National Governance Association
NLEs	National Leaders of Education
NPM	New Public Management
NPQH	National Professional Qualification for Headship
NPQSL	National Professional Qualification for Senior Leadership
ECT	Early Career Teachers
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PLC	Professional Learning Community
PSHE	Personal, Social, Health and Economic
PTR	Pause, Think and Reflect
QFT	Quality First Teaching
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SES	Socio-economic Status
SLCN	Speech, Language and Communication Needs
TA	Teaching Assistant
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
TL	Transformational Leadership
T&L	Teaching and Learning
TRG	Teacher Research Group
UK	United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UWL	University of West London
VCOPs	Virtual Communities of Practice
WHO	World Health Organisation

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Chapter 1

Introduction:

The Research, Its Context and Purpose

1.1 Introduction

Researchers' growing interest in school leadership is based on the belief that the leadership style of school leaders significantly impacts the quality of teaching and learning, ultimately affecting student achievement (Cruickshank, 2017). Effective leadership can enhance teachers' working conditions and improve the overall climate and environment of schools (Pont, Nusche, and Hunter, 2008; Shatzer *et al.*, 2014). While Leithwood *et al.*, (2006) have suggested that the influence of leadership style on student learning is second to classroom teaching. This defines teachers and teaching quality as effective factors in the journey of school improvement. Additionally, a review of empirical research on school leadership by Hallinger (2010) implied that leaders can have indirect or mediated positive effects on student achievement by building a collaborative organisational learning culture and helping to develop the leadership capacities of staff and community.

Bush and Glover (2014) associated the growth in the importance of school leadership with various leadership theories and further development of new models of leadership such as Instructional Leadership; Transformational Leadership (Burns, 1978); Distributed Leadership (Gronn, 2002); Contingent Leadership (Fiedler, 1964) and so on. Nevertheless, the two theories of instructional leadership and transformational leadership are the most regularly cited theories in the education related literature (Robinson, 2008). Educators including Hallinger (2003) and Shatzer *et al.* (2014) have

endorsed both theories as appropriate models of leadership for school leaders. Similarly, Day, Gu and Sammons (2016) suggested an integrated form of instructional and transformational leadership as an effective variable for improving school outcomes. In addition, (Arnett, Moesta and Horn, 2018) and Robinson (2008) recognised the instructional role of school leaders as an important key factor to develop teaching and learning quality and contribute to school improvement. However, there is a plethora of perspectives on leadership styles, but a lack of certainty about which leadership models are more likely to contribute to the improvement of school and student achievement (see Bush and Glover, 2003; Day *et al.*, 2016; Harris, 2004; Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; and Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009) has created confusion in the field. Therefore, in the current research of my thesis I seek to examine the theoretical underpinnings of the leadership practice of the participant schools, with the aim to assess different leadership models and behaviours and discuss evidence of their relative effectiveness in guiding school improvement. More specifically, I explore the experiences and perceptions of headteachers, leadership team members, and classroom teachers as they join hands to enhance student achievement and guide their schools towards improvement.

1.1.1 *Researcher Position*

The rationale for conducting this research on leadership and school improvement originated from my professional life experiences. Having spent my working life in educational settings, learning to be an expert in second language acquisition led me to the profession of teaching. Therefore, after completing a master's degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), I attained Qualified Teacher Status. Throughout my teacher training at a Higher Education college and a Language Centre,

I observed and experienced effective and ineffective educational leadership. Furthermore, I observed how unsustainable leadership skills discouraged teachers and decreased their expectations to work harder for better teaching and learning outcomes. Conversely, I took advantage of the positive impact of leaders that motivated everybody in the setting including teachers; the learning support assistants; the students and even trainee teachers. This determined me to explore and pinpoint the complex range of conditions necessary for successful leadership and school improvement. Hence, I hope that the knowledge gained from this research will be beneficial to others in the field. In addition, I have hoped to gain a deep insight into the practice of different school leaders to identify their leadership approaches which may support the existing leadership models or develop additional models to be used in schools in the future. By the identification of practical leadership models, my thesis will contribute to the professional growth of staff and development of school organisations and expand the knowledge about the practice and policy of school improvement.

Being informed by the existing literature early in the course of undertaking the current research, I identified various variables that are linked to school improvement. Among the variables was included the leadership style of school leaders, which is already known as an important contributor to the improvement of school and system performance (Cruickshank, 2017; Fullan, 2007; Groves and West-Burnham, 2020; Harris, 2014; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005). However, I noted that the great importance of leadership has led to a plethora of alternative leadership models with a lack of certainty about which leadership models are more likely to contribute to the improvement of school and student achievement. This created a need for extended inquiry into exploring the relationship between any forms of leadership with learning

outcomes and school improvement related to classroom learning (Bush and Glover, 2003; Day *et al.*, 2016; Harris, 2004; Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; and Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009). To explore the issue, therefore in the research of my thesis, I seek to examine the theoretical underpinnings of the leadership practice of the participant schools, with the aim to assess different leadership models and behaviours and discuss the evidence of their relative effectiveness in guiding school improvement. Throughout the thesis, I have used the term, 'educational leadership' synonymously with 'school leadership.' As Southworth (2003) suggests educational leadership is the field of study and practice concerned with the operation of schools and other educational organisations. Thus, discussions about educational leadership in this thesis tend to refer to the formal organisational positions in schools such as: headteachers/principals, deputy and assistant headteachers/principals, heads of department/subject leaders, and heads of year. Moreover, I have defined the concept of 'school improvement' as an organised learning process within a school with two goals: improving people (Boyer, 1995) and enhancing organisational capacity (Siguroardottir and Sigporsson, 2015).

This first chapter begins by introducing the aim of my research and its associated research questions. Providing a brief overview of the contextual background to the study, it is important to look at the change and continuity in the school leadership literature. Therefore, adopting a historical perspective, the context presents an abbreviated history of educational reforms in England to highlight the significant changes in the field. Subsequently, an outline of each chapter follows, beginning with an overview of the review of the literature, illustrating the key role of school leadership within the everchanging landscape of education and the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic. I have then presented a relevant theoretical framework and conceptual

model underpinning the current research.

1.1.2 Research Aim and Associated Research Questions

My research aims to explore the role of school leadership in driving school improvement before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. By addressing theoretical gaps in understanding leadership practices, particularly in complex and crisis contexts, this study sheds light on how instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership evolved in response to systemic challenges. I intend to uncover how school leaders in six primary schools in London adapted their strategies to maintain equity, collaboration, and resilience while navigating crises. To achieve the desired outcomes I have outlined the following objectives:

1. To identify the strategies used by school leaders to initiate a change or sustain an improvement process in school.
2. To understand the relation between professional development of teachers and school leaders with school improvement.

One key and four ancillary research questions arose from the literature review:

Overall Research Question

Which forms of educational leadership are more likely to contribute to school improvement?

Sub-research Questions

1. How do educational leaders contribute to school improvement?
2. What is the role of teachers in school improvement?
3. What is the contribution of staff professional development for school improvement?
4. What was the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on school leadership?

1.2 Contextual Background to the Study

It seems well established that there is a correlation between leadership style and school effectiveness (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005; Robinson, 2007). However, there is a plethora of perspectives on leadership styles, but which one/combination of these models is more effective in the success of schools, requires exploration and that is the main concern of my thesis. Considering the process of school improvement as a person-centered journey, the principle of 'school improvement is people's improvement' (Boyer, 1995) drives the thesis forward with an underlying belief that student learning is an outcome of teacher learning. Based on the directive role of school leaders in this process, I have explored the work of different school leaders to gain a better understanding of how they drive their schools towards better outcomes; what strategies they apply to initiate a change or sustain an improvement process; and what activities they use to promote learning for everyone in their schools including themselves. Being a teacher, I also aimed to discover the ways by which teachers can enhance their contributions to the journey of school improvement.

It is worth noting that the notion of school leadership is far from being stabilised and its realisation varies according to policies and local contexts (Normand *et al.*, 2018). I learnt that substantial changes affecting the role and expectations of school leadership date back to the period between the late 1970s to the 1990s, where governments around the world reshaped the public education sector. These reforms came to be termed 'New Public Management' (NPM) (Hood, 1991), with 'marketisation' as the only element that can be described as characterising this ideology (Tolofari, 2005). The changes that occurred were salient with the introduction of the Education Reform Act of 1988 by the Conservative government. Christensen and Laegreid (2001) characterise the educational reforms in relation to the local management of schools

using principles of managerialism, i.e., *decentralisation*- to weaken or abolish the power of Local Education Authorities (LEA). Power was given instead to parents and school governors, with a focus on performance and monitoring, and the high influence of stakeholders in the daily life of the school, while the collegiality of educators became diminished. The rationale behind these reforms according to Aldrich (1994) were to transfer control of education from the central government to the hands of consumers (such as parents and employers) and to use market forces to improve the effectiveness of schools. Efforts to import private sector norms into the public services by the Conservative government of the 1980s therefore established a quasi-market in education with greater competition among schools. These market-based reforms, as Gobby and Wilkins (2020) contend, on the one hand strengthened the status and the importance of educational leadership to schools and allowed more leadership styles by choice or necessity to be practiced; on the other hand, it changed the internal operation of the school to more closely resemble a business with all the incentives and trappings that are necessary for setting up and running a business such as performance management and measurement, business-like management styles and key performance indicators. With corporate leaders and private businesses being the models for school governance, school leaders are described as corporate leaders and are expected to develop and manage partnership with external partners and stakeholders in order to improve performance and accountability (ibid. 2020).

Another notable change that occurred due to the NPM policies and affected the practice of school leadership was in 2000 when the New Labour government reinforced a change in direction away from competition to partnership and cooperation. The City Academies programme was introduced by the government to enable different providers such as universities, charities and social enterprises, set up as private limited

companies, to oversee management of underperforming schools in disadvantaged, urban areas, thus removing certain schools from the control of Local Education Authorities (LEA) (Gobby and Wilkins, 2020). Despite this change however, little was done to reverse the quasi-market of the preceding Conservative governments. In 2010 the Coalition government (a cooperation between the Conservative and Liberal Democratic party) revised the academies programme to enable all schools to convert to academy status by joining or creating their own foundations or trusts (The Academies Act 2010). In effect, encouraging high-performing schools as a resource to support weaker and struggling schools (National College for School Leadership [NCSL], 2009). Promoting school-to-school support was seen as particularly vital in addressing the challenges and problems of primary or secondary schools and bringing about school improvement. Therefore, moving the responsibility for this school-to-school improvement work further towards school leaders themselves (ibid. 2009). Where Hargreaves (2010) coined the term as a 'self-improving school system.' In January 2018, statistics released by the Department for education (DfE) indicate 6,996 maintained schools were converted to academies (72% of these secondary schools, including free schools and 27% primary schools). Noting, the conversion of maintained schools into academies, as Chapman (2013) explains, has changed the way schools are organised internally, especially among sponsored academies that are run by large management groups known as multi-academy trusts (MATs). More key changes highlighted by Wilkins (2016) include stricter focus on performance management, centrally mandated contractual obligations, and market discipline to enhance external accountability to funders and regulators.

Even though the reforms created by the coalition education policies have emphasised school cooperation and collaboration, it was clear that the governments in power

seemed to remain committed to promote competition between schools. This was evident since the conversion of schools to academy status was accelerated, allowing both successful and failing schools to convert to academy status. Considering the reforms have inadvertently supported the development of a quasi-market, there have always been questions about compatibility of competitive and collaborative arrangements in education (Goker, 2020).

1.2.1 Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on this Research

While the background of new public management (NPM) reforms provides a crucial foundation for understanding the shifts in educational policy and the role of school leadership, the onset of the Covid-19 crisis has introduced unprecedented challenges and complexities that directly influence the trajectory and focus of my research in this thesis. After recruiting two outstanding schools in the context of NPM, Covid-19 emerged. The implications of this global outbreak on education and research are still far from obvious (Harris and Jones, 2020). Since the outset of this crisis in 2020, teaching and learning has been transformed into a remote and online activity while some school-based research studies have stopped or slowed down. My project is one of the many that has been paused and forced to take a new direction with a shift in the research methodology. However, considering the disruption as an opportunity, I was determined to know about the phenomenon of leadership both before and during the time of pandemic. This divided the project into two phases. Phase one, pre-Covid, with a focus on the leadership practice of schools in the context of NPM reform policies with identified features such as: decentralisation, marketisation, and privatisation. Phase two, during Covid-19, to explore the leadership practice of schools in the context of this unprecedented crisis. During the pre-Covid period, I studied two outstanding

schools in terms of identifying effective leadership styles exercised by the leaders of these schools in response to the impacts of the educational reforms of NPM. It was important for me to gain insights into the practice of these quality leaders and learn about their leadership styles and actionable responses to this policy. To date, although much has been written about the importance and intentions of the performance based NPM policy, nevertheless, according to Pashiardis and Brauckmann (2018), little empirical research has been undertaken to analyse what school leaders, especially headteachers do or prioritise in this context. Subsequently, with the impact of Covid-19, I decided to collect additional data from the two outstanding schools, as well as recruiting another four new schools. This opportunity enabled me to capture the reality and learn about this landscape scale crisis (Bryant *et al.*, 2020) but also improved my understanding about how school leaders responded to this type of crisis and what forms of leadership practice emerged in response. While there is an extensive literature on leadership and change management, as yet there is negligible empirical research on crisis leadership in school settings (Urlick, Carpenter and Eckert, 2021). Especially, on the impact of pandemic-included school lockdown (Huber and Helm, 2020).

1.3 Brief Overview of the Chapters

Chapter two provides a review of the related literature that presents a background to my study. I begin the chapter by presenting a historical review of school leadership theories leading on into subsequent sections to define and discuss key terms that underpin this thesis, including "leadership," "outstanding school," "teacher development," and "school improvement." Then, I provide discussions about the socio-political educational context in England, and the impacts of NPM and neoliberal ideologies on educational leadership and school improvement. Finally, I continue the

discussion by assessing the two notions of change and crisis, including the current Covid-19 crisis, as well as discussing the implications on the role of school leadership. Hoping to identify effective leadership styles adapted in the culture of change and crisis.

Chapter three provides a theoretical basis of effective school improvement grounded on leadership theories. Notably, I have suggested three leadership theories for the context of this thesis including instructional leadership, transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), and distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002). Considering any style of leadership will refer to specific social behaviour, the effectiveness of these theories is tested in practice in relation to staff and school improvement. Based on this framework, I have presented a conceptual model for school improvement to identify effective leadership model (s) implemented by school leaders to foster development for staff and the school organisation.

Chapter four presents the research design and methodology of my thesis. The methodological choice of mine was a result of conducting a small-scale systematic review to identify the most popular methodological approaches used by scholars and researchers to study leadership in the field of education (from 2016 to 2019). As a result, I selected case study as a research design, collecting data through individual semi-structured interviews. Finally, using a constructive approach in this research methodology, I took an interpretive stance to analyse the interviews thematically.

Chapters five and six demonstrate the findings I have obtained from the selected six case study schools. In these two chapters, I outline relevant data from 22 participant interviews from these schools. Interpreting and briefly discussing participants' perspectives to gain a better understanding of the school leadership practice. Through

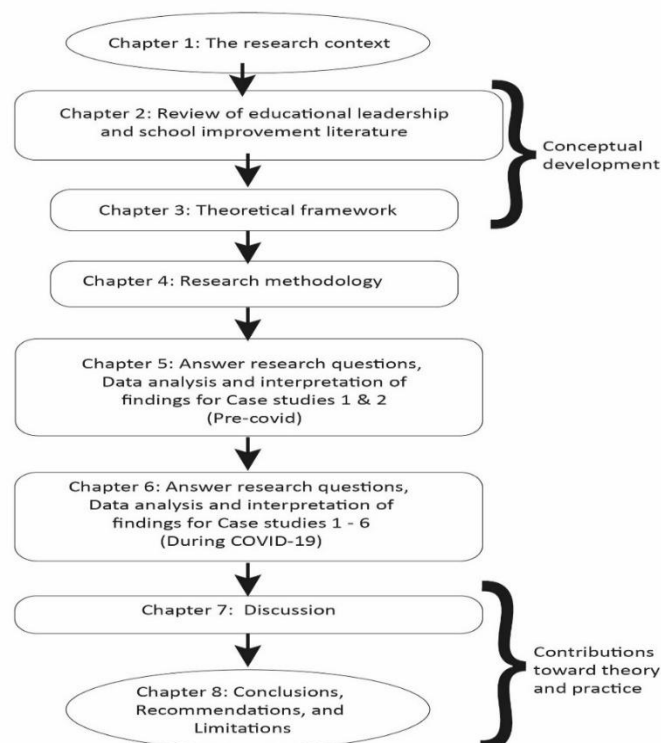
the findings across these chapters, I realised that the role of school leaders has changed. In particular headteachers have become more important during the crisis. It became clear for me that stronger leadership must be part of any strategy to raise student performance, deliver high quality teaching, and improve schools. In doing so, they remained central to the improvement of schools in terms of implementing a combination of effective leadership styles and attributes, retaining strategic control over the direction of school improvement, and providing a culture of support, collaboration and progress within and across their schools. While considering the concept of leadership is complex and multi-faceted in nature thus, context played a critical role in regard to school type and structure, norms of interaction, collaborative engagement and trust.

In chapter seven, I pull together the discussion of findings across the case studies, drawing from the literature review and theoretical framework chapters to inform an analysis, and discusses the implications of the findings and their potential impact. Here, I have used the key findings as a means of structuring the analysis of the finding chapters. Overall, nine themes (four in the pre-Covid time and five during the Covid time) and several sub-themes emerged from an analysis across the six case study findings, which I have explored in detail in chapters five and six.

The final chapter, chapter eight, is the conclusions chapter where I draw together the main findings arising from my study. Similar to the evidence provided by recent educators (see for example Groves, Hobbs and West-Burnham, 2017; Groves and West-Burnham, 2020), the findings of my thesis emphasis the need for change in the education system of England. Learning from the work of outstanding schools and the lessons from Covid-19, the premise is that schools need leadership models and improvement strategies that are adaptable, inclusive, and focused on the whole child.

As such, contextual and cultural factors need to be given more attention in the design of policies. Recommendations in that regard are made in the conclusions chapter. A reconceptualisation of school leadership is called for, along with the re-examination of the agenda for school improvement leading to a fresh thinking about schooling. Additionally, the methodology and research method were found successful in eliciting a depth of understanding of effective leadership styles and behaviours from the case studies' findings, informed by the views of their staff. However, I encountered a number of methodological challenges and limitations, as explained in this final chapter. The following diagram is a visual summary of the structure of my research helping to navigate information by presenting the structure in an accessible way (see Figure 1.1 below).

Figure 1.1: The Structure of My Research



The next chapter presents a review of the related literature and thus a background to my study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Educational leadership plays a vital role in shaping the trajectory of schools and fostering continuous improvement in educational outcomes. As schools strive to meet the diverse needs of students and adapt to ever-evolving educational landscapes, effective leadership becomes increasingly essential. Considering there are various interpretations of how and to what extent school leadership contributes to school improvement, in this thesis I rely on existing systematic reviews (e.g., Bush and Glover, 2014; Gumus *et al.* , 2018) to provide context to the key research question – which forms of educational leadership are more likely to contribute to school improvement- and identify the gaps and confusion in the current thinking. This research question serves as the guiding inquiry into the dynamic relationship between educational leadership and school improvement, probing into the diverse dimensions and complexities of this relationship. Educational leadership encompasses a multifaceted set of practices, behaviours, and strategies employed by school leaders to inspire, guide, and support stakeholders in achieving shared educational goals. From setting a compelling vision for the school to implementing evidence-based practices that enhance teaching and learning, educational leaders apparently play a crucial role in shaping the culture, climate, and effectiveness of educational institutions. Against this backdrop, in this literature review I seek to explore and critically analyse the complex interplay between educational leadership and school improvement. By examining key theoretical perspectives, empirical studies, and policy frameworks, I aim to shed light on the mechanisms through which educational leadership influences school

improvement efforts and outcomes. Central to this exploration are the following research questions:

1. How do educational leaders contribute to school improvement?
2. What is the role of teachers in school improvement?
3. What is the contribution of staff professional development for school improvement?
4. What was the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on school leadership?

These research questions guide the inquiry into the dynamic relationship between educational leadership and school improvement, probing into the diverse dimensions and complexities of this relationship.

To structure this literature review, I will begin by presenting a historical review of school leadership theories leading on into subsequent sections to define and discuss key terms that underpin this thesis, including "leadership," "outstanding school," "teacher development," and "school improvement." By establishing a clear understanding of these terms, I lay the groundwork for a nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the literature. Furthermore, I will provide discussions about the socio-political educational context in England, and the impacts of NPM and neoliberal ideologies on educational leadership and school improvement. Since the project ran through two different time points, before and during Covid-19 crisis, therefore, in addition to discussing the impact of educational reform policies on the education system of England, I also discuss and analyse the responses of educational leaders to Covid-19 crisis.

By drawing upon a diverse range of perspectives and empirical evidence, I intend to provide a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter, which makes the chapter to serve as a foundation for the subsequent chapters of the thesis, offering insights and reflections that inform and enrich the findings and conclusions of my study.

2.2 Historical Overview of School Leadership Criticism

Taking a historical perspective on school leadership criticism, I realise that the focus has changed from an approach on a leader born with innate abilities (trait or great man theory) (Carlyle, 1881) to one who can be developed with appropriate skills and training (skill theory- Katz, 1955), depending on the needs of the organisation (style of behaviour theory- Blake and Mouton, 1964). Relying on the working definition of the term leadership submitted by several studies including Bush (2003), any leader needs to be able to influence others. While according to the types of power these leaders may exert, Mackian and Simons (2013) categorise them as one of the following: laissez-faire allowing others to develop their own power from-within, democratic leaders in which members of the group take a more participative role in the decision-making process, or authoritarian leaders who like to have power over others.

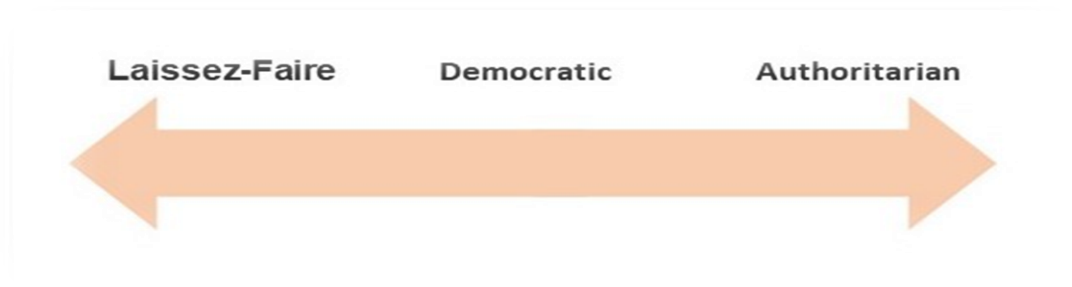


Figure 2.1: Leadership Continuum according to Mackian and Simons (2013)

Above all, it sounds essential to have appropriate awareness of the different traits, skills and styles of leadership for any leader who is willing to develop their own capacity to lead (ibid. 2013). Moreover, nowadays, the great deal of literature on leadership within a range of organisations, both general and educational has produced a range of views and models for leadership. Noting, some authors have attempted to classify these various conceptions into several broad themes or types (Bush, 2008). For

example, Leithwood *et al.* (1999) identified six models of leadership and later on Bush and Glover (2003) and Bush (2007) introduced nine further leadership models such as: managerial leadership; transformational leadership, participative leadership, interpersonal leadership, transactional leadership, postmodern leadership, moral leadership, instructional leadership, and contingent leadership. However, throughout the last two decades studies (such as Hallinger and Heck, 1998; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000; Robinson, 2006; Day *et al.* 2016; Pietsch and Tulwitzki, 2017) have emphasised the popularity of the two competing perspectives including instructional leadership and transformational leadership in the field. Observing more empirical evidence in the field (including Goldring *et al.* 2009; Leithwood *et al.* 2010; Walker and Hallinger, 2015) suggests that both of these leadership styles have impacts on student learning as well as on learning preconditions within schools. For instance, Robinson *et al.* (2008) compared these two leadership styles in a meta-analysis study and found that the effect size for instructional leadership on student achievement was nearly 4 times as high as the effect size for transformational leadership. Nevertheless, until now only a few studies have attempted to investigate the differential effects of instructional and transformational leadership using one coherent design (Pietsch and Tulwitzki, 2017). While other scholars such as (Hallinger 2003 and Leithwood *et al.* 2010) have noticed the overlapping factors of these perspectives on leadership style.

Besides the popularity of instructional and transformational leadership models in the domain of educational leadership research, I noted there are diverse leadership styles with many of them having been the subject of empirical inquiry. On the one hand, some studies consider a single form of leadership as an influential model for school improvement. Examples are a study by Dommick (2000) who asserts that for leadership to contribute to school improvement and better educational outcomes, it

needs to be a certain type, and that leadership must focus on teaching and learning. This is indeed the main characteristic of the instructional leadership model, also known by other names of leadership for learning (Ng, 2019), or leadership of teaching and learning. Subsequently, Dommick's claim is endorsed by Robinson's (2007) view, emphasising the importance of instructional leadership for developing school and student achievement. In addition, Spillane's (2005 and 2006) perspectives have added variety to the above views and identified distributed leadership as a conceptual or diagnostic tool for those thinking about school improvement.

On the other hand, researchers such as Menon (2013) and Cruickshank (2017) criticise the single approach, I described above, for not being effective for improving schools and student outcomes. Their debate supports the idea of an integrated form of leadership which was further mentioned in a study by Day *et al.* (2016). Likewise, there were other studies that reinforced the integrated model and declared that a combination of leadership types together results in improvement. For example, Hallinger (2003; 2007) was one of the theorists who recommended an integrated form of leadership (both instructional and transformational) as an effective leadership model. Acknowledging the great deal of support provided for the integrated form of leadership, additionally Orazi, Turini and Valotti (2013) have found an '*integrated form of transactional and transformational leadership*' particularly useful in the context of New Public Management (NPM). In agreement with these authors, transactional leadership (Bass, 1985) is a style of leadership in which leaders promote compliance by followers through the use of incentives such as rewards and punishments. Examples would be, monitoring staff performance, intervening when standards are not met, diagnosing the need of each staff member, and rewarding performance. While transformational leadership (TL) (Burns, 1978) is often associated with leaders who

set a vision and goals for their organisation; consistently communicate that vision and motivate followers using non-pecuniary incentives such as inspiration and persuasion (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Bass, 1998). Transformational leaders through providing support and building relationships develop an environment conducive to better learning outcomes and better working conditions within schools (Anderson, 2017); therefore, it can be said that they are similar to instructional leaders since both types of leadership create positive contextual impacts.

Furthermore, Fernandez, Cho and Perry (2010) consider leaders as '*strategic individuals*' who act in concert with other stakeholders. These authors focus on the interplay of leaders and followers in the traditional leader-follower relationship. However, a great amount of interaction in the organisation occurs between colleagues along the horizontal or vertical levels rather than between formal leaders and followers. This has given rise to the idea of '*distributed leadership*' (DL) (Gronn, 2002), which is promoted due to the decentralisation component of the NPM ideology. Distributed leadership also known as shared leadership, according to Spillane (2006) is a collective and interactive approach to leading where leadership is "*stretched over multiple leaders*" (p.15). For example, as Harris (2004) suggested, headteachers who distribute leadership responsibilities amongst their staff are more likely to build capacity for change and contribute to school improvement. Yet, despite the participative decision-making characteristic of this leadership style, it seems that the structural constraints and practical limitations associated with the NPM regime may not allow this model of leadership to be practiced widely within schools.

In addition to the idea of distributed leadership, it is worth noting that different schools and leaders within them might utilise specific leadership approaches. This is especially evident in a study undertaken by Morrison (2018) on an international school where the

school leaders rather than being satisfied to select a single defined leadership style, they defined their approach as situational/relational or a combination of democratic/authoritarian depending on context. This can be explained in terms of the way these leaders saw themselves as operating within a different contextual environment and their decision-making style was dependent upon the conditions of their school environment. Yet, it is also important to acknowledge that there are schools wherein their leaders may simply ‘muddle through’ and do not operate with specific models in mind. In such situations, it does appear that every movement of the leaders is decided on what seems best at the time rather than what was planned (Ackerman, Mette and Biddle, 2018). Bearing in mind, specific styles of leadership can work very well for a particular situation but might not work so well in another case. Hence, it is advisable for the leader to possess the knowledge to understand leadership styles and have the capability to select and perform the right leadership style. Therein lies the value of context and thinking about school leadership styles as a situational approach based on environmental and largely situational factors.

Therefore, with the myriads of leadership theories in the field, the current issues I have identified include, that, despite the diversity of views about leadership styles and behaviours in education, there exists a lack of certainty about which leadership model or combination of models are more likely to contribute to improvement of school and student achievement (Bush, 2007; Bush, 2020; Day *et al.*, 2016).

Understanding various leadership theories lay the foundation for exploring how effective educational leadership can drive meaningful school improvement initiatives.

2.3 Educational Leadership and School Improvement

In the context of educational leadership and school improvement, I find it essential to understand the crucial role that leaders play in driving positive change and fostering a culture of continuous improvement within educational institutions. Within this context, as defined earlier, leadership seems to be the process of guiding and influencing others to achieve positive changes in educational practices and outcomes (Bush, 2003). Accordingly Leithwood *et al.* (2004) emphasises the ability of effective leaders to exhibit vision, integrity, and empathy, inspiring trust, commitment, and collaboration among stakeholders. By articulating a compelling vision, building relationships, and empowering others to take ownership of school improvement efforts, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) suggest leaders can create environments that foster innovation, excellence, and continuous improvement.

Of course, various theoretical perspectives on educational leadership offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics and multifaceted nature of leadership within educational settings. Transformational leadership, for example, emphasises the importance of vision, inspiration, and individualised support in motivating followers to achieve collective goals (Bass and Avolio, 1994). Transformational leaders inspire trust, promote collaboration, and encourage innovation, creating a shared sense of purpose and direction that drives school improvement efforts. Similarly, instructional leadership efforts focus on the role of leaders in shaping teaching and learning practices, emphasising the importance of curriculum alignment, instructional support, and assessment for learning (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004). Instructional leaders provide feedback, facilitate professional learning, and foster a culture of inquiry and reflection that enhances teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Moreover, distributed leadership recognises that leadership is not confined to formal roles or positions but

is distributed across individuals and teams within the organisation (Spillane *et al.*, 2004). Distributed leaders empower stakeholders, build capacity, and foster collective responsibility for school improvement, promoting collaboration, shared decision-making, and continuous learning. By leveraging the diverse expertise and perspectives of stakeholders, distributed leadership practices enhance organisational effectiveness and promote sustainable change (Hallinger, 2021).

Moreover, from the field observations, I realised that in promoting school improvement, educational leaders adopt a systemic approach that addresses various dimensions of educational effectiveness, including curriculum, instruction, assessment, and school climate. They play a critical role in driving school improvement by inspiring vision, fostering collaboration, and empowering stakeholders to achieve shared goals and objectives (Fullan, 2020). Therefore, by embracing diverse theoretical perspectives and evidence-based practices, it appears that educational leaders can create learning environments that promote excellence and continuous improvement for all students. Building on these theoretical perspectives, this research introduces two conceptual models that extend the existing understanding of educational leadership and school improvement. The Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI) model proposes a dynamic approach to leadership that integrates elements of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership while emphasizing adaptability, equity, and collaboration—key factors that emerged as critical in both pre-Covid and crisis contexts. Additionally, the Holistic Approach to Student Success (HASS) framework highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach to school improvement, focusing on teacher agency, social-emotional learning, and long-term systemic change. These models provide a theoretical bridge between traditional leadership theories and the evolving demands of educational leadership in rapidly changing

environments. Their relevance will be explored further in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

2.4 Contextual Influences on Educational Leadership

Indeed, the literature indicates that educational leadership does not operate in isolation but rather is influenced by the broader socio-political, cultural, and economic contexts in which educational institutions operate. These contextual influences shape the opportunities and challenges faced by educational leaders and play a significant role in shaping leadership practices, priorities, and outcomes. For example, the socio-political landscape of the education system in England, as explained by Ball (2021), is deeply influenced by a myriad of factors, including historical legacies, policy agendas, and societal values. This intricate web of influences shapes the priorities, practices, and challenges faced by educational leaders and teachers alike (ibid. 2021). Acknowledging, the evolution of the education system in England is rooted in a complex history of social, economic, and political developments (Chitty, 2014). From the establishment of universal education in the nineteenth century to the expansion of comprehensive schooling in the post-war era, successive governments have grappled with issues of access, equity, and quality. Particularly, in recent decades, as I highlighted in the introduction of this thesis, the educational landscape in England has been influenced by neoliberal ideologies, marketisation policies, and accountability measures such as the New Public Management (NPM) reforms (Ball, 2021; Chitty, 2014). These neoliberal drivers have led to increased accountability, competition, and marketisation in education, impacting the roles and responsibilities of educational leaders and teachers (Harris, 2002).

2.4.1 *New Public Management (NPM) Policies*

Drawing from my review of the literature it is evident that the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles within the education sector has profoundly reshaped the governance and management of schools. In this case Chitty (2014) has described the main characteristics of NPM by its emphasis on efficiency, accountability, and decentralisation, which have instigated market-style reforms, including the implementation of performance targets, school autonomy, and heightened competition. Within this landscape, managerialism and performativity stand as the cornerstones of NPM reforms. As such, the local management of schools at the school level serves as a significant indicator of managerialism in education, marked by shifts in power dynamics and leadership both within schools and in their broader management and control systems (Raab, 2000). For instance, the introduction of school governing boards modelled on business boards exemplifies this devolved management process, transferring power over budgeting, appointments, planning, personnel, and other aspects from local education authorities (LEAs) to schools. Consequently, headteachers and teachers are held increasingly accountable for quality, measured and inspected through various instruments.

Also, structural changes in schools, drawn from studies by Arnott (2000), Ferlie *et al.* (1996), Fredriksson and Pallas (2018), Raab (2000), and Tolofari (2005), highlight shifts in roles, governance patterns, accountability frameworks, resource allocation dynamics, and underlying educational values. These changes reflect a departure from traditional collegiality among teaching staff toward a more hierarchical management structure, with headteachers assuming roles akin to business managers (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2018; Tolofari, 2005). Moreover, the imperative for such structural shifts lies in the pressure on educational institutions to generate higher levels of non-state

income, leading to a quasi-market scenario where schools compete for pupils and resources (Groves and West-Burnham, 2020). As a consequence, educational institutions are increasingly perceived as performance-based organisations (Peters, 2004), where performance becomes the core purpose, and school leaders are tasked with managing it (Marginson and Considine, 2000). This performance-based environment fosters new control methods, such as appraisal systems, performance-related pay, and output-based performance judgments (Reeves, 2006). Additionally, financial allocation becomes a significant control tool, alongside measures like standardised testing, school league tables, school improvement plans, and direct monitoring through school inspection (Wilkins, 2016).

Despite the constraints of NPM principles in schools, but through early studies like Cooper's (1988), I can argue that governmental influence has remained strong through the establishment of professional guidelines, performance targets, and strategic objectives against which schools are evaluated. Therefore, the notion of "governing at a distance" (ibid. 1988) underscores the accountability schools have to demonstrate for performance improvements to governing bodies and regulatory agencies, shaping the expectations and roles of school leaders.

In response to the challenges caused by the NPM reforms and discussed above, Pashiardis and Brauckmann (2018) have offered a hybrid leadership model like Edupreneurial leadership (consisting of entrepreneurial, structuring, and instructional leadership styles) aiming to balance external imperatives with internal operations. According to these authors, instructional leadership forms the baseline of effective school leadership. Instructional/pedagogical leaders are highly skilled in teaching and learning and deploy considerable leadership skills (Mathews, 2012). These leaders can influence student performance (Bush, 2020; Hallinger, 2003) through the quality

of teaching and learning, as well as promoting professional development for teachers (Hallinger, 2007). In other words, the conditions of teachers' working life, the amount of professional development they receive, and the way their performance is measured can be influenced by the extent to which instructional leaders practice quality assurance in schools. Worth noting, an excessive amount of quality assurance can create a rigid condition for teachers and decrease their performance (European Commissions, 2020). For instance, most business-like school leaders predominantly use the role of instructional leader to supervise, control and scrutinise teachers rather than coaching them in schools. Possibly, that could be a reason why Hulpia, Devos and Van Keer (2010) refer to this model of leadership as the 'supervision' leadership. Recalling the idea of principal/hero instructional leadership (Ng, 2019) which has led some educators (e.g., Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Ng, 2019) to emphasize that, in the 21st century instructional leadership should be reincarnated as 'leadership for learning'. However, there still exists a notable gap in empirical understanding regarding the priorities and responses of school leaders, particularly headteachers, to NPM reform policies (ibid. 2018). This gap underscores the need for further research to elucidate the nuanced challenges and strategies faced by school leaders within the evolving landscape of NPM-influenced education systems.

2.4.2 Impact of Neoliberal Ideas and NPM Policies on Educational Leadership and Teachers

As I explored the literature, it became clear that neoliberal ideas and New Public Management (NPM) policies have profoundly influenced educational leadership and teachers. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on market-oriented principles and individual competition, has penetrated education systems globally, reshaping the roles and practices of educators in profound ways (Jones and Brown, 2019; Smith, 2018). These

policy reforms have placed increased pressure on educators to meet performance targets, navigate accountability measures, and adapt to rapidly changing policy landscapes (Ball, 2021). Teachers, in particular, have faced challenges related to workload, accountability, and professional autonomy, which have impacted their morale and well-being (Ball, 2016).

In my exploration, I find that one of the most significant impacts of neoliberal reforms on teachers is the mounting pressure to meet standardised performance metrics and accountability measures. Within this framework, I observe a shift towards high stakes testing and league tables, leading to a narrowed curriculum and an overemphasis on rote learning and test preparation. As a result, teachers often find themselves constrained by the demands of meeting predetermined outcomes, which can stifle their autonomy and creativity in the classroom (Brown and Johnson, 2016).

Furthermore, it seems like neoliberal policies exacerbate existing inequalities within the education system, disproportionately affecting teachers and students in disadvantaged communities. Marketisation measures, such as school choice and competition, often lead to the stratification of schools, with resources and opportunities concentrated in more affluent areas. This creates additional challenges for teachers working in under-resourced schools, who must navigate limited resources while striving to support students with diverse needs (Glover and Miller, 2020).

The implementation of NPM principles, as discussed earlier, has introduced a culture of high-stakes accountability, characterised by top-down performance management and targets. Under this system, teachers are subjected to constant monitoring and evaluation, with their professional worth often judged solely on quantitative measures of student achievement. Such a culture of surveillance can contribute to heightened

levels of stress and burnout among educators, impacting their morale and overall well-being (Evans and Smith, 2019). In addition to these challenges, teachers also face constraints in accessing meaningful professional development and support. Budget cuts and resource constraints have limited opportunities for ongoing training and collaboration, hindering teachers' capacity to innovate and adapt to changing educational landscapes. This lack of support can leave teachers feeling disempowered and demoralised, ultimately impacting their effectiveness in the classroom and their ability to nurture student learning (Adams and Garcia, 2020).

Exploring the influence of NPM and neoliberal ideologies on educational systems sets the stage for examining how educational leadership can navigate and shape these dynamics to foster tangible school improvement outcomes.

2.5 Role of Leaders in School Improvement

Research indicates that educational leaders serve as the catalysts for change and progress within educational institutions, playing a multifaceted role in driving school improvement efforts. Their leadership practices, strategies, and priorities significantly influence the culture, climate, and effectiveness of the school community.

2.5.1 *Strategic Planning and Vision-Setting*

In particular, educational leaders contribute to school improvement by engaging stakeholders in strategic planning processes that articulate a clear vision, mission, and goals for the school community (Harris, 2022). Strategic planning involves analysing data, identifying areas for growth, setting priorities, and developing action plans to address identified needs (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986). Additionally, visionary leaders inspire and motivate stakeholders by articulating a compelling vision for the future of the school, one that reflects the values, aspirations, and priorities of the community.

(Murphy, 2023; Sergiovanni, 2019). By aligning the vision with the needs and aspirations of stakeholders, leaders create a shared sense of purpose and direction that guides decision-making and action toward achieving desired outcomes (Fullan, 2020; Leithwood *et al.*, 2022).

2.5.2 Fostering a Positive School Culture

Moreover, it was evident that educational leaders shape the culture of the school by modelling and promoting values, beliefs, and practices that support teaching and learning (Sergiovanni, 2019). DuFour (2014) characterised a positive school culture by trust, collaboration, high expectations, and a focus on continuous improvement (DuFour, 2014). Others (such as Gruenert and Whitaker, 2015; Heck and Hallinger, 2021) added, leaders foster a positive school culture by promoting open communication, celebrating successes, and addressing challenges transparently. By creating a supportive and inclusive environment where all stakeholders feel valued, respected, and empowered, studies show that leaders promote engagement, motivation, and collective efficacy, leading to improved student outcomes (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Harris and Muijs, 2023).

2.5.3 Empowering Leadership Practices

Moreover, educational leaders seem to empower stakeholders by providing opportunities for professional growth, collaboration, and leadership development (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2021; Spillane, 2021). In particular, distributed leadership practices can promote shared decision-making, collective responsibility, and distributed accountability among members of the school community (Bush, 2022; Harris, 2018). By empowering teachers, middle and senior level leaders, and other staff take ownership of school improvement initiatives, leaders seem to be

able to foster a culture of innovation, creativity, and continuous improvement (Harris and Muijs, 2023; Muijs and Harris, 2016). In doing so, Hallinger (2020) explains effective leaders establish structures and processes that support distributed leadership practices, ensuring that all stakeholders have the opportunity to contribute to the school's improvement efforts. Attempting to understand the pivotal role of educational leaders in driving school improvement sets the stage for exploring the key characteristics that define an outstanding school.

2.5.4 Definition of an Outstanding School

According to scholars such as Harris and Muijs (2023) and Ofsted's (2019) report, an outstanding school is a school that has been recognised for its exceptional performance and achievements in various aspects of education, including academic outcomes, student engagement, and leadership effectiveness. Ofsted's (2019) new framework comprises four complementary elements – quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development and leadership and management. School leaders of outstanding schools demonstrate a commitment via intent, implementation and impact towards excellence, equity, and continuous improvement, ensuring that all students receive a quality of education that prepares them for future success. As I delve into the defining characteristics of outstanding schools, it becomes evident that the collective efforts of dedicated educators, particularly teachers, play a crucial role in actualising and sustaining these standards of excellence.

2.6 Teacher Development and School Improvement

Evidence suggests that teachers play a pivotal role in school improvement efforts, and their ongoing professional development is crucial for enhancing student learning outcomes and overall school performance. In this section, I explore the significance of

teacher development in driving school improvement and define teacher development as a process aimed at enhancing teachers' knowledge, skills, and practices.

2.6.1 Role of Teachers in School Improvement

Studies including (Hattie, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2020) show that teachers are key agents of change within educational institutions, and their expertise, dedication, and effectiveness significantly impact student outcomes and school performance. Teachers contribute to school improvement efforts by implementing evidence-based instructional practices, fostering positive relationships with students, and creating engaging learning environments (Harris and Muijs, 2023; Leithwood *et al.*, 2012). Through their continuous commitment to professional growth and learning, teachers enhance their capacity to meet the diverse needs of students, adapt to changing educational contexts, and contribute to a culture of excellence and innovation within schools (Fullan, 2016; Little, 2019). Therefore, professional development plays a central role in enhancing teachers' knowledge, skills, and practices to improve student learning outcomes and overall school performance (Guskey and Yoon, 2009; Opfer *et al.*, 2016; Vescio *et al.*, 2008). Effective professional development initiatives provide teachers with opportunities for ongoing learning, collaboration, and reflection, focusing on evidence-based strategies that have a direct impact on student achievement (Desimone, 2009; Fishman *et al.*, 2013). Particularly, by engaging in professional learning communities (PLCs), action research projects, and mentorship programmes, teachers deepen their understanding of pedagogical content knowledge, instructional strategies, and assessment practices, leading to improved teaching effectiveness and student outcomes (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009; Hargreaves, 2015; Little, 2019).

2.6.2 Collaborative Learning Communities

Apparently, one approach to professional development involves the creation of collaborative learning communities, where teachers engage in ongoing dialogue, reflection, and inquiry to improve their practice (Little, 2020; Stoll *et al.*, 2006). Like PLCs, collaborative learning communities provide opportunities for teachers to share expertise, exchange ideas, and co-create solutions to common challenges, fostering a culture of shared learning and continuous improvement (Hord, 1997; Stoll *et al.*, 2012). Hence, by participating in collaborative inquiry projects, lesson study groups, and professional learning teams, teachers deepen their understanding of effective teaching practices, enhance their pedagogical content knowledge, and develop a shared understanding of high-quality instruction (Hargreaves, 2015; Harris and Muijs, 2023; Little, 2012).

2.6.3 Job-Embedded Learning

Another effective approach to professional development is job-embedded learning, which integrates learning opportunities directly into teachers' daily work routines and responsibilities (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009; Kraft *et al.*, 2020). Job-embedded learning initiatives, such as coaching, mentoring, and peer observation, provide teachers with personalised support, feedback, and guidance to improve their practice (Joyce and Showers, 2002;). By receiving targeted feedback and support from instructional coaches, mentors, or colleagues, teachers can identify areas for growth, experiment with new instructional strategies, and reflect on their teaching practice in real-time (Kraft *et al.*, 2018; Knight, 2021). Job-embedded learning promotes continuous improvement by connecting professional development directly to teachers' classroom experiences and instructional goals, leading to meaningful changes in teaching practice and student outcomes (Birman *et al.*, 2000; Kennedy, 2016).

2.6.4 Professional Learning Networks

Also, professional learning networks can offer teachers with the opportunities to connect with colleagues both within and beyond their school community, sharing resources, expertise, and best practices (Trust *et al.*, 2016). In a similar vein, professional learning networks, facilitated through online platforms, social media, or professional organisations, provide teachers with access to a wealth of knowledge and support, regardless of geographical location or institutional affiliation (Bakker *et al.*, 2016). By participating in online forums, webinars, and virtual conferences, teachers can engage in ongoing professional learning, collaborate with peers, and stay abreast of current research and trends in education (Richardson and Mancabelli, 2011). Professional learning networks foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation by connecting teachers with diverse perspectives, ideas, and experiences, enriching their professional practice and enhancing student learning outcomes (Hirsch *et al.*, 2019).

Suggesting that professional development and capacity-building are essential components of teacher development and school improvement efforts. Hence, by providing opportunities for collaborative learning, job-embedded learning, and participation in professional learning networks, it sounds like schools can support teachers in their continuous growth and development, ultimately leading to improved teaching effectiveness and student outcomes.

Acknowledging, the pivotal role of teachers in driving school improvement, it is essential to transition the focus towards understanding the mechanisms of teacher development, which are instrumental in enhancing their impact on student learning and overall school performance.

2.6.5 Definition of Teacher Development

Grounded on the discussion, above, the concept of teacher development seems to be a systematic process aimed at enhancing teachers' knowledge, skills, and practices to improve student learning outcomes and overall school performance. Teacher development encompasses a wide range of activities, including workshops, seminars, coaching, mentoring, and collaborative inquiry, designed to support teachers in their professional growth and learning (Vescio *et al.*, 2008). In this way, Little (2012) asserts that effective teacher development initiatives should be aligned with school improvement goals, evidence-based, and differentiated to meet the diverse needs and interests of teachers. Indicating that by investing in teacher development, schools can build the capacity of their educators to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing educational landscape and promote continuous improvement and innovation in teaching and learning (Garet *et al.*, 2001).

As I analysed the importance of teacher development in bolstering educational outcomes, my attention naturally shifts to defining the notion of school improvement. This exploration extends further into examining models such as those proposed by the New Public Management reforms, which provide structured approaches for enhancing organisational effectiveness and student achievement.

2.6.6 School Improvement Model through NPM

The New Public Management (NPM) reform policy, as discussed earlier, has had a significant impact on educational leadership and school improvement efforts, particularly in the context of the early 21st century in England. Early studies such as Hood (1991) suggests that NPM, as a set of administrative and managerial principles borrowed from private sector practices, is aimed to increase efficiency, accountability,

and performance in public sector organisations, including schools. The NPM model of school improvement emphasises performance measurement, market-driven competition, and decentralisation of decision-making authority (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). Under NPM, schools are expected to operate as autonomous entities, competing for resources and students based on their performance indicators, such as test scores, graduation rates, and student satisfaction surveys (Grebennikov *et al.*, 2017). Within this context, school leaders are tasked with implementing performance management systems, setting targets, and aligning resources to achieve desired outcomes, often under pressure to demonstrate improvements in student achievement and school effectiveness (Clarke and Newman, 1997).

However, the NPM model of school improvement has been subject to criticism for its narrow focus on quantitative measures of performance, its tendency to create competition and stratification among schools, and its potential to exacerbate inequalities and inequities in educational outcomes (Marginson and Considine, 2000). Hargreaves (2010) argues that the emphasis on standardised testing and market-based competition may lead to teaching to the test, narrowing of the curriculum, and neglect of non-academic aspects of education, such as social-emotional learning and character development. Moreover, the implementation of NPM reforms in education has been accompanied by challenges related to accountability, transparency, and stakeholder engagement (Hood, 1995). School leaders may face pressures to meet performance targets at the expense of broader educational goals, leading to a focus on short-term gains rather than long-term sustainability and equity (Hopkins *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, the marketisation of education under NPM may exacerbate social inequalities by privileging schools in affluent areas and marginalising those serving disadvantaged communities (Bacchi, 2009). Representing, the NPM model of school

improvement as a significant policy context within which educational leadership and school improvement efforts have unfolded in the early 21st century. While NPM reforms have aimed to increase efficiency and accountability in education, they have also raised concerns about their impact on educational quality, equity, and social cohesion.

Consequently, in examining the school improvement model through the lens of NPM, it does appear that the principles of efficiency, accountability, and decentralisation have significantly shaped educational governance and management practices. As I transition from the discussion on NPM's impact on school improvement, the focus now shifts to exploring the dynamic role of school leadership in times of change and crisis, particularly amidst the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the following section, I examine the evolving nature of educational leadership in navigating change and crisis situations, shedding light on the strategies employed by school leaders to adapt, innovate, and sustain effective practices in the face of unprecedented challenges.

2.7 School Leadership in Times of Change and Crisis

This constantly changing landscape of education whether caused by political ideologies, economic reasons, or a health pandemic increases challenges especially in the performance of school leadership and calls for effective leadership styles and behaviours. This means that as a project running during the global Covid-19 pandemic, in the second phase of this thesis, I explore how school leaders respond to this crisis, whether this crisis changed the way schools behaved, and if so, what forms of educational leadership emerged. In doing so, this section provides a context to understanding school leadership in the conditions of change and crisis. I begin the

section by offering a definition on two similar concepts of 'change' and 'crisis,' discussing the role and responsibilities of leadership in driving a change. Furthermore, to gain insights into the field of crisis leadership and management, I then present a review of crisis leadership, evaluating effective strategies adopted by crisis leaders and managers in non-educational settings to overcome the challenge. This leads on to a discussion about crisis in schools and the ways in which school leaders have navigated through the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.7.1 Crisis Leadership Criticism

I realised that two often cited and influential scholars in the field of educational change are Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves. These educators (Fullan, 2007; 2008; 2020; Hargreaves, 2009; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) emphasise the importance of improving the profession of teaching to achieve effective school improvement. At the heart of their concern for effective educational change is the crucial role school leadership plays, building a shared vision and collaborative environments for development and learning in and across schools (Fullan, 2007; Harris and Chapman, 2002). In Fullan's (2021, p.1) view, "*change is a double-edge sword.*" This definition carries the polarity encompassed within the phenomenon of change. The message is clear, when things are unsettled, we can still find ways to move ahead and to develop breakthroughs. Noting that a change represents an uncertain future where people are not quite sure what to do – school leaders leading through a process of change need to provide guidance and reassurance that where they are going is better than where they have been. This explains why McNulty (2019) insists the importance of creating a kind of forward momentum to be critical in change efforts. In this process one thing organisations should remember is that change is now perceived as a condition of normality, a situation that does not frighten anymore to such an extent as it did even a

few years ago. Moreover, it really feels today like a normal process which people and organisations have to go through. Effective school leaders thus need to reinforce a message that: despite presenting difficulty, a change is a necessity in education (ibid. 2019). Therefore, these leaders should provide help in the best cases to retool and retrain staff for that new role so they are ready for it. Indeed, this is an enormous responsibility for leaders to take on and as Kotter (2012) highlights, it demands a team effort to develop and communicate the vision to large numbers of members, overcome resistance, generate short-term wins, and integrate the changes into the organisational culture. In this way, Kotter reinforces the importance of teamwork especially relevant for the competitive world we live in, by stating:

The hierarchical structures and organisational processes we have used for decades to run and improve our enterprises are no longer up to the task of winning in this faster-moving world. (Kotter, 2012, p. 1)

This claim alerts leaders who attempt to implement change alone and who are therefore more likely to end up being isolated and not succeeding in the change process. Consistent with Kotter (2012), the role of the leader is therefore to put together a winning coalition, where the members of the coalition need to be enthusiastic, committed, and credible to ensure a successful transformation of the organisation. More so, an effective coalition can process information more quickly and spread the implementation of important decisions (Issah, 2018). Leaders should not set up a coalition and expect it to succeed in the transformation, but rather they should work with the coalition to share the sense of the problems, opportunities, and commitment to the change process. This implies the importance of collaboration in the process of change. Noting, the presence of trust in a coalition is also essential for the creation of teamwork irrespective of the process adopted in forming the coalition (Kotter, 2012).

In addition to the great importance of collaboration, connectedness and trust between leaders and their team, studies have stressed the critical role of communication during a process of change. For example, Issah (2018) noted that in any situation of change, a key determinant to the level of success is the degree to which the leader is able to communicate a need for the change to the organisational members. Thus, effective leadership seems to be central to a successful organisational transformation, where Fullan (2020) has called this type of leadership as Change leadership model. In agreement with Fullan, to lead complex changes of today's world more effectively, school leaders should be successful change leaders with five crucial qualities including moral purpose, understanding change, developing caring relationships, building knowledge and promoting deep learning, and coherence making. This model of leadership enhances team members' commitment and foster improvements for schools (Fullan, 2020).

Beside creating the conditions for organisational change, leaders also should be willing to change themselves. This change according to Boyatzis, Goleman and Rhee (2000) can be done by displaying adaptability, self-confidence, innovation, and by serving as change catalysts. By setting such an example, leaders gain credibility among their followers, which is necessary for obtaining followers' acceptance of the proposed changes. More importantly, preparing leaders in the domains of emotional intelligence (EI) will enable them *'to engage with staff, build commitment, forge working relationships, and increase staff-satisfaction'* (Foltin and Keller, 2012, p. 22). So, that leader will have to succeed in the midst of these challenges, amongst which are the emotions of those to be affected by the change. Hence, there has been an increased focus on EI in leadership in managing the process of change. Goleman (2004) defined EI as, *'the ability to be aware of and to handle one's emotions in varying situations'* (p.

4). Considering change can trigger an emotional response among people affected by it, it is the role of leaders to provide enormous amounts of empathy and EI to keep the organisation aligned, motivated, and focused (Goleman, 2004). Thus leaders identified to be effective, should have an appreciable level of EI skills displayed in the figure below (see Figure 2.2 below).

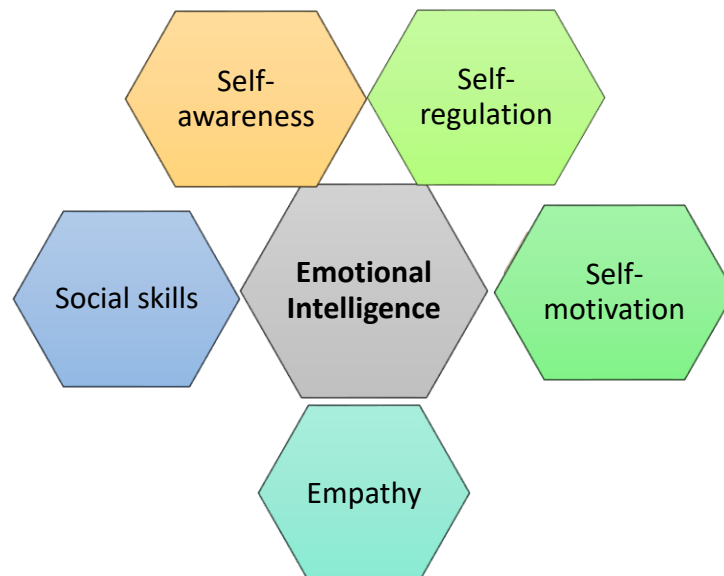


Figure 2.2: Components of Emotional Intelligence (Source: Goleman, 2004)

Referring to the above figure, leaders can improve organisation and institutional effectiveness if they respond to their followers with empathy. Evidence suggested by literature (see Duckers *et al.*, 2017; Srivastava, 2013) highlights the need for leaders to understand, recognise, and manage emotions for effective leadership. Meisler, Vigoda-Gadot, and Drory, (2013) noted that people who have developed emotionally intelligent-related skills, use their moods and emotions and that of others to motivate them to adapt the desired behaviours. That said, these abilities and skills are essential for leaders to successfully facilitate change. They enable leaders to identify the talents needed to build a winning team, and the ability to overcome resistance to change. Accordingly, Issah (2018) adds that EI is the most important ingredient contributing to

increase morale, cooperation, teamwork, motivation, and a positive work environment. Moving forward, as I will discuss in the coming sections, the crucial role of emotionally intelligent leaders can be corresponded to the conditions of crisis, too. In fact, with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, now more than ever leaders need to practice emotional intelligence and care about the emotional wellbeing and health of their own and their employees.

Another similar term to the notion of change is the concept of 'crisis.' According to McNulty (2019), these two notions are quite similar phenomena but with different speeds. A crisis tends to occur unexpectedly and everything has to move rapidly. Whereas change tends to happen at a slower pace however, both cases represent an uncertain future where people are not quite sure what to do. Another interpretation of crisis offered by Smith and Riley (2012), outlines the phenomenon as:

an urgent situation that requires immediate and decisive action by an organisation and, in particular, by the leaders of the organisation. (p. 58)

This definition highlights two points; firstly, crises by their nature are mostly unpredictable and inherently unique events; and secondly, effective leadership is a critical ingredient in driving change and strategic innovation. Acknowledging crises as a key driver of change, it is also important to understand the types of crises in order to develop appropriate strategies for effectively dealing with them if they occur. Sarkar and Clegg (2021) consider a crisis as a heterogeneous phenomenon, varying in breadth (who and what is affected), depth (intensity of its impact), and with regards to temporality (duration). The wide range of crisis situations has made scholars cluster them in typologies. For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic typifies a type of extreme-context disruptive crisis, "*unique, unprecedented, or even uncategorisable,*" all-encompassing in its breadth and depth, with the duration of its impact remaining

largely unknown (Christianson *et al.*, 2009, p. 846). The outbreak as highlighted by Bryant *et al.* (2020) has the hallmarks of a 'landscape scale' crisis- an unexpected event or sequence of events of enormous scale and overwhelming speed, resulting in a high degree of uncertainty that gives rise to disorientation, a feeling of lost control, and strong emotional disturbance (Leonard and Howitt, 2009). As Sarkar and Osiyevskyy (2018) conceptualised, this crisis also corresponds to the fast building and global type of social cataclysm. In such circumstances, Sarkar and Clegg (2021) recommend that leadership changes as the contingencies change; if it does not adapt, the chances of survival will be greatly diminished once any extraordinary support measure from government during the pandemic have been removed.

In contrast to the increased growth of research on generic leadership, Hannah *et al.* (2009) claim that leadership in crisis or extreme contexts is one of the least researched areas in the leadership field. In their review of leadership in extreme events, these authors summarise a crisis as having these features: a) low probability; b) threatening matters of high priority; c) occurring with limited time to respond and d) "*characterised by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution*" (p. 899). The Covid-19 pandemic is a prime example of the above. The outbreak of novel coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) as the largest health threat worldwide (WHO, 2020), has disrupted schooling globally, devastated economic growth, and interrupted international travel (Karimi, 2021). While there have been other recent viral outbreaks before (for example, Ebola, severe acute respiratory syndrome or SARS, and avian influenza), Covid-19 is by far the most recent globally contagious illness, provoking unprecedented abrupt lockdowns and quarantines, and straining health systems worldwide (United Nations, 2020).

Like everything else in this world, the practice of leadership has also been affected by this new context. As affirmed by Crevani, Clegg and Todnem By (2021), the Covid-19 pandemic has unsettled organisational life relative to practicing leadership in two ways. The first way is the eventfulness of organisations, having to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity. The second one is the susceptibility of embodied and material work practices to exogenous events. Both have important consequences for leadership and change. First, not only do leaders have little information to predict what will happen next, but the pandemic as Mol (2002) described it is also multiple. Experts from different fields have attempted to solve different issues of the pandemic where they have learnt to materialise the pandemic in some ways (for example, school closures around the world with multiple stories about children, parents and teachers, parodies of Zoom meetings on social media, online learning practices hastily acquired or not, etc.) but there is no grand narrative that can accommodate the multiplicity of this new context. Leaders may now have accepted that ambiguity and uncertainty caused by the pandemic cannot be resolved, they need to be handled, neither their occurrence nor consequences can be predicted. When dealing with leadership and change, studies (see Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Fletcher, 2004; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012) have recognised the necessity of a shift from celebrating independence to appreciating and learning to work with interdependence. Furthermore, the second way in unsettling of organisational life, as Crevani, Clegg and Todnem By (2021) outline, is when face-to-face interactions become an occupational hazard- social distancing becomes the norm to counter the Covid-19 outbreak. For many employees including leaders and managers, remote work has become the new normal. This may have accelerated a new trend of digitalisation that might have been already underway, or it may just be the evolution of workplaces. As Uhl-Bien (2021) declares, discomfort, frustration and

burnout created by digital meetings, as well as the satisfaction of performing digital work, have shown that leadership is not just a matter of discourse. Interactions between people are also important, both materially and socially (ibid. 2021).

As described above, circumstances have made us more aware of the ambiguity and multiplicity of reality, of the need for collaboration, adaptation, and resilience, and of the embodied and material dimension of work life. One can argue that this was predictable from earlier studies, where Hitt (1998) claimed, in the 21st century organisations will be facing a complex competitive landscape driven largely by globalisation and the technological revolution. Perhaps, this explains why Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey (2007) claimed that leadership models of the last century are outdated because they have been products of top-down, bureaucratic paradigms, effective for an economy premised on physical production, rather than being suited for a more knowledge-oriented economy of the 21st century. Though the shocking wave of the Covid-19 as a disaster of our time, makes the situation even more complex. Leading to a demand for leadership scholars and practitioners to engage in new conventions for leadership and organisational change at a time when there is an opening for new practices to emerge. Based on these circumstances a collection of studies has explored leadership as a dispersed, complex, collaborative, collective and multimodal endeavour. For example, Uhl-Bien's (2021) study of '*Complexity Leadership and Followership*,' explains how successful responses to crises are combined of top-down and relational/distributed/collective leadership. Moreover, Sergi, Lusiani, and Langley (2021) explored representation of leadership in the media during the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic. These authors noted that the representation of leadership during those months reproduced images of heroic leadership, rather than focusing on the central feature of the phenomenon that is

leadership as a social and relational process (ibid. 2021). Finally, Sarkar and Clegg (2021) in their study on '*Lessons from small businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic*,' bring our attention to the importance of resilience.

The discussion above broadens the appeal for changing leadership as a process, accomplished in relations and interactions that are both social and material, situated in places and spaces that are both constraining/enabling of leadership and change processes but that, at the same time, are re-produced as these processes unfold. In this sense, leadership should thus be explored in terms of complexity, resilience, adaptation or as collective, processual, and distributed leadership.

2.7.2 Crisis Leadership Factors

The literature based on crisis leadership that I cited above from other societal sectors is also applicable to school systems. During a crisis - school leaders akin to their counterparts in other contexts - should facilitate sensemaking in conditions of uncertainty, engage in effective communication, be flexible and adaptive, and pay attention to the emotional wellbeing and health of their staff. The ten executive tasks proposed by Boin *et al.* (2013) and introduced in the previous section seem to be relevant for school organisations and their leaders - just as they are suggested in other sectors of society. This was evident in some crisis leadership research that has been conducted on school settings. For instance, Smith and Riley (2012, p. 65) recognised that school leadership in times of crisis is different from everyday leadership practices. These authors also noted that critical attributes of crisis leadership in schools entail:

The ability to cope with—and thrive on—ambiguity; a strong capacity to think laterally; a willingness to question events in new and insightful ways; a preparedness to respond flexibly and quickly, and to change direction rapidly if required; an ability to work with and through people to achieve critical outcomes; the tenacity to persevere when all seems to be lost; and a willingness to take necessary risks and to “break the rules” when necessary.

In addition to these attributes, several studies such as (Argenti, 2002; Kielkowski, 2013) have noted that crisis leaders need to show that they have the necessary skills to manage the fast flow of information, the constantly changing evidence, and the ability to distil contradictory advice from experts and advisors. Crisis leaders need a consistent, recognisable, and credible leadership approach. Alkharabsheh, Ahmad and Kharabsheh (2013) have compared transformational and transactional leadership styles in times of crises. Acknowledging that transformational style focuses on inspiring towards a higher collective purpose whereas transactional leaders concentrate on managing complex and operating procedures. These authors concluded that the style of leadership is not as important as providing stability, confidence, reassurance, and a sense of control. On the other hand, De Bussy and Paterson (2012) found that transformational leadership is highly effective in a crisis context but harder to sustain over the long term, especially once a sense of normalcy had returned. In the end, D'Auria and De Smet (2020) suggest, what is more important than the particular style of leadership is that the leader be able to:

“Detach from a fraught situation and think clearly about how [they] will navigate it ...” while displaying “deliberate calm”, and “visible decisiveness.” (pp. 4–5)

Interestingly, I observed this claim in another empirical study conducted by Mutch (2015b) when she studied school principals' actions after the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand. Mutch articulated a three-factor conceptual model (that is dispositional, relational, and situational) of school crisis leadership (see Table 2.4).

Table 2.4: Three-factor conceptual model of school crisis leadership (Source: Mutch, 2015b)

Factors	
Dispositional	What leaders bring to the event from their background, personal qualities, experiences, values, beliefs, personality traits, skills, areas of expertise, and conceptions of leadership
Relational	The ways in which leaders offer a unifying vision and develop a sense of community within the organisation, engendering loyalty, enabling empowerment, building strong and trusting relationships, and fostering collaboration
Situational	How leaders assess the situation as it unfolds, understanding both the past and immediate contexts, being aware of different responses (including cultural sensitivities), making timely decisions, adapting to changing needs, making use of resources (both material and personnel), providing direction, responding flexibly, thinking creatively, and constantly reappraising the options

In her case studies of four primary schools, Mutch (2015b) used the above model as an analytical framework to identify specific leadership actions that fell under each of these factors. Additionally, in a separate article that same year, Mutch (2015a) noted that schools with an inclusive culture and with strong relationships beforehand are better situated to manage crises that may occur. This claim has been frequently supported in the literature. For example, Kezar and Holcombe (2017) recognise that institutions who operated a shared leadership model have benefitted from a greater degree of agility, innovation, and collaboration during a crisis; likewise, Kezar *et al.*, (2018) observe, that establishing a culture of trust, collaboration, and shared leadership prior to a crisis, will more significantly influence the ability of the institution to withstand times of crisis. Furthermore, Fullan, Quinn, Drummy and Gardner (2020) add that stronger collaboration and technology infrastructure in schools assist them in a more rapid response to a crisis.

In addition, other studies (e.g., Duckers *et al.*, 2017; Mutch, 2015a) have noted the importance of maintaining trust during a crisis. This is clearly observed in a study undertaken by Sutherland (2017) when examining leadership behaviours in the light

of school crisis caused by the deaths of two students on a service-learning trip. As a result, Sutherland found that closely held, non-consultative decision-making by leaders limited the school's ability to communicate effectively and thus hindered trust in the larger school community. On the other hand, he realised that subsequent implementation of new communication structures fostered better collaboration and rebuilt trust with educators and families. Accordingly, the findings of Sutherland's study are relevant for school leaders who find it difficult to balance conflicting parents and educator expectations during the current pandemic and therefore have noticed community trust erode as a result.

Finally, Mahfouz, El-Mehtar, Osman and Kotok (2019) made an investigation of Lebanese principals and schools to understand how principals are making sense of and navigating the Syrian refugee student crisis at their schools. As a result, they found that:

instead of focusing on leadership and academic performance, principals [faced with a large influx of Syrian refugee families] spent most of their time putting out fires, resolving urgent issues, and attending to basic needs that typically are taken for granted in other schools. (p. 24)

These challenges are very similar to the lived experiences of many school leaders during the early months of the Covid-19 crisis. Apparently, most school leaders during the first few months of the crisis pandemic progressed through several key response phases. For instance, McLeod (2020b) outlined a four-phase process framework, which focuses on sequences of activities of school leaders in response to the pandemic. In **phase 1**, the focus was on basic needs such as feeding children and families, ensuring students have access to technological devices and the Internet, and checking in on the well-being of families. In **phase 2**, schools were reoriented to deliver instruction remotely. This included training teachers for new pedagogies and

technologies, as well as creating instructional routines and digital platforms to facilitate online learning. As soon as schools began to settle into new routines, then school leaders could begin paying attention to richer and deeper learning opportunities for their students **(phase 3)**; and look forward to future opportunities and help their organisations to get better prepared for future dislocations of schooling **(phase 4)**. The final phase is what many scholars (such as Boin and Hart, 2003) have identified as a reconstruction or adaptive stage of crisis leadership. Comparable to McLeod's (2020b) study, Fullan *et al.* (2020) have also employed a similar process framework to propose a need for a paradigm shift in education. Congruent with Fullan and his team, although the pandemic has disrupted all sectors of society, but it has revealed their fault lines, especially in our education systems. As argued by these authors, before the pandemic, many education systems were stalled (ibid. 2020)- they have not maintained pace with technological advances and failed to provide widespread access to digital tools (OECD, 2018). As well as this mix, when the pandemic happened, 1 in 5 students did not have access to the Internet or a device to support them in crisis lockdowns (Harris and Jones, 2020). Hence, using the fallout from the Covid-19 crisis, continuing advances in digital technology, and a pent-up demand for student-centred learning, made Fullan and his team (2020) suggest a solution to manage the immediate issues while building a bridge to a reimagined education system. This solution is a three-phase strategy (including phase 1- disruption: shifting to remote learning; phase 2- transition: reopening schools; and phase 3- reimagining learning), with each phase enabling wellbeing, equity and quality (deep) learning. This strategy is based on a scheme called: '*New Pedagogies for Deep Learning*' (Fullan and Langworthy, 2014), which provides learning for all and helps students to become knowledgeable and skilled change makers through deeper learning.

In line with Brodie (2019), however, the above argument initiated by Fullan and his colleagues sounds appropriate, yet it might be still too early to make sense of schools' responses to the pandemic. Scholars and practitioners are beginning to understand the early phases of the outbreak especially its impact on school lockdowns. For example, Bagwell (2020) recognised that the pandemic is swiftly redefining schooling and leadership – that is, leaders need to lead adaptively, build individual and organisational resilience, and create distributed leadership structures for effective instructional response. Moreover, Netolicky (2020) commented that most of the challenges of school leaders during the pandemic range from the need to lead both fast and slow, to balancing equity with excellence and accountability, and to considering both human needs and organisational outcomes. Additionally, Fernandez and Shaw (2020) recognised that academic leaders during the pandemic should rely on their best practices including: a) utilising a type of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) to connect with others; b) distributing leadership responsibilities within the organisation; and c) communicating clearly. In parallel, Harris and Jones (2020) offered seven propositions for consideration and potential research attention, including the ideas that: *“most school leadership preparation and training programmes. . . are likely to be out of step with the challenges facing school leaders today”* and that *“self-care and consideration must be the main priority and prime concerns for all school leaders”* (p. 245). These authors also recognised that *“crisis and change management are now essential skills of a school leader. . . [that] require more than routine problem solving or occasional firefighting”* (p. 246).

In the wake of the new emerging roles for school leadership especially during the pandemic, moreover, Rigby *et al.* (2020) identified three promising practices for schools such as: treating families as equal partners in learning; continuing to provide

high quality learning opportunities for students; and decision making that is coordinated, coherent and inclusive. These authors through conducting interviews with office leaders, made a further three recommendations for schools to focus on “*building on learning not loss of learning, to prioritise relationships, and to create anti-racist, systemic coherence*” (p. 6). Regarding the first recommendation, Rigby *et al.* (2020) noted that “*this is an opportunity to design systems to understand and build on what children learned (and continue to learn) at home*” (p. 6). Simply put, trying to see opportunities in the crisis.

Drawing on what has been discussed so far and consistent with James and Wooten (2011, p. 61), it is true to say that crisis leadership matters primarily because:

It is often the handling of a crisis that leads to more damage than the crisis event itself. Learning from a crisis is the best hope we have of preventing repeat occurrences.

This again reinforces the critical role of leaders in organisational change, however, when it comes to education, Smawfield (2013, p. 9) mentioned:

One of the most under-represented areas within the literature, is the capture of knowledge on how schools have been able to respond to real-life disasters.

Also, further empirical research needed to analyse crisis in schools (Urlick *et al.*, 2021). As well as responding to the lack of clarity on the impact of this outbreak during the school lockdowns (Huber and Helm, 2020). Therefore, as the pandemic progresses, it seems essential to learn more about the leadership and institutional challenges that accompany crises, the roles that educators are required to play, and the structures and behaviours that appear to be successful.

2.8 Summary and Gaps in the Literature

In this literature review, I have attempted to provide insights into the diverse forms of educational leadership and their contributions to school improvement. By defining and discussing key terms such as "leadership," "outstanding school," "teacher development," and "school improvement model through NPM," I have laid the foundation for a nuanced understanding of the concepts underpinning the thesis. While the literature on educational leadership is extensive, significant gaps remain in understanding the role of school leaders within two key contexts. First, there is a lack of empirical studies exploring how school leaders navigate the complexities of New Public Management (NPM) reforms, particularly in primary school settings. Pashiardis and Brauckmann (2018) highlight the need for further research into how NPM-driven accountability pressures impact leadership styles and school improvement strategies. The existing studies often emphasize performance management and instructional leadership in isolation, with limited focus on how these practices evolve under NPM frameworks that prioritise market-based competition and standardisation. Second, the Covid-19 crisis introduced unprecedented challenges for school leadership, yet research examining school leaders' responses to such crises remains in its infancy. Urlick et al. (2021) and Huber and Helm (2020) emphasize the need to understand how school leaders adapted to the rapid shifts in teaching, learning, and community support during the pandemic. Most existing studies either focus on isolated cases or fail to capture the dynamic interplay of leadership strategies before and during crises.

This research addresses these gaps by exploring the role of school leaders across two distinct yet interconnected periods: the pre-Covid era dominated by NPM reforms and the crisis period of the Covid-19 pandemic. By examining how leadership

practices evolved in response to systemic pressures and unexpected disruptions, this study contributes new insights into the adaptive capacities of school leaders and the broader implications for sustainable school improvement. Building on these insights, this thesis develops the Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI) model and the Holistic Approach to Student Success (HASS) framework—two conceptual models that synthesize leadership adaptability, teacher agency, and holistic student development into a structured yet flexible approach to school improvement. These models will be explored further in the empirical and discussion chapters, where they are contextualised within real-world school leadership practices.

2.8.1 Link to Theoretical Framework Chapter

This literature review chapter sets the stage for the theoretical framework chapter in which I will critique three relevant theories of educational leadership - instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership and justify in what ways they offer theoretical foundation for the data collection and analysis of my study. Grounded in the philosophy that school improvement is people improvement (Boyer, 1995), these leadership theories offer valuable perspectives on the role of leadership in fostering professional growth and creating the conditions for continuous improvement of staff, students, and school. I aim to synthesise insights from these theoretical perspectives with crisis leadership factors. The theoretical framework chapter will provide a robust theoretical foundation for the empirical investigation of educational leadership and school improvement in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3

Theoretical and Conceptual Models Underpinning the Research

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present a theoretical framework that underpins the exploration of educational leadership and school improvement in the context of primary schools in London. Drawing on insights from the literature review conducted in Chapter 2 and the research questions of this thesis, this framework provides a conceptual lens through which to examine the complexities of educational leadership and its impact on school effectiveness and student achievement. According to Hallinger (2003), theoretical frameworks are essential for understanding and analysing complex phenomena in educational leadership research, guiding the interpretation of empirical data and the formulation of research questions (Spillane *et al.*, 2004). Theoretical frameworks also inform policy and practice by offering insights into effective leadership practices and strategies for promoting school improvement (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999; Harris, 2008).

This chapter begins with a discussion of key theories in educational leadership: instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership. These theories are foundational to understanding how school leaders influence school improvement by enhancing teacher quality and teaching practices within schools. Furthermore, the chapter presents a conceptual model of school improvement within this framework, emphasising the role of school leaders in fostering continuous improvement. This model integrates insights from the discussed theories, illustrating how leadership practices can enhance school effectiveness and student outcomes in the dynamic context of primary education.

3.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Educational Leadership

As I delve into the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis, I have selected a model of school improvement which includes a combination of three leadership theories such as Instructional Leadership, Transformational Leadership (Ravitch and Riggan, 2016). Distributed Leadership (Spillane, 2006), and the philosophy of School Improvement as people improvement (Boyer, 1995). These key theories provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of educational leadership and its impact on school effectiveness.

3.2.1 *Instructional Leadership*

Instructional leadership is a prominent theoretical framework that emphasises the pivotal role of school leaders in shaping teaching and learning processes within educational institutions (Hallinger, 2011). This approach posits that effective school leaders prioritise the improvement of teaching quality and student learning outcomes through a variety of actions and strategies. Relatively, in the context of my study, instructional leadership serves as a cornerstone for understanding how school leaders influence school improvement processes. Through my research, I seek to explore the specific practices and behaviours associated with instructional leadership, such as providing targeted instructional support, setting high academic expectations, and fostering a culture of continuous professional development among staff members. The importance of these practices is emphasised by recent studies (such as Robinson *et al.*, 2020; Waters *et al.*, 2021) in promoting equitable educational opportunities and addressing achievement disparities among diverse student populations.

While instructional leadership extends beyond mere oversight of teaching practices; it encompasses the creation of supportive learning environments, the alignment of

curriculum and instruction with educational standards, and the utilisation of data to inform instructional decision-making (Leithwood *et al.*, 2021). By exploring how school leaders enact instructional leadership in primary schools in London, I aimed to uncover the mechanisms through which teaching quality and student learning outcomes are improved, thereby contributing to overall school effectiveness and success.

3.2.2 *Transformational Leadership*

Transformational leadership theory posits that effective leaders inspire and motivate followers to achieve higher levels of performance and organisational change by articulating a compelling vision, demonstrating charisma, and empowering others (Bass and Riggio, 2006). This leadership approach is particularly relevant in educational contexts where leaders are tasked with driving innovation, promoting collaboration, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement (ibid. 2006).

In the context of this thesis, transformational leadership serves as a lens through which to explore how school leaders influence school improvement processes through their visionary and inspirational leadership behaviours. Through the research in this thesis, I aim to investigate how school leaders articulate a compelling vision for the future of their schools, inspire trust and confidence among staff members, and empower educators to contribute to the realisation of shared goals and objectives. Recent research has underscored the role of transformational leadership in fostering organisational change, promoting teacher efficacy, and enhancing student outcomes (Avolio *et al.*, 2019; Yukl, 2013).

Furthermore, transformational leadership is characterised by its emphasis on individualised consideration and intellectual stimulation, whereby leaders actively engage with followers, solicit their input, and challenge them to think critically and

creatively (Bass and Riggio, 2006). By examining how school leaders enact transformational leadership in primary schools in London, I aim to uncover the ways in which they cultivate a culture of innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement, thereby driving positive change within their organisations.

3.2.3 *Distributed Leadership*

Distributed leadership theory challenges traditional hierarchical notions of leadership by recognising that leadership functions are distributed across various members of the organisation (Spillane *et al.*, 2004). This approach asserts that effective leadership is a collective endeavour, with multiple individuals contributing to decision-making, problem-solving, and organisational change.

In the context of this thesis, distributed leadership serves as a framework for understanding how leadership is enacted and experienced within primary schools in London. Through the research in this thesis, I aim to explore the collaborative and shared nature of leadership, whereby school leaders work collaboratively with staff members, parents, and other stakeholders to address complex challenges and promote school improvement. Recent studies have highlighted the importance of distributed leadership in promoting shared responsibility, collaborative decision-making, and teacher empowerment, particularly in the context of dynamic and rapidly changing educational environments (Harris *et al.*, 2021; Harris and Muijs, 2020). By empowering teachers, staff, and students to contribute to school improvement efforts, distributed leadership practices can foster a sense of ownership, agency, and commitment within the school community. Research suggests that distributed leadership practices can lead to increased organisational effectiveness and improved student outcomes (Gronn, 2000).

Also, distributed leadership is characterised by its emphasis on building leadership capacity at all levels of the organisation, thereby fostering a culture of collective efficacy and continuous learning (Spillane *et al.*, 2004). By examining how distributed leadership practices are enacted in primary schools in London, I aimed to uncover the ways in which leadership is shared, distributed, and experienced by various members of the school community, thereby contributing to overall school improvement and effectiveness.

In this case, the selection of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership theories for inclusion in the theoretical framework is guided by their direct relevance to the core mission of schools, their established efficacy in promoting organisational effectiveness and improvement, and their alignment with the research questions, aims, and objectives of the thesis. By synthesising insights from these key theories, the theoretical framework provides a comprehensive conceptual basis for understanding educational leadership and its impact on school improvement in primary schools in London.

3.2.4 Crisis Leadership

I have reviewed the existing literature on crisis leadership in chapter 2 offering a range of definitions of crisis leadership, depending on the sector in which the research is conducted, such as business, education, or politics. For instance, drawing on leadership during Hurricane Katrina which occurred in 2005, Boin, 't Hart, McConnell and Preston (2010, p. 706) use this definition:

Effective crisis leadership entails recognising emerging threats, initiating efforts to mitigate them and deal with their consequences, and, once an acute crisis period has passed, re-establishing a sense of normalcy.

Yet, regardless of diverse definitions, it is evident from the existing literature that leaders are in charge of responsibilities with crisis management. The great importance of the contribution of leadership in times of crisis is evident in more studies. For example, studies such as (Boin and t'Hart, 2003; Garcia, 2006; James, Wooten and Dushek, 2011) have suggested the ability to lead during a crisis has important implications for how stakeholders perceive the organisation, as well as for its post-crisis reputation. Furthermore, the organisations' reputation can be severely harmed if a leader mishandles a crisis (James and Wooten, 2005). To clarify the difference between crisis leadership and crisis management, I relied on Porche's (2009) definition who assert that crisis management is more operational, including processes such as diagnosis, decision making, and resource mobilisation. Whereas crisis leadership has oversight of crisis management but also provides a vision, direction, and big-picture thinking. More interpretation has been suggested by Boin, Kuipers and Overdijk (2013) where they define the concept of crisis management "*as the sum of activities aimed at minimising the impact of a crisis*" (p. 81)- the impacts in terms of damage to people, critical infrastructure, and public institutions. However, modest a crisis, the definition by Boin and associates (2013) assume that effective crisis management can save lives, protect infrastructure, and restore trust within organisations. While negative outcomes are usually related directly to ineffective crisis management. Considering there are other factors that affect the outcome of a crisis such as the size, speed of crisis onset, and the 'knowability' or predictability of a threat agent this might determine how much leeway can be left for the performance of leadership in crisis. Additionally, the outcome is informed by behaviour of the actors, media, competitors, victims, and the available resources to help society recover (ibid. 2013).

Since organisations are confronted with crisis regularly, I noted the efforts of several researchers who have attempted to present conceptual models and sense-making frameworks to help both leaders and institutions think of effective leadership during turbulent times. Taking a comprehensive view of crisis leadership, for instance, Boin *et al.* (2013) provide an evaluative framework that apparently can be used to assess leadership performance before, during, and after a crisis (McLeod and Dulskey, 2021). This framework consists of a set of ten executive tasks such as: early recognition of crisis; sensemaking; making critical decisions; coordinating; helping to engage in meaning making; coupling and decoupling; rendering accountability; robust communication; reflecting on and learning from a crisis; and enhancing resilience (see Figure 2.3). Based on these strategies, it seems like the overall goal of a leader is to increase organisational resilience before, during, and after a crisis.

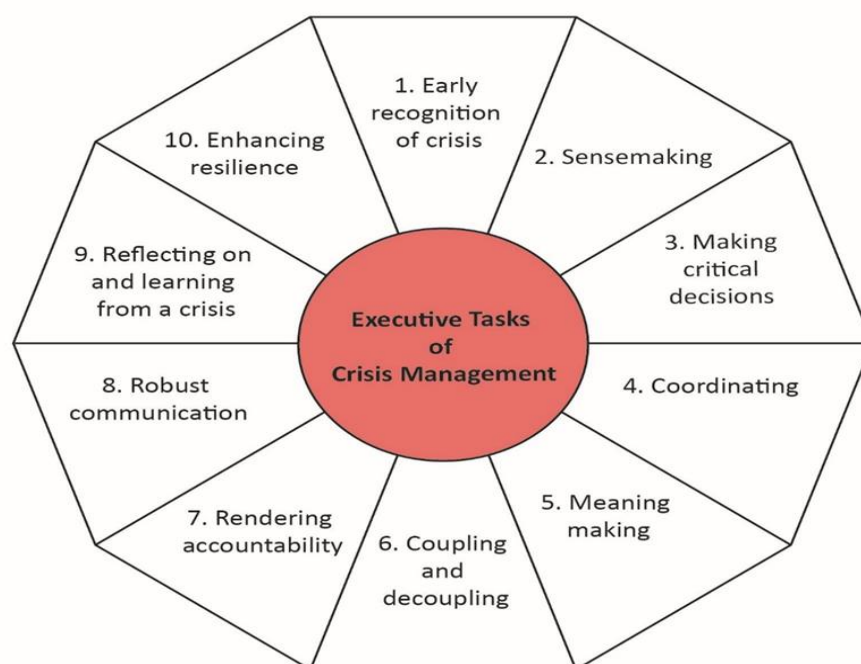


Figure 2.3: Executive Tasks of Crisis Management (Source: Boin *et al.*, 2013)

Beside implementing the above crisis management strategies, it was evident that leaders should also pay attention to the emotional well-being and health of their

employees. Some scholars have noted the emotional implications of organisational crisis for leaders. For example, James, Wooten and Dushek (2011) noted leaders' experience of negative emotions, such as fear and anxiety, due to crisis events. Other scholars (such as Mitroff, 2004; Fein and Isaacson, 2009) have also argued that organisational crises raise leaders' own anxiety levels. To take the argument further, I noted Madera and Smith (2009) found that leaders' expressions of anger and sadness in response to organisational crisis influences how their followers evaluate them. However, as Meisler *et al.* (2013) have recognised, the potential contribution of leaders' emotional intelligence level in times of crisis has received little attention. Building on the earlier discussion about the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) as a critical leadership skill necessary during uncertain times (see Section 2.7.1), Meisler *et al.* (2013) have attempted to connect leaders' EI to the well-being of employees and their work outcomes during organisational crisis. As a result, these authors found that leaders and managers use their emotional abilities to control and buffer the negative implications of crisis events on employees' emotions as well as on the work outcomes which is beneficial both for their employees and the organisations. After finding that "*the psychosocial dimension of crises has received little attention in crisis management literature*" (p. 95), Duckers *et al.* (2017) were among the researchers who created a conceptual model of psychosocial crisis management. The model emphasised on the crucial role of leadership in performing organisational tasks such as "*providing information and basic aid*" and "*promoting a sense of safety, calming, self- and community efficacy, connectedness to others, and hope*" (p.101). Therefore, suggesting that effective crisis leadership involves more than effective communication and response coordination and must attend to the general wellbeing and health of employees and other stakeholders.

3.2.5 Boyer's Concept of School Improvement as People Improvement (Boyer, 1995)

In addition to the three leadership theories of Instructional Leadership, Transformational Leadership (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000), and Distributed Leadership (Spillane, 2006), I have chosen the philosophy of school Improvement as people improvement by Boyer (1995) as the fourth theory underpinning this thesis. Recalling on (Chapter 1, Section 1.1.1), the concept of school improvement is an organised learning process within a school with two goals: improving people (Boyer, 1995) and enhancing organisational capacity (Siguroardottir and Sigporsson, 2015). School improvement initiatives aim to enhance educational outcomes by addressing various dimensions of educational effectiveness, including curriculum development, instructional practices, assessment strategies, and school climate. In particular, the concept of school improvement as people improvement by Boyer underscores the importance of investing in human capital and fostering a culture of continuous learning and growth within educational organisations (Boyer, 1995). This perspective suggests that school improvement is fundamentally about enhancing the knowledge, skills, and practices of educators to drive positive change within schools. As Boyer (1995) stated:

The school is people, so when we talk about excellence or improvement or progress, we are really talking about the people who make up the building.
(p. 35)

This implies that the most appropriate way to achieve educational change is through improving the school's people (staff and students). In other words, sustainable school improvement cannot be achieved solely through structural reforms or policy interventions (such as the school improvement model by New Public Management reforms- see Chapter 2) but requires a holistic approach with a deep commitment to

nurturing the growth, development, and well-being of all individuals within the school community. The rationale behind my decision in choosing Boyer's definition of school improvement in this thesis is that this view aligns with a holistic approach to education, emphasising the development of individuals not only academically but also socially, emotionally, and ethically. Boyer's perspective recognises the importance of nurturing well-rounded individuals, contributing to a broader and more meaningful concept of school improvement beyond just academic performance. In the context of this thesis, Boyer's concept of school improvement as people improvement serves as a guiding principle for understanding the holistic nature of school improvement processes. Because by investing in professional development, mentoring, and coaching initiatives, school leaders can empower educators to enhance their teaching practices, promote student learning, and contribute to overall school effectiveness (Fullan, 2020). Therefore, through this thesis, I aim to explore how school leaders influence the improvement process focusing on the development and support of their people.

Moreover, by adapting Boyer's perspective of school improvement, I intend to emphasise the interconnectedness of school improvement efforts and highlight the importance of collaboration and shared responsibility among all members of the school community. Being mindful that this perspective also underscores the importance of addressing the diverse needs and experiences of students, staff, and families within educational settings. Suggesting a need for an inclusive and equitable approach to school improvement, wherein school leaders can create opportunities for all stakeholders to thrive and succeed. This involves recognising and valuing the unique strengths and perspectives of individuals, fostering a sense of belonging and belongingness, and promoting social justice and equity in all aspects of school life. Furthermore, the perspective highlights the value of ongoing reflection and evaluation

in the school improvement process. By continuously assessing and refining their practices, school leaders can ensure that their efforts are in line with the evolving needs and priorities of their school community (Fullan, 2007). This iterative approach to improvement allows for flexibility, adaptability, and innovation, enabling schools to respond effectively to changing circumstances and challenges.

Altogether, the concept of school improvement as people improvement (Boyer, 1995) provides a holistic framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of school improvement processes. By focusing on the development and support of educators, fostering collaboration and shared responsibility, and promoting inclusivity and equity, school leaders can create environments where all members of the school community can thrive and succeed.

3.3 Justification for Theoretical Choices

Boyer's (1995) philosophy of school improvement as "people improvement" aligns well with the critique of New Public Management (NPM) reforms I discussed earlier in the literature review chapter. While NPM reforms often prioritise managerial and market-driven approaches to school improvement, they can neglect the human-centric aspects crucial for genuine and sustainable improvement (Smith, 2021; Johnson and Smith, 2023). Contrary to the NPM's structural and policy-focused interventions, Boyer's philosophy emphasises the critical role of human capital development in driving school improvement efforts. By prioritising the growth, development, and empowerment of individuals within educational institutions, as Groves and West-Burnham (2022) suggest, schools can create supportive, inclusive, and equitable learning environments that enable all stakeholders to thrive.

Additionally, in the context of educational leadership, Boyer's (1995) definition accentuates the importance of leadership theories, including visionary leadership, instructional leadership, and distributed leadership practices, that prioritise the well-being and professional growth of educators. For example, transformational leaders inspire and empower teachers, fostering a culture of collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement (Bass and Avolio, 1994). Similarly, instructional leaders provide feedback, support, and resources to enhance teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004). Also, distributed leaders empower individuals and teams to take ownership of school improvement initiatives, promoting shared responsibility, collective learning, and collaboration (Harris, 2008).

Furthermore, the qualitative and collaborative nature of my research methods associates with the principles of transformational and distributed leadership, emphasising collaboration, shared responsibility, and the empowerment of individuals within the school community.

Of course, embracing Boyer's philosophy of school improvement as "people improvement" acknowledges the limitations of NPM reforms and emphasises the need for a more human-centric approach to school improvement. This philosophy recognises that sustainable school improvement requires a deep commitment to nurturing the growth, development, and well-being of all individuals within the school community, rather than relying solely on structural reforms or policy interventions.

Thus, it seems like the chosen leadership theories offer complementary perspectives on educational leadership practices and their impact on school improvement. Instructional leadership provides insights into specific actions and strategies to enhance teaching quality and student learning outcomes. Transformational leadership

offers a lens to explore the motivational and inspirational aspects of leadership driving organisational change and improvement. Distributed leadership complements these perspectives by highlighting the collaborative and shared nature of leadership within educational settings, particularly in the context of primary schools in London. These selected leadership theories act as three key pillars grounded on the notion of ‘school improvement is people improvement’ (Boyer, 1995) which drives this thesis forward (see Figure 3.1 below).

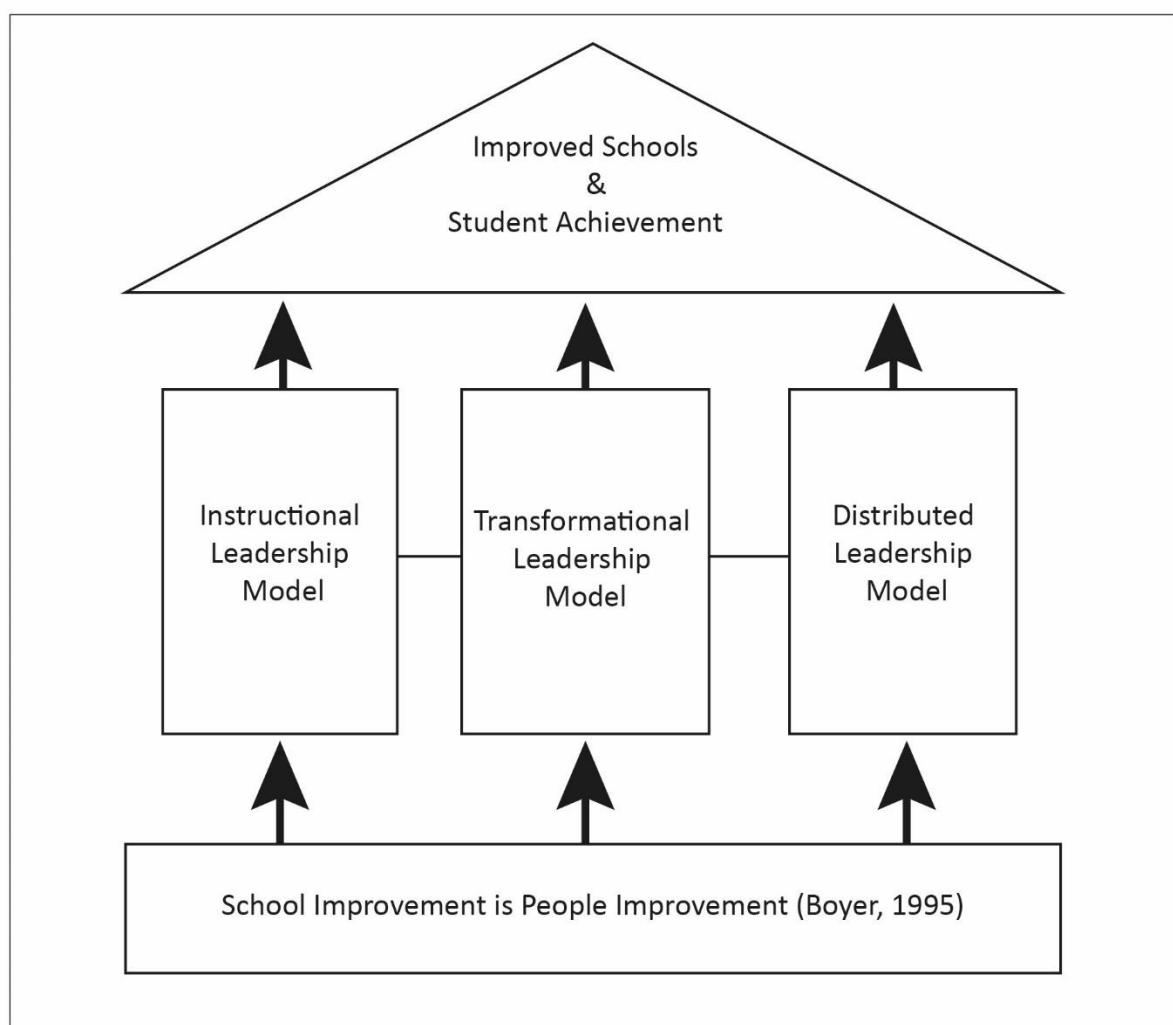


Figure 3.1: Theoretical Framework of this Research

Based upon this theoretical framework, a conceptual model for the process of school improvement has been designed at the end of this chapter to present the importance

of effective leadership style and behaviours, such as the above three leadership styles, that are necessary in providing the conditions for the continuous development of staff and school improvement.

Building upon the theoretical foundations of Instructional leadership, Transformational leadership, Distributed leadership, and the symbiotic relationship between school improvement and people improvement, the subsequent section delves into an exploration of school leadership's pivotal role in fostering staff professional development.

3.4 School Leadership and Staff Professional Development

Based on the discussion so far, it does appear that school leadership exerts an indirect influence on staff and school improvement by shaping the organisational culture, fostering collaboration, and providing a supportive environment that enhances the commitment of teachers and enables them to excel. According to Day *et al.* (2016), school leaders should have the abilities and skills to provide and participate in effective professional development programmes and activities. Although individuals have a responsibility for their own continuing professional development, the school also needs to be learning-centred and provide opportunities for all staff to continue their learning (Bubb and Earley, 2009). This section defines the notion of professional development and offers a framework to emphasize the important link between great professional development and great pedagogy. It does this by suggesting two adult learning theories of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as effective staff professional learning models for schools to follow.

Whilst schools require effective leaders if they are to achieve success and provide a first-class education for their learners, they also need highly qualified and skilled teachers (Bush, 2007; Day *et al.*, 2008; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006). Scholars and practitioners (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Odden and Wallace, 2003; Thurlings and Brok, 2017) have frequently argued that improving teaching is the main factor in enhancing student learning and the most powerful strategy to improving schools. Therefore, it is important to define the notion of professional development and the various forms it may come in. Throughout this thesis the term 'professional development' will be used synonymously with 'professional learning;' firstly, to show the increasing interest of the teachers and other professionals in their learning (Easton, 2008). Secondly, to consider teachers as agents of their own growth where learning is an experience that should be driven largely by the learner (Calvert, 2016; Imants and Van der Wal, 2020). Bubb and Earley (2009, p.14) define the concept of professional development as:

an ongoing process encompassing all formal and informal learning experiences that enable all staff in schools, individually and with others, to think about what they are doing, enhance their knowledge and skills and improve ways of working so that pupil learning, and wellbeing are enhanced as a result...

Based upon this definition, professional development programmes and activities come in different forms. The European Commission (2019) categorises continuous professional development (CPD) activities in three forms including: within-school activities (such as coaching, mentoring, support for individual members of staff, open lessons, team teaching, sharing good practice, lesson observation and feedback); whole school development activities (such as sharing of good practice through academy trusts, school networks and teaching schools); and external activities (such as accredited postgraduate study, conferences, industrial placement or work

shadowing, visits to other schools, and international study visits and exchanges). Nonetheless, a new form of online/remote professional development has recently replaced the traditional face-to-face training due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is to limit the spread of the pandemic and comply with the government health regulation of social distancing and safety measures (United Nations, 2020).

To understand what characterises effective professional development, numerous studies (including Stoll, Harris and Handscomb, 2012) have been describing what professional development should look like. For instance, the Professional Learning Association (2011) has described an effective professional development as an ongoing, embedded, connected practice, aligned to school goals, and collaborative activities. Despite these principles, Worth, Lazzari and Hillary, (2017) refer to an existing gap between what teachers really need and what they are getting from professional learning. Calvert (2016) asserts that teachers need professional development programmes and activities that are teacher-driven and recognising teachers as professionals with valuable insights. Considering the necessity of such needs has been especially emphasised during the ongoing pandemic where teachers have remained central to successful learning and will continue to have a critical role in mitigating the impact of the crisis on learners (Penfold, 2020).

Congruent with Calvert (2016), to transform professional learning that really supports teacher learning and professionalism, educational leaders should pay greater attention to the importance of teacher agency. She defines teacher agency in the context of professional learning as the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues. Rather than responding passively to learning opportunities, teachers who have agency are aware of their part in their professional growth and lead their own learning to

achieve their goals (ibid. 2016). Since there has been an increasing interest in the topic of teacher agency particularly in the context of change, other researchers such as Imants and Van Der Wal (2019) have realised that teachers are change agents in professional development, school reform and school improvement. Furthermore, teachers play a central role in these programmes since they interact with the content of them, as well as with the school and classroom work environments in which these programmes are assumed to be effectively introduced. It seems that teacher's active contribution in shaping their work, and its conditions is an indispensable element of good and meaningful education.

Gathering what has been discussed so far, it is certain that great professional development is fundamental to great pedagogy. To clarify the term 'great' here, I relied on a statement by the NCSL (2012, p. 2) that the word 'great' for professional development *"indicates that powerful learning experiences must have an impact."* Therefore, based on these considerations, I have adapted nine professional development claims from a range of studies (including Calvert, 2016; DfE, 2016; and NCSL, 2012) in this thesis to provide evidence of the impact of professional development on pupil and teacher learning which in turn directly support school improvement (see Table 3.2 below). I also utilised this framework in the discussion of this thesis, Chapter 7, to evaluate the professional development provision of the selected schools.

Table 3.2: GPD Claims (Sources: Calvert, 2016; DfE, 2016; NCSL, 2012)

Claims	Great Professional Development (GPD) Approaches
Claim:1	GPD should start with the end in mind
Claim: 2	GPD should promote reflective thinking in order to change practice
Claim: 3	GPD should be based on both individual and team needs
Claim: 4	GPD is a mix of both work-embedded learning and external expertise
Claim: 5	GPD should support and model the best way adults learn
Claim: 6	GPD uses action research and enquiry as key tools
Claim: 7	GPD can be enhanced through collaborative learning and joint practice development
Claim: 8	GPD can be enhanced by creating professional learning communities within and between schools
Claim: 9	GPD requires leaders to create the necessary conditions

According to the above table (source: Calvert, 2016; DfE, 2016; NCSL, 2012), it sounds that the underlying philosophy of all nine claims is that professional development of staff can be enhanced if the training practice of schools is based on the common principles of adult learning theories (ALTs) such as experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) (for example, apprenticeships, role-play, action research, games, case studies, internships, and on-the-job training) and the theory of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In this way, considering the above table as a point of reference (see Chapter 7), I will compare the training practice of participating schools against the above nine claims to explore the effectiveness of the schools' professional development provisions. However, dealing with situations such as Covid-19 pandemic which caused the largest disruption of education systems in history (United Nations, 2020)- CoPs are becoming more diverse and richer in their productive capabilities. Using digital platforms and tools has made it possible for schools and/or educators to cultivate spontaneous virtual CoPs (VCoPs) that have been supporting peer learning and led to staff professional learning. Chiu, Hsu and Wang (2006) report that many

individuals participate in virtual communities, especially in professional virtual communities (i.e., virtual communities of practice: VCoPs), for seeking knowledge to resolve problems at work. This new form of collaboration between educational leaders, teachers, and other important stakeholders— including families, civil society, health professionals and social workers, businesses, and the wider community – can enable more holistic approaches to education reforms and provide enhanced continuity and continuous improvement. Such mobilisation of resources within a community, as indicated by the Education Development Trust (2020), may prove to be highly important in ensuring quality education for all in the Covid-19 recovery period and beyond.

3.4.1 Professional Learning Community

In fostering a culture of continuous improvement, school leadership actively promotes staff professional development. Within this framework, a pivotal component is the establishment of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). These collaborative forums play a crucial role in enhancing collective knowledge, fostering a spirit of shared learning, and ultimately contributing to the overall development of our educational community. Evidence submitted by Fullan (2020) suggests that staff professional development for the capacity building of school is essential but not sufficient- school leaders also need to engage in changing systems that will lead them to a new and different understanding of the change process and allow schools to grow into learning communities. In order to transform a school into a learning community, Darling-Hammond (2017) declared that school leaders firstly need to think about teaching as a profession with the aim to inform practice rather than a technical work to prescribe practice. Secondly, they need to consider the practice of teaching as a human activity that is a complex process and involves cooperation of others with the aim to

accomplish the value and standards of practice. This ability of leadership supports the establishment of an effective culture that develops the collective practice or social capital of schools and transforms them into communities of learners where everyone learns from and with each other. An example could be the strategy of 'Professional Learning Communities' (PLCs). Because properly constructed PLCs consistently enhance learning outcomes and help teachers to integrate new ideas into their practice (European Commission, 2018; Harris and Jones, 2011; Hord, 1997; Ross and Adams, 2008).

More evidence (such as European Commission, 2020; Little, 2006) concludes that providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate and participate in PLCs is essential to high-quality professional learning. Noting, this strategy overlaps with the related concept of CoPs, I named earlier. In agreement with Bouchard (2012), the core of PLCs and CoPs is the same because they both enhance and transform teaching and learning. Acknowledging the focus of CoPs seems to be on learning, while in a slight contrast PLCs focus more on the act of teaching. Moreover, Adams (2009) suggests that PLCs can help staff to be better teachers since they are rather involved with the learning of the teacher and the focus is on the results of teaching (student achievement). However, I do not intend to dwell on the distinctions between PLCs and CoPs but rather consider them as two sides of the same coin, both seeking to empower groups of people in teaching and/or learning. Furthermore, both types of communities transform an individual teacher into a member of a teaching whole. In other words, they convert human capital to social capital (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

PLCs may be known with different names from school to school or place to place such as collaborative learning communities, professional learning groups or communities of

practice (Glossary of Education, 2014). For instance, in Japan, it is known as *lesson study* or *lesson research* (Postholm, 2018). Also, PLCs can take different forms (for example, functioning as a form of action research) or may be organised for different purposes. According to Hord (1997) the most efficient description of the strategy is: the three words ('professional,' 'learning,' 'community') which explain the concept as: Professionals coming together in a group—a community—to learn. Dufour and Marzano (2015, p. 22) added a more detailed definition of the concept of a PLC as:

... an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.

Based on this definition, it can be argued that a PLC has two broad purposes including, firstly, improving the knowledge and skills of teachers through collaborative team learning and professional discussions. Secondly, it enhances student achievement through stronger leadership and teaching. Furthermore, Dufour and Marzano (2011) characterise PLCs by three core principles including: ensuring students learn (shifting a focus from teaching to learning); a culture of collaboration (professionals working together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all and meaningful collaboration leading to enhanced professional learning and better student learning); and a focus on results (PLCs judge their effectiveness on the basis of results). Others including (Hord, 2004; Stoll and Louis, 2007) have conceptualised a PLC as the whole school level where certain principles such as shared values, a focus on student learning, reflective dialogue and action enquiry are in place. Harris and Jones's (2017) definition of a PLC sit within three overlapping interpretations. Firstly, there is the whole school interpretation, where the whole school operates as a learning community by following certain norms and values (Bolam *et al.*, 2005; Hipp *et al.*, 2008). Secondly, there is a within school interpretation, where groups or teams

of PLCs are responsible for leading research, improvement, or innovation (Dufour and Dufour, 2013; Harris and Jones, 2010). Thirdly, there is an across school interpretation, where the collaborative activity between teachers is school to school and embodies network learning (Kaser and Halbert, 2006). Nevertheless, there are different definitions of PLCs where they do not subscribe to the whole school interpretations. That is why Dufour (2004, p.4) states, '*the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning.*'

In terms of the school leader's role in developing PLCs, studies (such as Dufour and Marzano, 2011; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006) have frequently emphasised the crucial role of school leaders through building a collaborative culture that promotes teacher collaboration and prepares the conditions for initiating and sustaining the community development. In addition, school leaders play a key role in creating a sense of trust throughout the school which Louis (2015) has identified as a precondition for developing a PLC- however, some schools still have issues of how to improve this component (Harris, 2003). Building a 'collaborative team' is another criterion of a PLC which develops the collective capacity of educators to function as members of a PLC (Dufour *et al.*, 2010; Dufour and Marzano, 2015) where they can learn from and with each other to make their school community more effective. Other evidence reported by the European Commissions (2020) shows that teachers should be held accountable to work collaboratively to ensure effectiveness in classrooms and build success for their schools. In turn, great leaders should be able to balance this internal accountability with the external accountability (high-stakes test and Ofsted expectations) and create a cohesive learning community (ibid. 2020).

Bearing in mind, creating change in schools and education systems is not easy. Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan and Hopkins (2014) describe the process as a

complex, fraught and complicated business. Ultimately, Hattie (2015) and William (2016) state that improving any education system is fundamentally dependent upon changing what happens in the smallest unit of change, the classroom. A range of evidence (including Fullan, 2011; Muijs and Reynolds, 2010; Reynolds, 2010) indicates that at the heart of successful educational reform at scale, is the critical task of changing pedagogy and professional practice for the better. As William (2016) notes, every teacher needs to improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better. There are various international reports (e.g., Hattie, 2015; Jensen *et al.*, 2016; Timperley *et al.*, 2007) that underline the centrality of teachers' professional collaboration in producing better school and system performance. This evidence reinforces the importance of building professional capacity and capital for positive and lasting change. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) have divided professional capital among teachers into three categories: human capital, social capital, and decisional capital. *Human capital* refers to the quality of teachers' initial training and ongoing professional development, their skills, qualifications, and professional knowledge. *Social capital* refers to the impact that teachers and other learning professionals have on each other through collaboration and PLCs. *Decisional capital* refers to the development of teachers' professional judgement and careers (ibid. 2012). These three factors, as reported by the OECD (2014, p. 67):

work in combination with the leadership capital of headteachers and other leaders to define the quality of the education system as a whole.

In particular, numerous studies (such as Hopkins and Jackson, 2003; and Lambert, 2007) have reinforced the importance of 'social capital', in the shape of teacher leadership and teacher agency, as positive contributors to school and system improvement. Others, (see Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; Spillane and Coldern, 2011;

Wenger, 2000) emphasise that building collective capacity (social capital) for organisational change through professional collaboration results in improved organisational outcomes. Similarly, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) highlight how PLCs, defined as systematic and focused teacher collaboration, have the potential to build both professional and social capital. These authors note that positive outcomes from teacher-led PLCs occur when there is shared inquiry into real problems of practice and where teachers take shared responsibility for the outcomes of their collaborative work. On the other hand, when PLCs are imposed on teachers, they tend to be far less successful. A study conducted by Schechter (2012) suggests that strong hierarchies of seniority among teachers as well as strong central management of schools constrain the sustainability of PLCs. Other identified factors that contribute to difficulties in sustaining PLCs in schools are teacher turnover, particularly in secondary schools, and a lack of the time needed for extended, substantive collaborative work (Boudett, City and Murnane, 2008; McLaughlin and Talbert 2001).

While professional collaboration within educational settings continued to be increasingly popular, especially during the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, Chapman *et al.* (2016, p. 181) have noted that: '*some of these forms of collaboration are more suited to the fostering of professional capital than others.*' Accordingly, other evidence (e.g., Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Harris and Jones, 2011; Hattie, 2015) has suggested that the greatest gains secured from professional collaboration are when they are focused primarily and exclusively on improving teaching and learning. The message, as Harris, Jones, and Huffman (2017) assert, is that collective capacity building and the enhancement of social capital emanates from focused and systematic collaborative practice among teachers. However, less is said about the exact form that this professional collaboration should take (Harris and Jones, 2017).

Despite the great amount of literature supporting and reinforcing the importance of professional collaboration, Darling-Hammond (2016) asserts that the evidential base about exactly which model or models of professional collaboration are most effective remains relatively understated and under-developed. Therefore, several recommendations have been made. For example, Harris and Jones (2017) highlight that to be most impactful, professional collaboration should be structured, supported, and properly resourced. Other evidence about the impact of professional collaboration emphasises the importance of teacher research and inquiry as essential components (Cordingley, 2016). Of course, caution needs to be exercised when supporting or recommending any particular approach, to professional collaboration, or any particular model because contexts, situations and schools vary considerably. But one thing is clear: teachers, or indeed any professional group, cannot just generate meaningful and impactful professional collaboration without some model or some way of working (Harris and Jones, 2017). In this way, Timperley *et al.* (2007, p. 25) claim that if teachers are treated as self-regulating professionals with sufficient time and resources, they:

....are able to construct their own learning experiences and develop a more effective reality for their students through their collective expertise.

Moreover, these authors recognised that the most effective PLCs are characterised by two conditions: firstly, participants are supported to process new understandings and to assess their implications for teaching; and secondly, the focus of the PLC is on analysing the impact of teaching on student learning (ibid. 2007). In terms of the impact of PLCs, Lomos *et al.* (2011) suggest, if properly constructed and enacted within schools, this kind of professional collaboration can contribute to improvements in student outcomes. Overall, the research evidence about this form of professional

collaborative learning confirms two points including, firstly, where teachers are part of a well-functioning PLC, they tend to be more reflective on their professional practice and willing to innovate in the classroom (Stoll and Louis, 2007). Secondly, that under the right conditions, a PLC can improve teachers' professional practice; teacher agency (Brodie, 2019) and can make a positive contribution to improved student and school performance (Lomos *et al.*, 2011).

To summarise the above discussion, I propose a PLC model shown in figure 3.3 below:



Figure 3.3: Components of an Effective Professional Learning Community (PLC) Model
(Created by the Researcher)

Looking forward it is certain that collaboration within, between and across schools, in the form of PLCs, or indeed any other collaborative configuration such as CoPs, will prove to be a powerful strategy for building capacity and enhancing professional capital in schools nationally. However, much will depend on the investment in, and commitment to, quality implementation at both the local and central level (Harris and Jones, 2017).

3.5 The Conceptual Model for School Improvement

In this chapter I proposed a conceptual model that integrates instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership as foundational to driving school improvement within primary schools in London. This model illustrates how these leadership practices interact with teacher development initiatives to foster school improvement outcomes, aligning with the central thesis that school improvement is fundamentally about people improvement. Figure 3.4 (below) illustrates the conceptual model that I designed to present the overall structure of this thesis. I have used this conceptual model together with the theoretical framework (Figure 3.1, p. 80) within it that describe the theories underpinning the research problems and explains the relationships that are explored within this thesis. This has provided me with sufficient support to explain the need and the relevance for this study in the field.

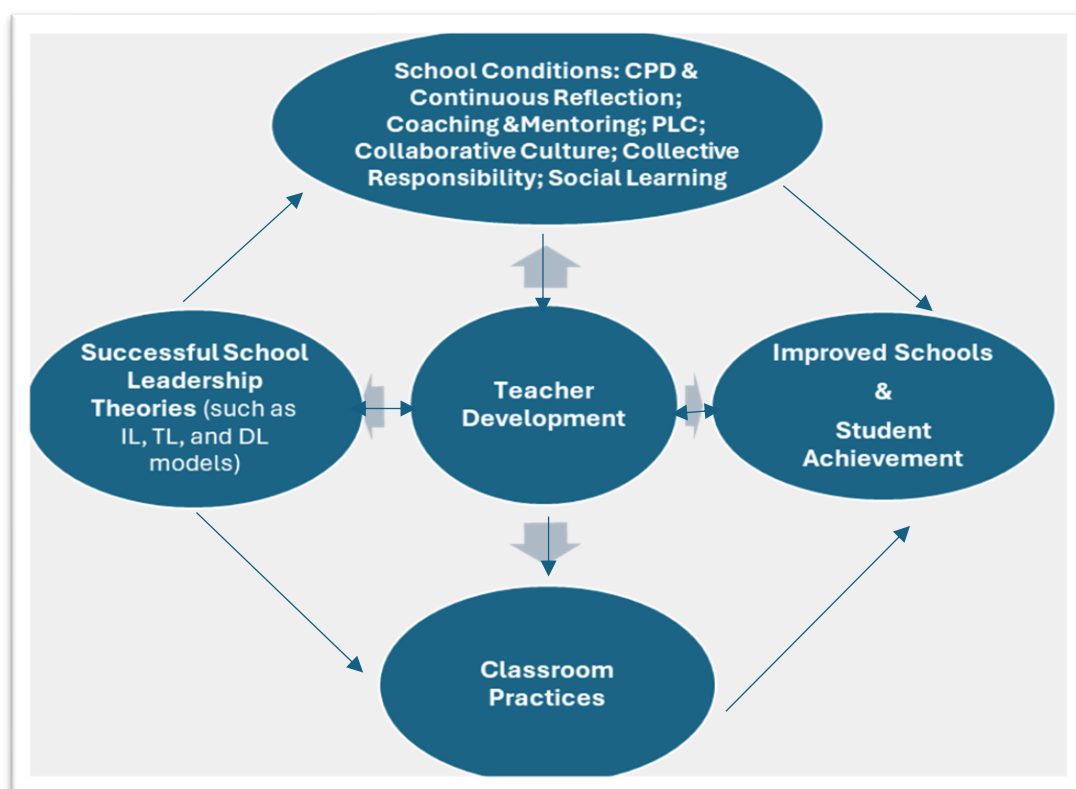


Figure 3.4: Conceptual Model for School Improvement (Created by the Researcher)

3.5.1 Leadership Practices

At the core of the conceptual model are three distinct leadership practices: instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership. Instructional leadership involves direct engagement by school leaders in shaping teaching and learning practices, setting high academic expectations, and providing targeted support and feedback to educators (Hallinger, 2011). Transformational leadership emphasizes inspirational aspects such as articulating a compelling vision, empowering others, and fostering innovation and change (Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 1994). Distributed leadership recognizes leadership as a collaborative endeavour, involving stakeholders like teachers and school leaders in shared decision-making and responsibility (Harris, 2008; Spillane *et al.*, 2004).

3.5.2 *Teacher Development*

Surrounding these leadership practices is the component of teacher development, encompassing professional learning, collaboration, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at enhancing educators' knowledge and skills. School leaders play a crucial role in creating supportive environments and facilitating resources for professional growth (Little, 2012). Through ongoing professional learning communities, mentoring programs, and collaborative inquiry projects, educators engage in reflective practice and innovative instructional strategies to improve teaching effectiveness and student outcomes (Bolam *et al.*, 2005; Timperley *et al.*, 2007).

3.5.3 *School Improvement Outcomes*

Radiating outward from leadership practices and teacher development are school improvement outcomes, reflecting the effectiveness of improvement efforts. These outcomes encompass academic achievement, student engagement, school climate, and stakeholder satisfaction (Cohen *et al.*, 2009; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2015; Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). Academic achievement includes standardised test scores and graduation rates, while student engagement refers to active participation in learning and extracurricular activities. School climate pertains to perceptions of safety and supportiveness, and stakeholder satisfaction gauges community perceptions of overall school performance (Muijs and Reynolds, 2005).

3.5.4 *Interactions and Feedback Loops*

The conceptual model incorporates interactions and feedback loops between leadership practices, teacher development, and school improvement outcomes. Leadership practices influence teacher development initiatives, which subsequently

impact school improvement outcomes (Day *et al.*, 2011). Conversely, school improvement outcomes provide feedback that informs leadership practices and refines strategies over time (Harris, 2013; Robinson *et al.*, 2009). These dynamic relationships underscore the iterative nature of school improvement, facilitating continuous refinement and adaptation of leadership and development strategies.

In summary, the conceptual model of school improvement provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how leadership practices, teacher development, and school improvement outcomes interact within primary schools in London. By elucidating these relationships, the model offers insights into how school leaders can effectively drive educational improvement and enhance organisational effectiveness (Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009).

3.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, in this chapter, I have presented a theoretical framework that integrates insights from instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership theories to provide a conceptual basis for understanding the practice of educational leadership and the process of school improvement within the participated primary schools. By synthesising key concepts and principles from these theories, the theoretical framework serves as a lens through which to explore the complexities of educational leadership and its impact on school effectiveness. The presentation of the theoretical framework and conceptual model at the end of the chapter provides a roadmap for the subsequent empirical analysis and discussion in the thesis, ensuring alignment and coherence across the various components of the research.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Research Design

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework and design employed to explore educational leadership and school improvement across six primary schools in London during two distinct contexts: pre-pandemic and pandemic. It begins by presenting the philosophical foundations of the research, followed by an explanation of the research design, data collection methods, and the approach to data analysis, which employs reflexive thematic analysis. The chapter also includes a dedicated section on reflexivity, emphasising my positionality and influence on the research process. Ethical considerations and strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings are addressed, alongside participant feedback that validated the study's conclusions.

4.2 Research Questions

The research was guided by one overarching question and four sub-questions:

Overall Research Question:

Which forms of educational leadership are more likely to contribute to school improvement?

Sub-Research Questions:

1. How do educational leaders contribute to school improvement?
2. What is the role of teachers in school improvement?
3. What is the contribution of staff professional development to school improvement?
4. What was the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on school leadership?

These questions informed the dual-phase study design and provided a framework for understanding leadership practices across different time periods and school contexts.

4.3 Philosophical Framework

4.3.1 *Ontology and Epistemology*

This research is rooted in a social constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes that reality is not an objective entity but is instead constructed through human interactions and social processes (Crotty, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Ontologically, the study adopts a relativist stance, recognising the existence of multiple, context-specific realities. In the context of this research, each participant's experience of leadership and school improvement represents a unique perspective influenced by their personal, social, and institutional environments.

Epistemologically, this study aligns with interpretivism, which holds that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants. This is particularly relevant in exploring leadership practices, as such practices are inherently social and context dependent. By engaging in semi-structured interviews, I aimed to elicit rich, narrative-based data that captured the subjective experiences of school leaders and teachers before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.3.2 *Challenges with Social Constructivism and Interpretivism*

While I found social constructivism and interpretivism to be robust frameworks for exploring complex, socially situated phenomena, they also presented several challenges that required careful consideration. One significant challenge was the inherent subjectivity and influence of my own positionality within the interpretivist paradigm. My assumptions, values, and perspectives inevitably shaped the research process. Although this reflexivity enriched the data by enabling me to engage more deeply with participants' narratives, it also raised concerns about bias and the potential for over-interpreting their experiences. To address this, I remained critically self-aware and adopted strategies to balance my interpretations.

Another challenge stemmed from social constructivism's acceptance of multiple truths, which often made analysis and synthesis more complex. For example, I observed diverse leadership styles across the schools in my study. Interpreting these differences without imposing a singular narrative required a nuanced approach that respected the unique contexts of each school while still identifying overarching patterns.

Ethical considerations were also a significant aspect of this research. I prioritised amplifying participants' voices, which involved addressing issues of representation, consent, and power dynamics. Ensuring that participants felt heard and accurately represented was especially crucial during the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when schools faced heightened pressures and vulnerabilities. I worked diligently to create a space where participants could share their experiences openly, despite the challenges of the crisis.

Finally, I recognised that the context-specific nature of social constructivist research posed limitations for generalisability. While the context-driven focus allowed me to capture unique leadership adaptations, it also required me to clearly articulate the boundaries of the study and consider how the findings might inform broader discussions on leadership and school improvement. I approached this by framing my findings within their specific contexts while reflecting on their potential relevance to similar settings.

4.3.3 Addressing The Challenges

To navigate the challenges inherent in this research, I adopted a range of strategies to ensure the rigour, trustworthiness, and ethical integrity of the study. Reflexivity was central to my approach. I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research

process to document my assumptions, biases, and evolving interpretations. This practice enabled me to critically examine my positionality and ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than being disproportionately influenced by my perspectives.

Participant validation was another key strategy I employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (see Appendix N for member checking). I shared executive summary reports (see Appendix M for sample executive summary report) with participants to seek their feedback and ensure that their voices were authentically represented. This feedback was invaluable, with schools such as School 1 offering reflections on adaptability and School 6 providing critiques of government policies. I incorporated these insights into the final themes, ensuring that the findings were not only reflective of my interpretations but also aligned with participants' lived experiences.

To mitigate the limitations of context-specific interpretations, I employed triangulation through a cross-case analysis. Although interviews served as the primary data source, the inclusion of multiple schools and perspectives allowed me to identify common themes across diverse cases. This approach strengthened the robustness of the findings by situating them within broader patterns rather than being confined to the specificities of individual schools.

Ethical safeguards were a critical component of my methodology. I implemented rigorous consent processes, ensured data anonymisation, and used numbers instead of names to protect participants' identities. Additionally, I conducted interviews with sensitivity to participants' workloads and emotional well-being, particularly given the heightened pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic. By fostering a respectful and

supportive environment, I aimed to minimise any potential discomfort or stress for participants while capturing their valuable insights.

4.4 Research Design

4.4.1 *Qualitative Case Study Approach*

In this research I adopt a qualitative case study design, which is particularly suited to exploring complex, context-specific phenomena such as educational leadership and school improvement. Case studies allow for an in-depth investigation of leadership practices within real-world settings (Yin, 2014). By focusing on six primary schools in London, the study captures the unique and shared experiences of school leaders and teachers across diverse contexts.

The dual-phase design—pre-pandemic and during the pandemic—adds a temporal dimension to the research, highlighting both continuity and adaptation in leadership practices. This approach enables a rich understanding of how leaders navigated systemic pressures and crises while fostering school improvement.

By focusing on a number of primary schools and examining their leadership practices and improvement efforts within the context of New Public Management (NPM) and the Covid-19 pandemic, I can gain a rich and detailed understanding of the factors influencing school improvement outcomes (Ibid. 2014). Through intensive data collection and analysis, including semi-structured interviews, I can uncover the nuances and intricacies of leadership practices and improvement initiatives within each case (Brinkman and Kvale, 2014).

One of the strengths of a case study design is its ability to embed the research within its natural context, allowing for the exploration of real-world phenomena within their socio-cultural settings (Creswell and Poth, 2017). This approach also aligns with the

social constructivist approach, emphasizing the co-construction of knowledge through dialogue and interpretation.

Given the importance of both context and socio-historical factors in shaping educational leadership practices and school improvement efforts, a case study design enables me to examine these phenomena within the specific context of primary schools in London. By conducting interviews and engaging with the key stakeholders, including headteachers, school leaders, and teachers, I can capture the unique contextual factors that influence leadership practices and improvement strategies.

Furthermore, a case study design facilitates a holistic perspective (Yin, 2014), allowing me to explore multiple dimensions of educational leadership and school improvement within each case. Rather than focusing narrowly on isolated variables or factors, I can examine the interplay between leadership practices, organisational dynamics, and external influences on school improvement outcomes. By considering the interactions and relationships among various elements within each case, I can develop a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in driving school improvement in the face of challenges such as those posed by the NPM framework and the Covid-19 pandemic.

In addition to providing descriptive insights into leadership practices and improvement efforts, a case study design can also contribute to theory refinement (Creswell and Poth, 2017). By systematically analysing patterns, themes, and relationships across cases, I can identify overarching themes and theoretical frameworks that help explain the dynamics of educational leadership and school improvement. This iterative process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation allows for the generation of new insights and the refinement of existing theories, ultimately contributing to the

advancement of knowledge in the field of educational leadership and school improvement.

This methodological approach aligns with the complex and multi-faceted nature of the research, enabling me to explore the intricacies of leadership practices and improvement strategies within the specific context of primary schools in London. Additionally, this approach contributes to the limited body of research on educational leadership in crisis contexts, offering valuable methodological insights into how dual-timepoint studies can capture the evolution of practices over time. By emphasizing both continuity and adaptation, the case study design bridges theoretical frameworks with real-world applications, enhancing the trustworthiness and relevance of the research findings.

4.4.2 Embedding the Conceptual Model in the Research Design

The conceptual model for school improvement, as presented in Chapter 3 (Figure 3.4, p. 95), served as the structural foundation for my research. This model integrates instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership theories with teacher development initiatives, providing a framework to explore how these elements collectively influence school improvement outcomes. Its design reflects the central premise of this study: that "school improvement is people improvement" (Boyer, 1995). By aligning leadership practices with staff development, the model fosters a systemic approach to driving improvements in primary schools. This conceptual model informed every stage of the research design. In developing the research questions and interview protocols, I relied on the model's components—leadership practices, teacher development, and school improvement outcomes. These elements shaped the focus of my inquiry, ensuring that data collection remained grounded in the study's

theoretical underpinnings. This alignment allowed me to explore how leadership and teacher development interact to influence school improvement effectively.

During the analysis phase, the conceptual model provided a structured lens for coding and thematic development. Categories such as “adaptive leadership” and “teacher professional growth” emerged directly from the model’s emphasis on feedback loops between leadership actions and school improvement outcomes. This structured approach enabled me to capture both individual experiences and broader systemic patterns, ensuring that the findings remained aligned with the model’s theoretical focus.

The iterative feedback loops embedded in the conceptual model also mirrored the reflexive nature of my research process. Participant feedback on the executive summaries not only validated the findings but also refined the thematic categories, allowing me to authentically represent the dynamic relationships outlined in the model. This iterative process further ensured that the study captured the complexity and adaptability of leadership practices in real-world educational settings.

By addressing critical gaps in the literature, the conceptual model emphasizes the interplay between leadership practices and teacher development during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The model’s focus on feedback loops and adaptability highlights the importance of flexible leadership styles in navigating challenging and rapidly changing educational contexts. Therefore, embedding the conceptual model into the research design allowed me to establish a cohesive alignment between theoretical constructs, data collection, and analysis. This coherence enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings and ensured that my research contributes not only to academic scholarship but also to practical insights for educational leadership.

4.4.3 Sampling Strategy

Initially, purposive sampling was employed to select two outstanding-rated schools for the pre-pandemic phase, reflecting high-performing leadership contexts. These schools included: one academy school as a member of a multi-academy trust (MAT) and one community-maintained school. The two schools were located within the desired location (London) and rated *outstanding* by Ofsted in their most recent inspections based on the overall key judgements including effective leadership and management; effective quality of teaching, learning and assessment; effective personal development; effective behaviour and welfare; and effective outcomes for pupils (Ofsted, 2018). However, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated a shift to convenience sampling, recruiting an additional four schools willing to participate during the crisis. Demonstrating that retaining the same selection criteria for recruiting further schools was no longer a viable option due to the pandemic. According to Lavrakas (2008) convenience sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which people are sampled simply because they are convenient sources of data for researchers (Lavrakas, 2008). I employed this type of sampling for several reasons. Because the global pandemic was particularly a stressful event for schools and their staff, the schools were chosen based on my personal connections, professional networks, and school leaders' resultant willingness to make time for a conversation. For instance, I obtained referral to three schools by the headteacher of the second school. Additionally, there was a fourth school for which I was a governor. Among the four schools, three were community type primary schools and one was an academy. Luckily all were located within the same area but with different Ofsted rating ranging

from good to inadequate.¹ Despite the limited access to research sites and participants, six primary schools eventually participated in this research (see Appendix C for ethical and access strategies)- the original number planned from the beginning of the research. These kinds of diverse case studies however had two advantages. Firstly, the occurrence of case studies in two different contexts (prior and during the pandemic) allowed me to collect extra data on the impact of Covid-19 on the phenomenon under study. Secondly, having case study schools with various Ofsted ratings (such as outstanding, good, and inadequate), indeed could enhance the depth and breadth of the cases and their response to the pandemic.

The final sample comprised:

Two outstanding-rated schools (one academy and one community school) participating pre- and during-pandemic.

Four good-rated schools (three community and one academy) participating only during the pandemic.

This diverse sample ensured representation of various school types and leadership experiences, enabling cross-case comparisons and enhancing the study's credibility.

¹ Bearing in mind, all the inspections had taken place prior to the arrival of the new Ofsted framework in 2019

4.4.4 Procedure for Recruitment of the Participant Schools

In the preparation for visiting the schools, firstly, I had to develop a list of outstanding primary schools in a district of London, then, I began to contact them via emails. When there was no response within a week, follow-up contact was made with a phone call, most of which I was asked to send a second email, indicating that they will ask the headteacher to check whether they wanted to take part. Among the 15 invitations I extended; four schools responded to express interest in the study. One of the four schools' headteacher mentioned his interest but requested to be contacted in the next academic year. Two other headteachers were unable to participate due to their busy administrative and leadership schedules while the fourth headteacher booked a visit, but she refused to meet up. The next attempt was to contact my professional network. Luckily, one of my professional contacts who is a school board member of an academy school, part of a multi-academy trust (MAT), managed to persuade the headteacher to take part in the research. This was the first school and the permission to visit the school was sought via exchanging emails with the headteacher. Whilst I was attending a school leadership meeting at the Local Authority (LA), I learnt about a community primary school in the borough with an excellent reputation of being research friendly. Soon after sending the headteacher an email requesting him to be interviewed, he happily arranged a visit to the school. This was the second school. At the time the interviews were scheduled to take place with this school, Covid-19 happened and shut the schools. There was no choice but to complete the remaining interviews remotely through online Google Meetings and Skype which were convenient for the interviewees.

Given that schools and educational institutions were closed, I had to suspend data collection and adapt the project to generate data. Following supervisors' authorisation and re-opening of schools after the second lockdown in England (March 2021), I made a second visit to the two former schools. Both schools affirmed their agreements via emails (school 1- 21st May 2021 and school 2- 19th May 2021). When I met the second headteacher again for an interview (25th May 2021) and discussed how the outbreak has halted data collection in the research, he did lend his support to get access to more school sites. He contacted his other colleague headteachers (via email- 25th May 2021) and asked them to help. As a result, three of them emailed back to show their availability and support. The first visits to these three schools were consecutively made on (28th May 2021; 8th June 2021; and 21st June 2021). In addition, the fourth school was the school wherein I am a governor. Permission to visit the headteacher for an interview was obtained verbally (23rd July 2021). In terms of recruiting participants, Saberi (2020) reports that the recruitment of research participants has changed due to the pandemic, which echoed my experience. While, retaining the same selection criteria (5 people per school including the headteacher, 2 SLT members, and 2 teachers), flexibility was necessary in targeting participants. The rationale behind choosing headteachers over school governors in this thesis could be explained in terms of their specific roles in schools. Considering school governors maintain a strategic approach whereas the leadership team perform the operational responsibilities associated with the day-to-day running of the school in which I was interested to explore. Demographic data of all participants involved in this study is described in the next section.

4.4.5 Participants

In total 22 participants were interviewed, including 6 males and 16 females. Tables 4.1 to 4.6 display interviewee profiles from the six schools conducted before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. These tables contain participants' demographic variables such as: position, gender, qualification, teaching responsibility; experience as a leader and experience as a teacher.

Table 4.1: School 1 (before the pandemic): Interviewee Profiles

Position	Gender	Highest Qualification	Currently Teaching	Experience as Leader	Experience as Teacher
Headteacher	F	Master's Degree	Not involved	8 Years	3 Years
Assist. Head 1	F	Qualified Teacher	Not involved	3 Years	5 Years
Assist. Head 2	F	Qualified Teacher	Not involved	3 Years	3 Years
Teacher 1 and Middle Leader	F	Qualified Teacher	Year 2	Under a Year	4 Years
Teacher 2	F	Qualified Teacher	Year 3	Now shadowing to be a Data Leader	5 Years

Table 4.2: School 2 (before the pandemic): Interviewee Profiles

Position	Gender	Highest Qualification	Currently Teaching	Experience as Leader	Experience as Teacher
Headteacher	M	Doctoral Research Student	Not involved	10 Years	6 Years
Assist. Head 1	F	Master's Degree	Year 6	3 Years	7 Years
Assist. Head 2	M	Doctoral Research Student	Year 6	1 Year	6 Years
Teacher 1	F	Qualified Teacher	Year 2	Under a Year	3 Years
Teacher 2	F	Qualified Teacher	Year 3	None	7 Years (Including 3 years at this school)

Table 4.3: School 3 (during the pandemic): Interviewee Profiles

Position	Gender	Highest Qualification	Currently Teaching	Experience as Leader	Experience as Teacher
Headteacher	F	EdD	Not involved	12 Years	Yes
Deputy. Head	M	Qualified Teacher	Not involved	8 Years	Yes
Teacher 1 and Middle leader	F	Qualified Teacher	Yes	2Years	7 Years
Teacher 2 and Middle Leader	F	Qualified Teacher	Yes	1 Year	7 Years

Table 4.4: School 4 (during the pandemic): Interviewee Profiles

Position	Gender	Highest Qualification	Currently Teaching	Experience as Leader	Experience as Teacher
Headteacher	F	Not reported	Not involved	11 Years	Yes
Assist. Head	M	Not reported	Not involved	3 Years (joined the school during Covid)	12 Years
Teacher 1 and Middle Leader	F	Qualified Teacher	Yes	1 Year	13 Years
Teacher 2	M	Qualified Teacher	Yes	None	NQT (joined the school 2020)

Table 4.5: School 5 (during the pandemic): Interviewee Profiles

Position	Gender	Highest Qualification	Currently Teaching	Experience as Leader	Experience as Teacher
Headteacher	F	Not reported	Not involved	17 Years (joined the school in 2019)	Not reported

Table 4.6: School 6 (during the pandemic): Interviewee Profiles

Position	Gender	Highest Qualification	Currently Teaching	Experience as Leader	Experience as Teacher
Headteacher	M	Unknown	Not involved	15 Years (joined the school in 2019)	Not reported
Assist. Head 1	F	Qualified Teacher	Yes	4 Years (joined the school in 2019)	9 Years
Assist. Head 2	F	Qualified Teacher	Yes	7 Years	11 Years

As shown in tables 4.1 to 4.6 participants selected for the interviews comprised of six headteachers, eight SLT members, and eight teaching staff. Collecting multiple perspectives (for example, from related individuals such as leadership team members and teaching staff) provided a rich understanding of school leadership practice and its

impact on the process of school improvement. The procedure for collecting the data is described below.

4.5 Data Collection Methods

4.5.1 *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, chosen for their flexibility and ability to elicit detailed, participant-driven narratives. This method allowed participants to reflect on their leadership practices and challenges, while enabling me to probe further into emerging themes.

Originally, I decided to include direct observations in schools; however, the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated reliance solely on interviews. While this adaptation limited opportunities for observational data, it enhanced the accessibility of participants, resulting in rich, detailed accounts of their experiences.

Although most of the interview questions were predetermined in a scripted style within a framework of themes ensuring consistency in the questions asked of all interviewees but the wording of the questions, the wording of the follow-up questions, and the order in which the questions were asked varied according to the flow of each discussion. In this way, allowing new ideas to be brought up during the interviews. Primarily, I asked open-ended questions so that participants would offer richer detail in their responses. The interview questions were closely structured in relation to the research aims and aligned with the research questions, focusing on themes such as leadership strategies, staff professional development, and the impact of the pandemic. The iterative nature of the interviews allowed for the exploration of unique participant perspectives, consistent with the study's interpretivist approach. As recognised by Brundrett and Rhodes (2014), this approach can make subsequent data presentation

and analysis simpler; as well as providing structural integrity to the final report (see Appendix D for interview protocol). Among the 22 one-to-one interviews, 18 were conducted face-to-face and the remaining 4 were done remotely using videoconferencing tools such as 'Google Meet' and 'Skype.' The shift to remote interviews during the pandemic posed challenges for building rapport but also allowed for greater flexibility in scheduling. While this adaptation limited observational opportunities, it facilitated more in-depth discussions by reducing logistical constraints for participants. In line with my interpretivist stance, I developed interview questions that aimed to explore the rich and nuanced perspectives of the participants. By focusing on their individual experiences, beliefs, and interpretations, these questions allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the practice of school leadership. This approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing the importance of understanding and interpreting human behaviour within its socio-cultural and socio-historical context (Merriam, 2009). By utilising these interview questions, I aim to capture the diverse perspectives and unique insights that contribute to a more holistic and nuanced understanding of school leadership practices at two different time points: before and during the coronavirus crisis.

4.5.1.1 Prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic

The types of questions I asked in the interviews before the pandemic were based on three themes being: leadership styles/models; collaboration and team building; and professional learning development. The aim was to examine the experience, opinion, values, knowledge, and feelings regarding the school leadership practice to understand the role of school leaders and their team including teachers in the process of school improvement. The interviewees were asked to describe the culture of the school, their relationships, and their roles; their understanding of the process of school

improvement; the leadership style and strategies they believed led the school towards success; their actions to improve teacher practices and the quality of teaching and learning; their understanding of how learning was led in their school and their feelings about whether they believed the process had been successful.

The themes that underpinned the interview questions were derived from the research questions which emerged from the summary of the literature review (see Appendix E for topic bank). Subcategories of these questions became some of the prompts which were used during the interview process. Following supervisor feedback, some of the interview questions were modified. Finally, as the last stage of the process, the interview questions were piloted in the first school which was an academy primary school (see Appendices F and G for pilot study questions). Based on the interviewees' answers, I modified some of the questions to ensure further clarity (see Appendices H and I for modified interview questions). The interviews were conducted at each interviewee's school at a time mutually convenient to them and I. Except, for the four interviews (including, two SLT members and two teachers in the second school) which had to be carried out remotely due to the coronavirus lockdown in March 2020.

4.5.1.2 Procedure Used during the Covid-19 Pandemic

In a similar vein, I used the same method to develop another set of semi-structured interview questions for the time during the pandemic. At this point in time, the aim was to understand how the school leaders responded to the crisis and what forms of leadership emerged. Although the overall objectives remained consistent, changes were necessary in almost all aspects of the research process, including adding an extra research question, recruitment of participants, optimising existing data sources, and streamlining data collection approaches. The interview questions emerged from the research questions and the summary of the literature review conducted on crisis

leadership. The intent of the interviews was to gain an understanding of how interviewees' school organisations responded during the early months of the pandemic crisis. School leaders also were asked to describe the decisions they made that seemed to work well during the time; and they talked about some of the challenges and opportunities that they foresaw in the months to come. Additionally, it was important to know if the school leaders used any of the pre-existing models of leadership; how they supported their staff to cope during that time; how teachers perceived the support they received from their leaders; how the relationships and networks (internal and external) were negotiated in these schools; what happened to the staff development in this time; how school leaders managed their instructional role during the uncertainty; whether school leaders and teachers' contributions were changed during this time; what values and attitudes underpinned their practices; and how school leaders managed equity in their schools (see Appendix J for leaders' interview questions). Similar questions were asked of teachers (see Appendix K for teachers' interview questions) to determine if there are differences between these two groups (school leaders and teachers).

Prior to the interviews, I sent the interview questions to the supervisors for feedback and piloted them with a couple of my professional network including a teacher and a retired headteacher. Noting that some of the interviews had to be conducted online due to the Covid-19 pandemic and school closures therefore, it was crucial for me to consider any potential risks that may arise from an online interview (College of Arts, Humanity and Social Sciences [CAHSS], 2020). For example, if the interview is on a sensitive or intrusive topic. In this case, participants received the participant information sheet in advance via email; as well as completing an electronic consent form and emailed it back. As with the face-to-face interviews, participants had to

verbally re-affirm that they had given informed consent and agreed for their voice to be recorded. Before conducting the interviews, the interviewees kindly offered me the choice of face-to-face or online (for example, Zoom, Google Meet, or Skype), based on my convenience and comfort level. Although face-to-face method was preferred for the purpose of getting good quality audio recordings. Considering the interviewees were offering their time out of a busy schedule, I did not use fixed time slots but instead set up interviews to accommodate the interviewees' schedules. The interviews were targeted to be about 30 minutes, but some interviewees generously offered their time and spoke for almost an hour. The rule of social distancing and social gathering guidelines by the UK government and the World Health Organisation (WHO) were followed during these in-person interviews. Bearing in mind, the major method of the data collection in this study has been face-to-face interviews; therefore, methodological rigour and validity of findings largely depended on the quality of interactions with interviewees during interviews (Kobakhidze, Hui, Chui, and Gonzalez, 2021). It is important to acknowledge that the pandemic impacted the state of mind and behaviour of most and in this context myself and the participants. In the interview protocol for this study, emphasis was placed on the demonstration of respect, humility, compassion, and appreciation. Keeping the interviews as conversations, not interrogations, was critical for building rapport between the interviewees and I, this was achieved as many participants expressed an interest in staying in touch and learning about the study's findings.

4.5.2 Background of the Researcher

My background as an Iranian educator and researcher has profoundly shaped my approach to this study. Growing up and receiving my initial education in Iran, I was

immersed in an educational system characterised by a strong hierarchical structure, where headteachers held significant power and were often perceived as distant authority figures. This dynamic instilled a sense of formality and fear, both among students and staff, creating an environment in which questioning authority or engaging in open dialogue was rare. From an early age, this experience influenced my perception of leadership as being directive rather than collaborative, a perspective that I carried into my early professional life.

Academically, the Iranian education system emphasized respect for authority and rote learning over critical inquiry. Students were encouraged to adopt a passive approach to knowledge, where established perspectives were accepted rather than questioned. As a result, my early academic writing reflected this cultural context, often lacking criticality and favouring descriptive over analytical narratives. This ingrained approach, while consistent with cultural expectations, limited my ability to engage critically with ideas and methodologies.

However, my migration to the UK in 2003 marked a significant shift in my academic and professional journey. Pursuing higher education in the UK in 2012—from my bachelor's degree to my current doctoral studies—exposed me to an academic culture that prioritises critical thinking, independent inquiry, and the evaluation of ideas. This transition was transformative, though not without challenges. Over time, I adapted my approach to align with the expectations of the UK academic environment, developing skills that allowed me to critique literature, methodologies, and findings with greater confidence. Engaging with critical pedagogy and academic mentorship has further enhanced my ability to adopt a questioning and evaluative stance in my research.

Professionally, my experiences in school governance and teaching in the UK provided contrasting perspectives on leadership. Unlike the hierarchical and often fear-driven approach of headteachers in Iran, I encountered leadership practices in the UK that were more collaborative and inclusive, emphasizing shared decision-making and staff empowerment. These experiences inspired my research focus on leadership practices and teacher development, particularly the interplay between leadership styles and school improvement.

Reflecting on my bicultural academic and professional experiences, I recognise the dual influence of these contexts on my research approach. My Iranian heritage has instilled a deep respect for participants and their voices, aligning well with the interpretivist philosophy underpinning this study. However, I am also conscious of how my early academic training, rooted in a less critical tradition, may still influence my writing. To address this, I actively engage in reflexive practices, including peer reviews and reflective journaling, to ensure analytical rigour and criticality throughout this study.

This study not only explores leadership practices in education but also represents my ongoing growth as a researcher committed to bridging diverse cultural perspectives and striving for academic rigour.

4.5.3 Ethical Approval, Access to Data, and Informed Consent

This research adhered to the highest ethical standards, consistent with the principles of interpretivist research, which prioritises participant voices and raises critical issues related to representation, consent, and power dynamics. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of West London (UWL) Research Ethics Committee before commencing the study. Access to potential participants was facilitated through

each school's headteacher, who held a duty of care for their staff. While I had relatively straightforward access, I often needed to negotiate my position as an outsider in many of the school contexts, ensuring that trust was built and maintained throughout the research process.

Given the constructivist nature of this study, with case studies formed around interview narratives gathered from school leadership teams and teachers (Elliott, 2005), informed consent was of utmost importance. Following Atkinson's (1998) principles of "being fair, honest, clear, and straightforward" (pp. 36-37), I adhered to both 'moral responsibility' and standard ethics protocols to balance ethical considerations with the progression of the research. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) guidelines were invaluable in ensuring that participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the assurance of anonymity, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Participants were provided with comprehensive information sheets and consent forms (see Appendices A and B), which detailed the use of a recording device, how the data would be stored securely, and how the findings would be shared.

One of the critical ethical considerations in this study was the varied workload challenges participants faced during data collection, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, School 6 experienced staff shortages during the interview phase, which required careful flexibility in scheduling and conducting interviews. Recognising these challenges, I prioritised sensitivity and sought to minimise any additional burden on participants. While qualitative methodology often suggests sharing full data transcripts with participants for validation, I instead shared executive summaries of the findings. This approach aligned with Kvale's (1996) ethical principles

by promoting transparency while avoiding overburdening participants during a period of heightened professional and personal demands. The summaries provided participants with an opportunity to validate the accuracy of their contributions and reflect on their engagement. Additionally, the summaries were beneficial for participant schools, as they could be included in their self-evaluation forms for OFSTED purposes.

Throughout the study, I ensured that confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing identifying characteristics before disseminating any information. Anonymisation techniques were employed, such as referring to participants by their role descriptors and assigning numbers where multiple participants held the same position (e.g., headteacher 1, headteacher 2). I made it clear to all participants that their names and identifying details would not be used for any purpose beyond the research, and no information would be shared that might compromise their anonymity. During the interviews, consent was not only obtained in writing but also reaffirmed periodically throughout the process to ensure participants were comfortable and willing to continue. Participants were reminded that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to decline to answer any question or end the interview at any time (BERA, 2018). For example, I ensured that participants had a clear understanding of the research purpose, addressed any questions or concerns they had, and provided continuous assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. This approach helped to inspire and maintain confidence throughout the research process.

Given the sensitive nature of participants sharing their experiences during the pandemic, I took special care to address power dynamics and foster an environment where participants felt heard and valued. Ethical sensitivity extended into the post-

research phase, as I shared findings in ways that respected participants' professional and personal constraints. The reflexive nature of this approach mirrored the principles of interpretivist research, ensuring that participants' voices were authentically represented while maintaining the integrity of the research process.

In terms of data management, all collected data were stored securely and in compliance with the UWL Data Management Statement, GDPR, and the schools' own data management guidelines. Anonymised data were securely stored to protect participants' privacy, and appropriate safeguards were in place to ensure compliance with ethical and legal standards.

By maintaining these ethical practices, I was able to ensure transparency, accountability, and sensitivity throughout the study, adhering to the ethical principles outlined by MacFarlane (2009) and Kvale (1996). These practices not only strengthened the trustworthiness of the research but also ensured that it contributed meaningfully to the understanding of educational leadership during a challenging and unprecedented time.

4.5.4 Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher was shaped by a dual positionality, encompassing both insider and outsider perspectives, which presented unique opportunities and challenges throughout the study. In the case of School 6, I held the position of a governor, which facilitated ease of access and provided me with an in-depth understanding of the school's context. This insider perspective allowed me to engage with the school's dynamics more deeply, but it also carried the potential risk of over-identifying with participants' perspectives, particularly those of school leaders. To mitigate this, I

employed several strategies to ensure that my interpretations remained balanced and objective.

One key strategy was the use of reflective journaling. Throughout the research process, I maintained a reflective journal to document instances where my familiarity with the school might have influenced my interpretations. This practice allowed me to critically evaluate and adjust my approach to both data collection and analysis. Additionally, regular peer debriefing sessions with my supervisors and colleagues played a crucial role in providing external critiques of my interpretations. These discussions ensured that my insider status did not unduly shape the findings and that my analysis retained its methodological rigour.

In contrast, my role as an outsider in the other five schools presented different challenges, particularly in establishing trust and rapport with participants. This was further complicated by the need to conduct many interviews remotely due to the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic. Overcoming these barriers required a proactive and transparent approach to communication. Before conducting the interviews, I provided participants with detailed information about the study's objectives, protocols, and ethical considerations. This transparency helped foster trust and reassured participants of the study's purpose and integrity.

Building rapport with participants was another critical aspect of my role as an outsider. I relied on active listening and empathetic questioning during interviews to create a comfortable and open environment where participants felt encouraged to share their experiences. These techniques were particularly important in navigating the complexities of remote interviews, where the lack of in-person interaction could have otherwise hindered the development of trust.

This dual positionality enriched the research by offering diverse perspectives. My insider role allowed me to gain a nuanced understanding of the context in School 6, while my outsider status in the other schools enabled me to approach the data with fresh eyes and a heightened sensitivity to building trust. However, balancing these roles required constant reflexivity to ensure that my positionality enhanced, rather than compromised, the research process. By critically reflecting on my role and actively addressing potential biases, I was able to maintain the integrity and trustworthiness of the study.

4.5.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity was integral to this research, with a reflective journal maintained throughout the study to document assumptions, biases, and evolving interpretations. This process ensured the analysis remained grounded in participants' narratives and allowed for iterative refinement of the research approach. My dual positionality enriched the research but required heightened reflexivity to mitigate potential biases during data interpretation, particularly in remote interview contexts.

The feedback from schools during the post-research phase offered additional opportunities for reflexivity. For instance, School 2's emphasis on the need for long-term evaluation of leadership models prompted me to consider how my initial focus on immediate outcomes might have influenced my interpretations. Similarly, School 6's reflections highlighted the critical role of emotional intelligence in leadership, particularly in managing staff shortages and maintaining team cohesion during the pandemic. This feedback aligns with the broader theme of leadership resilience under systemic pressures.

In addition, School 3's comments on the impact of government directives on leadership practices reinforced the need to critically examine external factors influencing leadership. These insights allowed me to reflect on the balance between participant voices and my interpretive lens, ensuring that the final themes authentically represented diverse perspectives.

Embedding reflexive practices at every stage of the research strengthened its credibility. As Finlay (2021) argues, reflexivity involves critically interrogating the researcher's positionality and values, fostering transparency and ethical rigour in qualitative research.

4.5.5.1 Data Collection

Reflexivity during data collection required careful attention to my personal biases and professional background in educational leadership. For instance, my inclination towards collaborative practices necessitated adjustments to avoid leading questions. Maintaining a reflective journal allowed me to document these challenges and adapt my questioning techniques accordingly.

4.5.5.2 Participant Feedback and Member Checking

To validate and refine the findings, I engaged participants in a member-checking process by preparing and sending **individualised executive summary reports** to each school (see Appendix M for a sample). These reports summarised the key findings relevant to their specific school and invited their feedback on the accuracy and interpretation of the data. However, this process occurred only after the initial data analysis phase, as the Covid-19 pandemic had overwhelmed schools with additional responsibilities, making earlier engagement infeasible. Out of the six schools, four

responded with feedback, which proved invaluable in refining thematic categories and ensuring the findings genuinely reflected participants' experiences. For example:

- Feedback from School 3 emphasized systemic pressures from government directives, prompting further exploration of external factors influencing leadership practices.
- School 6 highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership, reinforcing its inclusion as a sub-theme under "Leadership Adaptations During Crisis."

This iterative process demonstrates the collaborative ethos of the study and reflects Lincoln and Guba's (1985) principle of member checking as a strategy to enhance trustworthiness.

4.5.5.3 Data Analysis

During data analysis, reflexivity involved critically examining how my preconceptions influenced coding and theme development. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic approach, I revisited themes multiple times to ensure they were grounded in participants' narratives rather than shaped by my personal biases. For instance, my inclination towards collaborative leadership practices initially led to an overemphasis on related themes, but participant feedback and triangulation with interview data ensured a more balanced interpretation.

4.5.5.4 Critical Reflection on Reflexivity

Reflexivity throughout this study not only enhanced its credibility but also underscored my ethical responsibility to authentically represent participants' voices, especially during a period of unprecedented challenges for schools. As Holmes (2020) argues,

reflexivity is an iterative and continuous process that strengthens the transparency and trustworthiness of qualitative research. By embedding reflexive practices at every stage, this study maintains methodological rigour while remaining participant-centred.

4.5.6 Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, trustworthiness serves as a substitute for traditional notions of validity and reliability, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). To ensure trustworthiness in this study, I implemented strategies that addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, ensuring a rigorous and transparent research process.

Credibility was established through prolonged interaction with the data, as I conducted multiple rounds of analysis to ensure that the themes were deeply rooted in participants' narratives. To further enhance credibility, I employed member-checking by sharing executive summary reports with participants, inviting them to validate or contest the findings. Although only four schools provided feedback, their insights were invaluable in refining the themes and interpretations, adding a layer of authenticity to the study.

To ensure transferability, I provided detailed descriptions of the research context, participant demographics, and findings, enabling readers to assess the applicability of this study to other settings. The six primary schools included in the study represented a diverse range of leadership experiences, which contributed to the richness and relevance of the findings. By offering a comprehensive account of the research environment, I sought to support readers in determining how the findings might be relevant to their own contexts.

Dependability was strengthened through the documentation of a systematic approach to coding and thematic analysis. This process was recorded in a detailed codebook (Appendix L), which provided a transparent record of the analytical decisions made during the study. Additionally, I engaged in regular peer debriefing sessions with my supervisors, who offered external critiques of my interpretations. These discussions helped ensure that the findings were consistent and grounded in the data.

Confirmability was a critical focus of this research, with reflexivity playing a central role in ensuring objectivity. I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process, documenting my own biases and the strategies I used to address them. This reflexive practice allowed me to critically examine my positionality and its influence on the research. Furthermore, I triangulated data sources, including interview transcripts and participant feedback, to enhance the objectivity and reliability of the findings.

By employing these strategies, I was able to demonstrate a rigorous and transparent approach to qualitative research. These efforts ensured the trustworthiness of the findings, which I believe make a meaningful contribution to the field of educational leadership, particularly in understanding the dynamics of leadership during challenging times.

4.6 Data Analysis and Presentation Strategy

4.6.1 *Reflexive Thematic Analysis*

I collected data through semi-structured, open-ended interviews with a duration range of 30 to 90 minutes. These interviews were with school leaders including headteachers and teachers from six primary schools with various Ofsted rankings, focusing on their experiences and viewpoints during a time of significant educational change. The

following table (4.7) is a reminder of the selected case study schools and their Ofsted ratings along with the number of participants interviewed in this research study:

Table 4.7: A summary of case studies, types of schools and people interviewed in this study

Case Study (CS)	School type/ area	Ofsted rating	People interviewed (n=22)
CS1	Academy primary school	Outstanding	Headteacher x 1 Assistant headteachers x 2 Teacher x2
CS2	Community primary school	Outstanding	Headteacher x 1 Assistant headteachers x 2 Teacher x2
CS3	Community primary school	Good	Headteacher x1 Deputy headteacher x 1 Teacher x 2
CS4	Community primary school	Good	Headteacher x 1 Assistant headteacher x 1 Teacher x 2
CS5	Academy primary school (recently converted)	Previously was a community with an improvement measure	Headteacher x 1
CS6	Community primary school		Headteacher x 1 Assistant headteacher x 2

With the consent of my participants, I audio-recorded these interviews to ensure the data's accuracy and richness were preserved. Once I completed the interview, I used a verbatim style of transcription to transcribe the audio-recorded interviews. I chose this approach to keep all the information and feelings from the transcripts to retain the key information and meanings. In analysing qualitative data from the interview transcripts, I employed Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) reflexive thematic analysis

(RTA), which is a flexible and iterative approach aligned with the study's social constructivist and interpretivist paradigms. RTA prioritises my active role in interpreting data and constructing meaning, recognising the subjectivity inherent in qualitative research.

Initially, I approached the data without a rigid pre-conceived analysis framework or a pre-defined codebook. This approach allowed for the emergence of themes organically from the data, characteristic of an inductive approach. However, I was mindful of my theoretical framework, which comprises instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership theories. This framework provided a consistent lens through which to interpret the data, ensuring that my main themes aligned with these established leadership styles. Given the unprecedented challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, it was necessary to adapt my approach. The uncertainty faced by school leaders, coupled with constant changes in government instructions, created a highly dynamic and unpredictable environment. Consequently, while I maintained the flexibility of an inductive approach, I also adopted a more top-down, deductive approach to account for the rigid and evolving situations school leaders navigated during the pandemic.

Moreover, it became evident that school leaders demonstrated adaptability by shifting between instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership styles. This fluidity underscores the importance of responsive leadership in crisis contexts. RTA enabled me to capture this fluidity in leadership practices, highlighting how leaders shifted between instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership styles to effectively respond to the evolving challenges.

Using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches through RTA, I was able to balance flexibility with the necessary structure imposed by the theoretical framework. This approach ensured consistency with my theoretical framework and terminology, providing a nuanced understanding of how different leadership models contributed to school improvement both before and during the Covid-19 crisis.

4.6.2 Use of NVivo in Data Coding and Reflexive Analysis

In this doctoral-level research, the use of NVivo 14, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, played a significant role in facilitating the management and organisation of data while maintaining the interpretivist principles central to this study. Although NVivo served as a powerful organisational tool, the initial coding process was conducted manually in adherence to Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis. This approach ensured that the analysis remained deeply rooted in my active engagement with the data, a critical requirement of the interpretivist paradigm.

The integration of NVivo complemented the reflexive thematic analysis by enabling systematic data organisation without compromising the interpretive nature of the analysis. The software facilitated the systematic retrieval and cross-referencing of codes and themes, allowing for a more comprehensive and detailed exploration of the data. For instance, related codes such as “teacher autonomy” and “leadership emotional intelligence” were clustered under broader themes like “collaborative leadership,” enhancing the transparency and rigour of the thematic development.

Importantly, the use of NVivo did not replace or diminish the interpretivist nature of the analysis. As QSR International (2020) highlights, NVivo supports rather than dictates qualitative analysis, ensuring that interpretative decisions remain under the researcher's control. I retained full responsibility for the interpretation of the data,

ensuring that the analysis reflected participants' narratives and my reflexive engagement with their lived experiences. NVivo supported reflexivity by enabling the maintenance of reflective notes, memos, and the development of a codebook, which documented the analysis process and demonstrated transparency. The codebook produced in this study (see Appendix L) was not a prescriptive guide but rather an outcome of the reflexive thematic analysis, summarising the results (codes, themes, and sub-themes) to increase transparency.

Furthermore, NVivo offered tools for generating themes and identifying relationships between codes more efficiently than manual methods. Its visualisation capabilities, such as graphs and charts, provided an additional layer of support for interpreting and presenting the data. By facilitating deeper engagement with the data, NVivo allowed me to identify patterns and connections that might otherwise have been overlooked.

By navigating the complexities of social constructivism and interpretivism through the integration of NVivo, this research exemplifies the rigour, reflexivity, and ethical integrity demanded at the doctoral level. The methodological approach not only ensured a robust and transparent analysis but also contributed to understanding educational leadership in crisis contexts, offering insights that are both contextually rich and methodologically sound.

Once the data was stored in NVivo, I employed a six-stage RTA process guided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) to analyse the qualitative data. This approach allowed for a rich and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences while remaining grounded in the study's interpretivist philosophy. The following section outlines how Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis were

systematically applied to the study's qualitative data, ensuring rigour and depth in the analysis process:

Phase 1: Familiarisation with Data

Familiarisation began with the transcription of interview recordings, which I supplemented with field notes. This process involved repeatedly listening to recordings and reading through transcripts to capture nuances in participants' expressions. Initial impressions and patterns were documented manually in a reflective journal, providing the foundation for subsequent coding.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Coding was conducted both manually and using NVivo software to organise and manage data systematically. NVivo was particularly valuable in identifying patterns and relationships across the six cases, allowing for the visual clustering of codes and sub-codes. For example, the software highlighted recurring codes such as "adaptive leadership" and "emotional intelligence," which later informed broader themes. However, interpretative decisions were made manually to align with the study's reflexive and interpretivist approach.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Codes were grouped into potential themes using NVivo's node management tools. For instance, codes like "adaptive leadership" and "teacher resilience" were clustered under the broader theme "Leadership Adaptations During Crisis." The conceptual model (Figure 3.4, Chapter 3) provided a deductive framework for organising and

refining themes, ensuring alignment between theoretical constructs and empirical findings.

Feedback from multiple schools further refined these themes. For example:

- **School 1** highlighted how collaborative leadership practices supported their school's adaptability during the pandemic.
- **School 2-** the headteacher of this school emphasized the importance of a 'high challenge, low threat' environment, fostering a leadership culture focused on sustainable, long-term outcomes. This approach highlights the significance of balancing support with accountability, particularly during times of crisis, and underscores the challenges of measuring its immediate impact."
- **School 3** underscored the systemic pressures imposed by government policies, prompting further exploration of external factors influencing leadership practices.
- **School 6** drew attention to the critical role of emotional intelligence in leadership, particularly in addressing staff shortages and supporting well-being during the pandemic.

Recent studies, such as Harris and Jones (2023), discuss the importance of leadership approaches that adapt to crisis conditions while maintaining long-term focus. These insights, coupled with participant feedback, reinforced the value of integrating adaptive, collaborative, and emotionally intelligent leadership strategies into the analysis.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

NVivo's query and visualisation tools supported the review of themes by enabling a cross-case comparison of codes. This phase ensured that themes were distinct and coherent, reflecting participants' narratives accurately. Participant feedback on executive summaries further validated and refined these themes. For example, feedback from School 3 emphasized systemic pressures, prompting the integration of external factors into themes related to leadership challenges.

Phases 5 and 6: Defining Themes and Writing Up

In the final phases, themes were defined with clarity and contextualised within the conceptual model. For instance, the theme "Teacher Well-Being and Resilience" was connected to leadership practices that supported staff during the pandemic. These themes were then integrated into the findings chapter (Chapter 5 and 6), where they were further interpreted in relation to the literature. Careful attention was paid to ensuring that the themes were distinct and meaningful (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Four main themes and sub-themes were identified to align with research objectives. Figure 4.8 shows a screenshot of a table where I have finalised the themes and sub-themes to represent the data and the codes. Findings were synthesised into a coherent narrative with participant quotes as evidence.

Themes (11)	Sub-themes (49)
Theme 2- Adaptive Leadership (during crisis)	
Adaptation and Change Management	Adaptability and Flexibility
Adaptation and Change Management	Adaptation and Responsiveness
Adaptation and Change Management	Adapting to Changing Needs
Adaptation and Change Management	Adaptation to Remote Learning and Operations
	Technology Integration (added)
Common Theme- Collaborative Leadership	
Communication and Collaboration	Collaboration and Networking
Communication and Collaboration	Collaborative Decision-Making
Communication and Collaboration	Community and Relationships
Communication and Collaboration	Stakeholder Engagement and Communication
Communication and Collaboration	Effective Communication
Theme 1- Crisis Management Leadership (during crisis)	
Crisis Response and Management	Adapting to Uncertainty
Crisis Response and Management	Crisis Management Skills
Crisis Response and Management	Navigating New Challenges
Crisis Response and Management	Crisis Management and Adaptability
	Strategic Decision-making (added)

Figure 4.8: A screenshot of some of the final themes and sub-themes being reviewed and updated to reflect the outcome of the analysis

The final themes and sub-themes illustrated as diagrams, which are presented with the finding chapters (Chapters 5 and 6).

Finally, in the writing phase of the analysis, I attempted to weave together the analytic narrative and data extracts, presenting a coherent and insightful analysis of the data in relation to the research questions and objectives (Chapters 5 and 6). This involved carefully selecting vivid, compelling extract examples to illustrate each theme, integrating these with the analysis to tell a persuasive story about the data (Braun and Clarke, 2020). As a result of the reflexive thematic analysis of the data, I have provided the codebook containing the codes and themes that I have used to organise and interpret the data, and this is presented in Appendix L.

Noting, the combined use of manual techniques and NVivo software ensured both flexibility and methodological rigour. NVivo's ability to handle large datasets and visualise relationships complemented the reflexive approach, providing a structured

yet interpretive analysis. This iterative process ensured that themes remained participant-centred while maintaining theoretical and methodological alignment.

4.6.3 Addressing Misconceptions About NVivo and Interpretivism

It is important to note that the use of NVivo in this study aligns with an interpretivist approach, as I employed it solely as an organisational aid, with interpretative decisions grounded in reflexive engagement and participants' narratives. As Bazeley and Jackson (2013) argue, NVivo supports the interpretivist paradigm by enabling researchers to engage more deeply with their data through systematic categorisation and visualisation.

Importantly, reflexivity remained central to the analysis, with a reflective journal documenting how my positionality, assumptions, and values influenced the interpretation of themes. This ensured that the findings authentically represented participants' voices while acknowledging my role in co-constructing meaning.

Therefore, by combining manual coding with NVivo's organisational capabilities, this study adhered to the principles of reflexive thematic analysis and interpretivism, ensuring that the data analysis process was both rigorous and deeply interpretive.

4.7 Integration of School Responses

It is important to note that the feedback from participants, gathered through executive summary reports, was provided post-research and reflects their reflections on the findings rather than their immediate experiences during the data collection period. The feedback played a critical role in refining and confirming the themes identified during the reflexive thematic analysis. After developing initial themes through manual coding and NVivo-assisted analysis, executive summaries were shared with participants post-

research to validate the findings and ensure they authentically represented participants' experiences.

Feedback from schools was instrumental in refining and substantiating key themes:

- **School 1** reflected on their adaptability during the pandemic, highlighting the shift toward more collaborative leadership practices.
- **School 2** emphasized the value of a “counter-culture approach” to leadership, diverging from conventional norms to prioritise community engagement and resilience-building.
- **School 3** provided insights into the systemic pressures stemming from government policies, which significantly influenced their leadership decisions and practices.
- **School 6** highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence in navigating challenges such as staff shortages and maintaining team cohesion during the pandemic.

This iterative process reinforced the study's interpretivist approach, where meaning is co-constructed between the researcher and participants. By integrating feedback from most of the participating schools, the study captured a richer and more nuanced understanding of leadership practices and challenges during the pandemic.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework for this study, providing a detailed account of the research philosophy, design, data collection methods, and analytical approach. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative case study methodology to explore leadership practices and teacher

development in six primary schools before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, with themes informed by both participant narratives and the conceptual model presented in Chapter 3.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process, with particular attention given to the sensitivities of conducting research during a global pandemic. The chapter also addressed strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, including member-checking, triangulation, and reflexivity.

The methodological rigour described in this chapter provides a strong foundation for the findings presented in the next two chapters. By embedding reflexive practices and participant-centred approaches, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of leadership and school improvement in challenging times.

Chapter 5

Findings from the Schools before the Covid-19 Crisis

The Covid pandemic resulting in lockdown in the UK brought about significant changes in school practice. Therefore, the research in this thesis presents the findings in a way that compares the leadership practice of selected case study schools from before the pandemic in Chapter 5 with those from during the pandemic in Chapter 6.

This chapter provides the findings from School 1 (S1) and School 2 (S2) based on the in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted before the start of the Covid pandemic. Both schools were assessed as 'outstanding' (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.4) in their last Ofsted inspection. S1 and S2 were based on two different management styles. School 1 was part of a chain of primary schools managed by a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) and had academy management. At the same time, School 2 was a traditional community-maintained type of primary school, which provided an opportunity for a level comparison between the two schools based on the two different management styles during what could be considered 'normal' times. The chapter explores four main themes—Instructional Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Distributed Leadership, and Staff Professional Development—through which the leadership practices of two schools (S1 and S2) are compared in detail. These themes shed light on how leadership styles influenced school improvement efforts before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction to the Schools

The first school opened in September 2013 and had a school roll of 413 pupils. There were children in Nursery, Reception and Year 1, but there were future plans to cater for pupils up to Year 6. The school was an academy, part of a MAT which means an

academy trust or chain that operates more than one academy school (DfE, 2015). The school was last rated outstanding in June 2015 and ran an extended day, with lessons until 4.00pm. Being situated within a diverse borough in London, there were above average rates (21.2%) of pupils who spoke English as their additional language. Although the school's free meal entitlement (FME) was below the national average rate for primary schools (23%). Similarly, the proportion of pupils with disabilities or who have special educational needs (SEND) was lower than the national average (12.6%). The headteacher herself had a Master's, degree and was completing her NPQH (National Professional Qualification for Headship). The staffing complement reflected the formal structure of academy schools, with an Executive Head/Principal in charge of this school and another two schools as well as being a Regional Director overseeing 10 schools in the network and the school leadership team for the school reporting to the headteacher as shown in Figure 5.1.

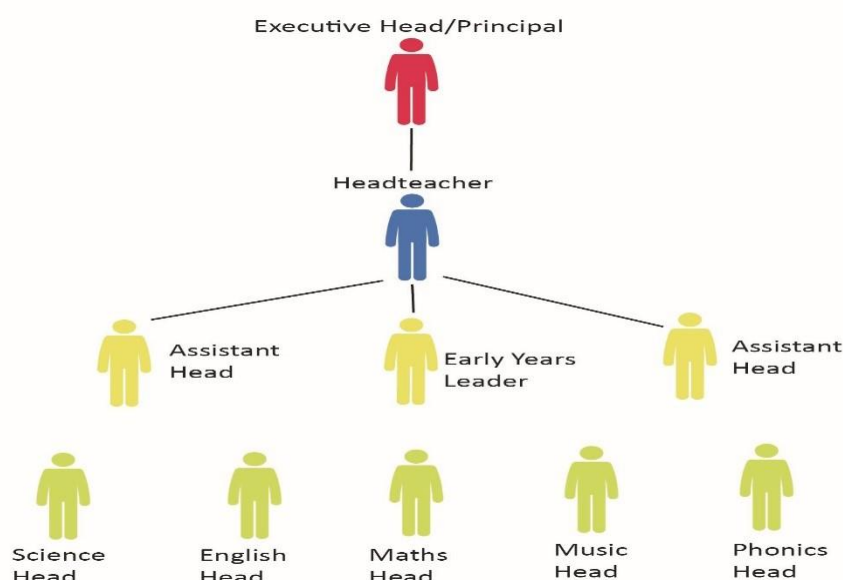


Figure 5.1: School 1: Leadership Structure

The second school was a community school serving pupils age ranged 3-11. With 432 pupils on the school roll, pupils came to the school from a wide range of heritages, and most spoke English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils with SEND of

17.1% (national average 12.6%) and FME of 31.9%, (national average 23%) were significantly above the national average. Despite being in the top group of the deprivation tables in the borough, the school was in the top group of performance and progress tables both locally and nationally. The school was upgraded by Ofsted from 'good' in 2014 to 'outstanding' in 2019. The headteacher and one of his assistant heads were not the only staff members currently completing their PhD research and there were other staff members with a postgraduate or professional award. The staffing complement reflected the nature of the school as a professional learning community, wherein the headteacher was a facilitator supporting and encouraging teachers to lead the learning of both their own and the school (see Figure 5.2).

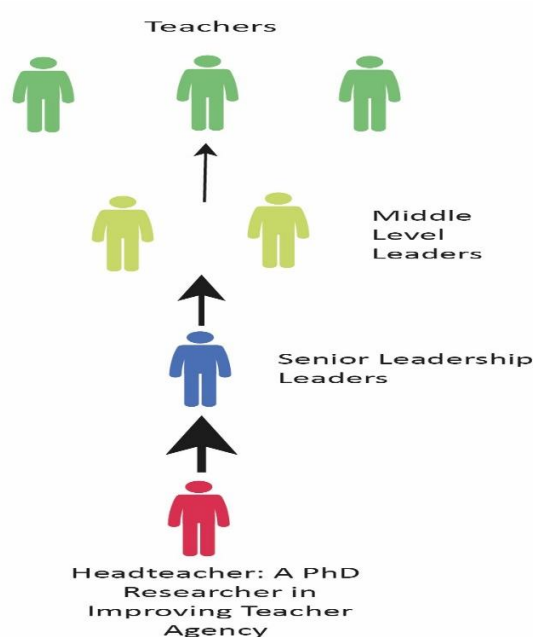


Figure 5.2: School 2: Leadership Structure

The initial phase of the interviews conducted on the selected case study schools focused on gathering basic information about the participants' backgrounds, including their tenure at the school, previous teaching and leadership experiences, and the school's leadership hierarchy. As the interviews progressed, more detailed questions were asked to explore participants' specific roles, additional responsibilities, priorities,

methods of empowering and collaborating with staff, their relationships with other schools, and their perspectives on effective school leadership to discern the leadership styles practised (see Appendix D for Interview protocol).

The data collected from S1 and S2 suggested four overarching themes with associated sub-themes, focusing on the nuances of leadership and school improvement constructed around the four original research questions. To develop a clear narrative, most of the sub-themes have been presented within the main themes, without creating sub-sections, this has been intended to improve the overall presentation of the results. Figure 5.3 summarises these themes and sub-themes, which I then discuss in detail in this chapter.

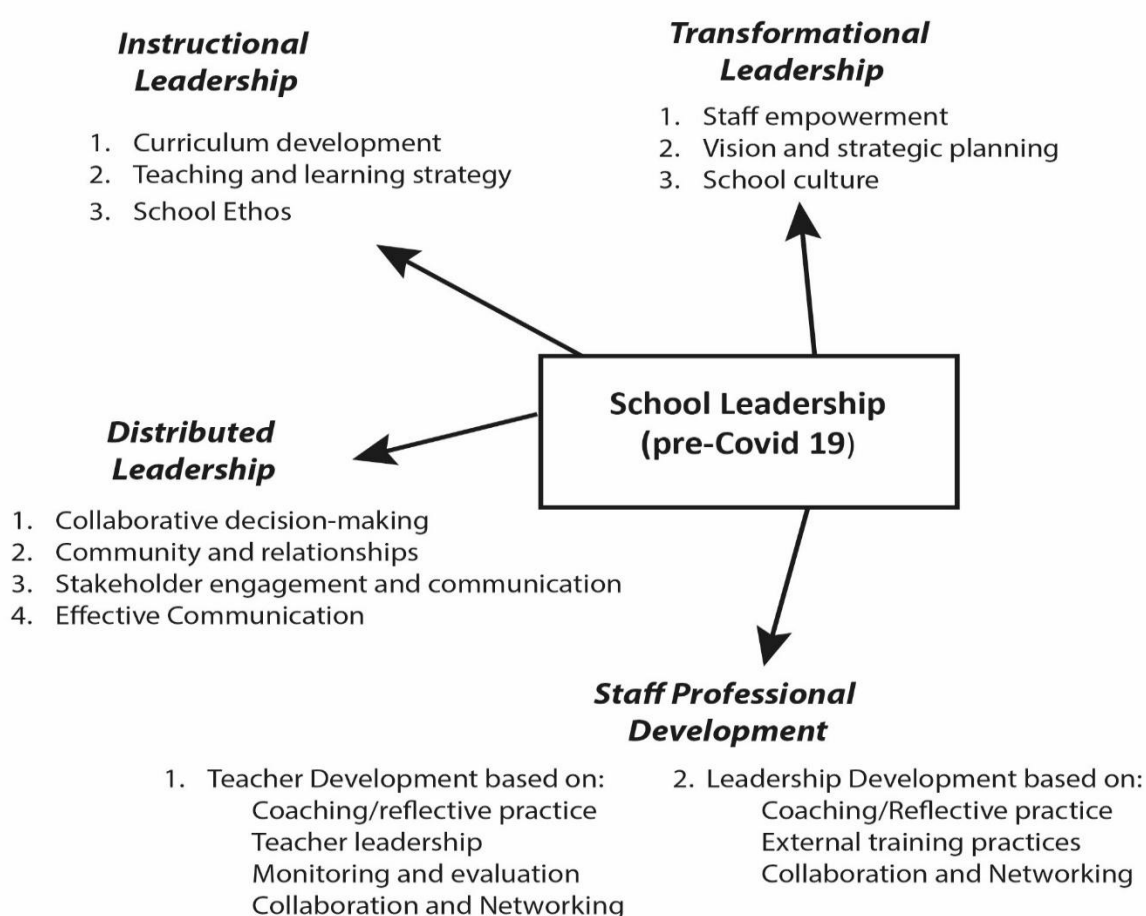


Figure 5.3: A summary of main themes and sub-themes from the reflexive thematic analysis of the data from CS1 and CS2 before Covid-19

The findings from both schools will be presented by main themes. The leadership practices of the two schools, S1 and S2, reveal notable differences in how instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership styles were employed to drive school improvement. The following sections explore these leadership dimensions in detail, highlighting the implications for staff and student outcomes.

5.1 Instructional Leadership-Oriented Themes

In response to the central research question- *which forms of educational leadership are more likely to contribute to school improvement?* I noted that in S1 and S2, instructional leadership was central in driving school improvements, focusing on curriculum development, the teaching and learning strategies, and staff professional development.

In both schools, the teachers and school leaders recognised school leaders with their supportive and instructional role in developing the school. The results suggest that S1 has a centralised leadership approach, where the senior leadership is responsible for making the key decisions. The teachers were usually not part of the decision-making process, which means the top leadership instructs the teachers. It seemed teachers were merely the instruments to execute these decisions in the school to achieve transformation. Over time, the centralised instructional approach had imbedded into the school's overall culture. For example, a middle level leader, who was a teacher as well, expected teachers to follow the centralised approach in solving classroom issues.

They [teachers] would need to be kind of riding my mission statement [as a leader] and agreeing with it and fulfilling it within the classroom.

(Teacher 1, School 1)

This can be translated in terms of the top-down formal structure of S1 and the pressure of external accountability from the MAT network dominated and promoted leadership

styles into management and quality assurance roles. The keywords I found from the interviews were 'managing,' 'staff movement,' 'direct mentor,' 'power', and 'checking.' When I asked the headteacher if she could identify her role, she described it as instructional, focusing on teaching and learning. At the same time, she mentioned that she was discounted to perform other tasks, such as fiscal and budgetary issues, which were the responsibility of the Executive Head/Principal.

I have an Executive Principal but she has a major role and she is also our regional director. She is involved in about 10 schools but she is an Executive Principal of about 3 which means for me I have a direct mentor. I see her quite a lot. She comes in to school maybe 2 to 3 times a week but that provides me with the support that I need and she does a lot of the upsides so she manages and supports with the operation sides, so I don't have to deal with that. I can just concentrate on the teaching and learning for now.
(Headteacher 1, School 1)

As I will discuss in the coming sections, such a hierarchy of power based on cooperative relations were also transparent among the headteacher and her staff. This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the formal staffing structures within academy schools rather than the intended consequence of the headteacher's leadership style. Furthermore, participants from S1's perceptions of the instructional role of school leaders as the primary contribution of leaders were similar. Suggesting, senior and middle-level leaders in S1 contribute to school improvement through their instructional roles. However, according to teachers' perspectives in S1, an effective school leader should support their team, encourage collaboration, and lead by example through role modelling and visibility which are the overlapping characteristics of the transformational leadership style.

On the other hand, the community school, S2, approached instructional leadership differently compared to the academy school, S1. While S1 had a principal-centred instructional leadership model, the S2 decentralised the instructional role to teachers

and empowered them to lead the instructional programme of the school. The headteacher asserted:

I think being a headteacher you need to have a number of hats. You need to programme a number of roles. A big part of my job is instructional leadership that the headteacher must be an instructional leader ... I think often in schools especially in England teachers are told what to do and that really disguises a professional person and my believe is that if you want to lead an incredible school, you have to be putting teachers in meaningful situations where they themselves can lead their own learning and the instructional programme of school ... (Headteacher 2, School 2)

Despite this difference, in both schools, instructional leadership was a key driver of improvement. At S1, this took a centralised form with decisions made by senior leaders, while S2 embraced a decentralised approach, empowering teachers to lead instructional strategies. The sub-themes of curriculum development, teaching and learning strategies, and school ethos all contribute to and support the overarching theme of instructional leadership in this context. These elements collectively shape how instructional leadership is practiced, ensuring alignment with the school's vision, mission, and educational goals. Curriculum development defines the content and structure of learning experiences, teaching and learning strategies dictate how instruction is delivered and received, and school ethos establishes the values, norms, and culture that influence instructional practices and leadership decisions.

5.1.1 Curriculum development

In terms of curriculum development, the top-down directives from the MAT network largely drove the practice at S1. The findings suggest that leaders made curriculum decisions without significant input from teachers, resulting in a standardised approach to instruction;

"The head of the school, she maps out the curriculum and the intention behind our curriculum; and then each of our subject leaders say their opinions." (Assistant Head 1, School 1)

This top-down approach may limit teacher autonomy in curriculum design, potentially limiting innovation and responsiveness to student needs. While S1 relied on a top-down approach to curriculum development, S2 fostered a collaborative process that encouraged teacher participation. Teachers were empowered to contribute to the design and implementation of instructional materials and strategies. As one of the teachers stated, "*we started as (an entire) staff, and we decided how we want it to look and how we are going to divide it up*" (Teacher 2, School 2).

This kind of collaborative approach can foster a sense of ownership and investment among teachers, leading to greater alignment between curriculum goals and student needs.

5.1.2 Teaching and Learning Strategy

As I mentioned earlier, S1 was led by the central MAT management, which owned several schools in the region. It was apparent that the MAT decided teaching and learning strategies at S1, emphasising data-driven practices and adherence to standardised instructional methods. This approach may have ensured consistency and alignment with educational standards in achieving good results. Nevertheless, it may have constrained teacher creativity and flexibility in meeting students' diverse needs because of the rigid learning strategies set by the MAT central management. According to Ofsted (2015, p. 8), the quality of teaching at this school (S1) was outstanding, with teachers providing excellent student support. But both teachers interviewed highlighted their individual contributions to enhancing student attainment, reflecting a culture of performativity that promotes individual accountability and competitiveness over collaboration. As one of the teachers commented:

So, each of us [teachers] needs to make sure we are following what they have been told us and focusing on improving student attainments.
(Teacher 2, School 1)

In contrast, teaching and learning strategies at S2 prioritised flexibility, innovation, and collaboration, where teachers were encouraged to experiment with different pedagogical approaches to meet their students' diverse needs.

I have been through a couple of lesson studies, When I done the first one, 3 years ago, I was in my NQT induction year and things are still stuck with me and we learnt key things. I think it's really a practical research tool.
(Teacher 1, School 2)

This emphasis on teacher autonomy resulted in increased teacher creativity, engagement, and innovation in S2, which may have benefited students, promoting deeper understanding and retention of content.

At the moment, we are working on wellbeing, trying to make sure that everybody got a chance to talk to one another because it's so important for professional collaboration that everyone feels comfortable with one another professionally and everyone kind of getting along. Also, I think that modelling that for children is really important. (Teacher 2, School 2)

5.1.3 School Ethos

From my observation, it was evident that S1 maintained a strong ethos of data-driven decision-making, with regular assessments and performance metrics suggested by the MAT network guiding instructional practices and school improvement initiatives.

One of the assistant headteachers confirmed:

So, this year because we launched the 'Great Teacher Rubric'- I got a copy here actually, pretty much my bible. So, it's a document which lays out what the MAT expects as a great teaching and learning and is broken down into lots of different areas. So, it's a coaching tool ... All primary and secondary schools under the MAT are using this document.
(Assistant Head 1, School 1)

Additionally, one of the teachers emphasised:

Making sure my lesson planning is to the standard it needs to be; making sure my teaching is up to the standard; I am following those practices and models that we been told.
(Teacher 2, School 1)

While data-driven practices can steer the organisation in achieving shared targets, an overreliance on quantitative measures may overlook qualitative aspects of teaching and learning, such as student engagement and socio-emotional development.

In contrast, S2 promoted innovative teaching approaches, such as lesson study (action research) and differentiated instruction, to cater to students' needs and interests. These innovative practices helped foster a dynamic and engaging learning environment, empowering teachers and students to take ownership of their roles and responsibilities, such as learning and developing critical thinking skills. This was supported by the outcome of an Ofsted inspection in 2019, which observed a positive and supportive work culture in S2:

Achievement is outstanding because the headteacher, with the support of other leaders and managers, has established a supportive culture in which teachers and pupils can excel ... Leaders provide highly effective training and support for teachers. Teachers all say that they are proud of the school. They are highly motivated and support each other in improving the way they work with pupils.
(Ofsted, 2019, p. 3)

Moreover, the assistant head asserted, "*when the headteacher first came in he got systems in place to improve teaching and learning*" (School 2). In establishing systems, the headteacher had to provide a new vision and direction for the school. He travelled and explored innovative teaching practices used by successful schools in other parts of the world. On one occasion, the school adopted innovative teaching methods like "Maths No Problem", which was inspired by schools in Singapore. By implementing such changes, the headteacher demonstrated a commitment to providing world class education for their students and the type of school he led allowed for that flexibility:

I believe in systems, and I think that one of the jobs of the headteacher as an instructional leader is to create alongside the staff, to collaborate with the staff team and create the kind of systems that allow freedom. So, teachers can focus on learners and learning.
(Headteacher 2, School 2)

In addition, the headteacher at S2 expressed his disagreement with the current New Public Management (NPM) policy reforms and described the education system in England as lacking innovative approaches:

...you are free, and you can do whatever you want as long as you are in a box ... this is not true freedom. I believe in a system. England is not an education system. It is the Wild West. It is everybody doing all sorts of different things for a variety of different outcomes all under a framework that has been designed by people who are not in classrooms.
(Headteacher 2, School 2)

Relatively, I found it interesting that the headteacher's personal experience in the Canadian education system was extremely useful in introducing a hybrid approach to teaching and leadership in S2. He explained:

The school (S2) is like a hybrid, so mixture of English education, Canadian education, may be a bit from Singapore, may be a bit from Finland or Australia; little bits from all over the world. But it is an unconventional English primary school.
(Headteacher 2, School 2)

Apparently, this innovative approach by the headteacher was based on Ontario's education system and is known as the New Change model of 'Age of learning, well-being, and identity' (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018). Evidence from the findings indicate that this new change model had introduced a wide range of positive developments throughout S2. One example was "leading from the middle" (LfM) model, which was implemented as part of the change model. LfM redefined the role of the headteacher as a facilitator and gave teachers increased ownership and agency over their professional growth and development.

A key drive of success in our school has been as I said earlier, putting the teachers in situations like lesson study where they are actively working together, collaborating to plan, to prepare, research, review, revise and instructional practice that has impact on learners and learning and is giving them the opportunity to have an element of social capital.
(Headteacher 2, School 2)

Another impact of the change model, as I observed, was seen in the school's ethos, vision, and values.

Every teacher, everyone, every adult in the school is a leader, is a learner and is a teacher. And every pupil, every child in the school is a leader, is a teacher, is a learner. And I think that is the foundation of the ethos here.
(Headteacher 2, School 2)

This kind of collaborative school ethos can promote a sense of equality, common identity, integrity, and humility throughout the school, creating a positive learning environment for all students and staff (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018).

In comparison, when I asked what makes a good school culture, one of the teachers from S1 described an imaginary school culture as:

It's about being honest and understanding that sometimes we need to have awkward conversations or say things like; this isn't good enough; you need to do this better. But we all need to understand that we are here to improve children's attainments.
(Teacher 2, School 1)

Seems to exacerbate high performance expectations associated with the standardised teaching and learning strategies practiced at this academy school.

5.1.4 Issues with the Centralised Instructional Leadership Approach in S1

In S1, teachers were recognised as an important part of the school. For example, the headteacher in S1 was aware of the significant role of teachers in the success and development of school:

I think they [teachers] have the most significant role because if teaching staff aren't at the highest standard, your actual attainment and progress of pupils doesn't exist.
(Headteacher 1, School 1)

Yet, the school's culture as part of an academy trust seemed to limit their freedom, agency, and creativity in practice. Defining teacher effectiveness to be judged mainly by teacher ability to follow the guidance, adherence to the MAT's teaching standards, and meeting targets- leaving little room for creativity from the established processes. This lack of teacher influence was also evident in the development of school improvement plans and curricula, often created by the MAT leadership, headteachers, and SLT members.

Although the instructional leadership at this school may have achieved overall targets, but this centralised approach may not allow the teachers to develop into future leaders, because they mainly followed the instruction provided by the school's top leaders. While teachers with greater autonomy and influence over school decisions are found to be more committed to taking risks and collaborating more with colleagues. As McAleavy *et al.* (2016) suggest, a shift from prescription to professional empowerment is needed to improve school culture. Similarly, even the headteacher in S1 had limited autonomy, and she had to '*double-check everything*' with the Executive Head of the MAT.

Despite acknowledging autonomy is essential for teachers' motivation and professionalism, the teachers in S1, as noted earlier, were not able to influence the school's curriculum or teaching approaches, which were often set by the MAT standards. As a result, teaching may have been viewed more as a technique than a profession. A teacher who was a middle leader in S1 evaluated teachers' influence on the process of school improvement relatively weak stating:

...every half term we have a primary reflection, so we reflect on the half term and all teachers, and all staff get to say what is going on in school, how they improve it and then the SLT team listen to the feedback and try to put things in place...
(Teacher 1, School 1)

This statement suggests that whilst, teachers could express their opinions, the ultimate decision-making power rested with the school leaders. In short, the teacher described the process as a "*drop-fall effect*," in which everyone understood their roles in the school, and teachers acted as followers. In addition, another teacher stated:

We are supporting and contributing to improve the education of the children in the year groups we have but we are always supporting those around us as well. So, we might be helping children we taught before; we might have a conversation with their teachers; we might say: have you tried this strategy, this works really well for them.
(Teacher 2, School 1)

In my perspective, this teacher sees herself primarily as a teacher focused on student attainment, but she was also responsible for shadowing a data lead, which could lead to a heavier workload and potential burnout (Worth *et al.*, 2017). In this way, characterising the school culture at S1 by its focus on performativity and managerialism, emphasising meeting external performance metrics and targets set by the MAT network. While this culture may have promoted accountability and efficiency, it may also have fostered an environment of competition and stress among staff, potentially detracting from collaboration and student well-being, and may not promote a high level of teacher agency and autonomy.

5.2 Transformational Leadership-Oriented Themes

Moreover, it was clear that the two outstanding schools were led by the ambition to improve the schools through their leadership albeit using different approaches. However, from the interviews I observed that transformational leadership was practised through different methods in both schools, including staff empowerment, vision-setting, and cultivating a positive school culture conducive to collaboration and growth. For instance, the leadership in S1 attempted to achieve staff empowerment through role-modelling by the senior leaders. The latest Ofsted inspection report (2015) for S1 highlighted the role of the headteacher as an exceptional role model for staff and pupils. In S1, the senior leaders supported the staff through role modelling, visibility, and instructional roles such as quality assurance and managing teachers' performance (Ofsted, 2015, p. 3). The headteacher in this school described her contribution with terms such as '*visibility*,' '*role modelling*,' and '*being supportive*.' As well as being a cooperative and transformational leader, the leaders in S1 were trying to bring transformation through developing a culture of performativity and managerialism. As part of their instructional role, the leaders including the headteacher

in this school were focusing on quality assurance and managing teachers' performance. One of the teachers emphasised:

School leaders move the school forward through monitoring of subjects; checking on teachers; checking how the learning is going; and checking the planning.
(Teacher 1, School 1)

While the approach was collaborative professionalism in S2, initiated by the Age of Learning, Wellbeing, and Identity change model (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018) adapted by the headteacher in this school. One of the assistant heads from school 2 explained:

Our school wasn't a bad school, but it did have some work to do and then with the headteacher we have now, obviously his vision was extremely broad and he could see the potential and all he needed from us was us to kind of back him up and to believe him what he was trying to do and then that has helped to transform the school.

(Assistant Head 1, School 2)

As a result of the change model implemented in S2, the leaders in this school apparently aimed to improve the school through a collaborative approach to staff professional development;

I think often in schools especially in England teachers are told what to do and that really disguises a professional person and my believe is that if you want to lead an incredible school, you have to be putting teachers in meaningful situations where they themselves can lead their own learning. 'Teacher-lead learning is professional excellence.

(Headteacher 2, School 2)

The inspirational role of the headteacher in S2 is often known as another criterion for outstanding schools (CfBT, 2011); and is closely associated with the transformational style (Zohar and Tenne-Gazit, 2008) of leaders to share their values and visions and inspire the behaviours and thinking of their staff.

Acknowledging, both schools were assessed as outstanding in their last Ofsted reviews, they must have been applying effective leadership techniques, which seem to have unique, mutually exclusive elements and some shared practices that work well in school improvements.

On the positive aspect of the centralised leadership approach of S1, the teachers in this school feel guided by the instructions provided by their senior leadership team. The teacher with a middle leadership responsibility in S1 stressed the influential role of the headteacher in directing and motivating the staff. Having double roles of teaching and leading, in her perspective as a leader, she stated school leaders were there to support teachers and be a role model for them. In return, teachers can be great followers to follow leaders' instructions. As she commented:

Teachers are followers. You, as a leader, want them to be followers but also feel like having a cooperation with it as well even if it's kind of you guided their opinion because of the way you are presenting it.

(Teacher 1, School 1)

...teachers need to be following the standards and what they have been told.

(Teacher 2, School 1)

In my view, describing teachers in S1 as 'followers' was another key element of the transformational leadership style, where the leader sets directions for followers to follow them. In addition, one of the teachers commented, "to lead, you need to inspire", which suggests the inspirational role associated with transformational leaders (Zohar and Tenne-Gazit, 2008). Similarly, another teacher who joined S1 five years ago and had a coaching responsibility for teacher trainee students, as well as shadowing the school's data lead whose role she was about to take over, described the leadership style of the school as supportive of supporting teachers and mentioned, "*school leaders are people who are constantly coming to support*" (Teacher 2, School 2), emphasising the importance of the supportive role of school leaders in teachers' performance and student achievements. Furthermore she continued:

I think the teachers are in the middle; they are with the children a lot of the time, but the teachers will also get lots of support and guidance from the school leaders and that helps to impact on student achievement as well.

(Teacher 2, School 1)

A great impact of school leaders on the performance of teachers and students stresses the link between the leadership style of school leaders and the level of teachers' commitment and motivation. Subsequently, a teacher in S1 described an imaginary excellent school culture through phrases like '*openness*,' '*sense of belonging*,' '*being valued as a teacher*,' '*achievement recognition*,' and '*supporting each other*.' She defined effective leadership as:

I think to be an effective leader you have to have a clear vision, it's not necessarily of every next step, it's got to depend on the end goal, and you got to know okay this is the path we are going on.

(Teacher 2, School 1)

This affirms the importance of having a visionary or Transformational Leader (TL), who can set a clear vision with short and long-term goals and develop a plan for the school's destination. Suggesting the headteacher as responsible for supporting and developing staff. Therefore, whether intentional or not, the development of such positive regard was the gift of the headteacher. School leaders and teachers in S1 mainly agreed on the importance of school leaders in successful schools. One of the teachers commented:

The SLT [members] are incredibly important because they are the people supporting the teachers and if you have got strong leadership and leaders are very supportive and very knowledgeable, they are able then to impart that on to their teachers.

(Teacher 2, School 1)

Furthermore, another teacher in S1 shared a similar view as that of the headteacher regarding the importance of visible leadership. She said; "*School leaders need to be a very visible part of all of the school*." She also recommended that school leaders can promote positive student outcomes by;

Making themselves present, going to the playground, doing assemblies with them, and making themselves known to the pupils within the school.

(Teacher 1, School 1)

In addition, one of the assistant heads in S1 considered the contribution of school leaders in promoting the development of teacher practices and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning at school. She mentioned, "*the more we invest in our teachers, the greater the outcomes for our pupils*" (Assistant Head 1, School 1). Another assistant head in S1 recognised the leaders' contribution in terms of developing their interpersonal skills, which improves schools and student achievement. She stated;

I think for me, in terms of my leadership, having close contacts and close relationships, that for me is the absolute key...

(Assistant head 2, School 1)

This assistant head defined her contribution through building trusting relationships, staff encouragement, sharing resources with each other, imparting knowledge with teachers, and collaborative learning. The key phrases that I picked up from her language included, '*working collaboratively,*' '*understanding teachers,*' '*having confidence in your team,*' '*giving them power,*' '*growing together,*' '*sharing resources,*' and '*building confidence.*'

Furthermore, my attention was drawn to the headteacher and all her SLT and middle-level members' discourse (S1), particularly their use of pronouns such as 'we' and 'us' to refer to the leadership team and 'they' and 'them' when talking about teachers. This kind of linguistic pattern could provide clues to an individual's status inside a group or possibly a hierarchy to show authority and how the idea of inclusivity is practised and maintained in the school. While the discourse among staff in S2 predominantly included the use of a pattern such as "we," reflecting a collective approach to decision-making and collaboration.

The vision and the strategic role of the school leaders at S1 were primarily dictated by the MAT network and its standards to which they belonged. With little input from the

teachers or community stakeholders in setting the school's vision, school leaders were also following the strategic planning involved with their quality assurance role promoted by the MAT. This top-down approach to vision-setting may have limited buy-in and ownership among staff, potentially undermining morale, and commitment to school improvement efforts. Conversely, S2 embraced a democratic and forward-thinking approach to leadership, with a focus on collaboration, innovation and continuous improvement to meet the evolving needs of students and the community. This proactive stance towards changes and adaptation positioned the headteacher at S2 as a leader in educational innovation, attracting motivated and forward-thinking staff members committed to lifelong learning. One of the teachers confirmed:

Over the past 3 years I've been working at this school. I have never afraid to ask any question. I am really lucky for being here compared with my other friends in other schools.
(Teacher 1, School 2)

I believe when teachers feel comfortable asking questions and have opportunities to engage in higher education, it can have a profound impact on students' lifelong learning.

5.3 Distributed Leadership-Oriented Themes

Compared to the centralised instructional approach in S1, the leadership in S2 relied heavily on a collaborative approach to leadership. S2 was established in the early 2000's as a community school in a low socioeconomic area with high ethnic and economic diversity. Despite these challenges, the school leadership seems to have managed to improve the school's performance. The school has undergone five full and one short Ofsted inspection (Table 5.4), with the most recent inspection in 2019 resulting in an 'Outstanding' rating, an improvement from the 'Good' rating received in 2014 and 2018. In contrast, S1 is relatively new and has only undergone one Ofsted inspection (2015) achieving outstanding grades.

Table 5.4: Ofsted inspection history of School 2

School Grade	Year of inspection	Types of inspection	Headteacher
Good	2003	Full	A
Good	2007	Full	A
Outstanding	2011	Full	A
Good	2014	Full	A
Good	2018	Short	Current
Outstanding	2019	Full	Current

The Ofsted inspection report (2019) appreciated the school leadership and collaborative management approach of S2;

The headteacher constantly inspires staff and pupils to want to review and improve their work; leaders at all levels are very clear about the school's aims; they work collaboratively to ensure that developments are consistently applied across the school; high-quality training for teachers and pupils' outcomes are outstanding. (Ofsted, 2019, p. 1)

Conversely, collaborative decision-making at S1 was limited, as the senior leadership primarily made key decisions without seeking significant input from teachers or community stakeholders. This top-down approach to decision-making may have limited buy-in and ownership among staff, potentially undermining morale, and commitment to school improvement efforts. Nevertheless, S2 embraced a collaborative approach to decision-making, with input sought from teachers, staff, and community stakeholders to ensure that decisions were inclusive and reflected diverse perspectives. The distributed leadership approach in S2 created a sense of accountability. Unlike S1, which focused solely on test scores and performance management, this school (S2) prioritised internal accountability and placed trust in its teachers. Bearing in mind, it is important to note that this sense of accountability was not developed in isolation but promoted by the leaders. From the findings, it was evident that the headteacher in S2 focused on enabling teacher agency and

developing a culture of learning through professional learning communities (PLCs). Peer-to-peer collaboration was encouraged, and staff could collaborate and develop their expertise. In my view, the school's framework for teaching was research-based and grounded in a constructivist view of learning (Wenger, 2015). The collaborative leadership practices of S2, particularly those of the headteacher, played a key role in making teaching an inspiring and rewarding profession for the teachers at this school. This sentiment was echoed by the two teachers from this school, who emphasised that school leaders can bring success to their schools by:

Creating a positive and supportive work environment where teachers feel valued and respected; providing opportunities for professional growth and development; fostering a sense of collaboration and teamwork among staff members; encouraging innovation and experimentation in teaching practices; and prioritising teachers and student well-being.
(Teachers 1 & 2, School 2)

By implementing these practices, it seems that the headteacher at S2 created a culture of excellence where teachers felt empowered and motivated to provide the best possible education for their students. Additionally, one of the teachers mentioned:

Encouraging the approach that everybody is at the same level and have a nurturing approach towards people. Letting them know they can make their own decisions and take responsibility because they want to- not because they have to.
(Teacher 1, School 2)

The expectation that the teacher had for her role reflects the kind of environment that the headteacher had established for his staff. This environment, as described in the quote, encourages growth, development, challenge, and support, which allow teachers to thrive. The above teacher particularly appreciated the two elements of trust and autonomy that existed in the teaching practice of the school. These elements were apparently effective contributors to the school's success and could also increase teachers' retention, job satisfaction, commitment, self-esteem, and creativity. As the teacher confirmed:

When I came to this school everything changed very quickly because it became the place where I work and have a lot of satisfaction from working there.
(Teacher 1, School 2)

Moreover, as highlighted in the school's Ofsted report (2019), the collective practice of the school made teachers feel proud to work at this institution. A teacher shared her personal experience, saying: *"I am really lucky working in this school because lots of people I work with are my really close friends now."* She went on to explain:

From the moment when I started my teaching career always there have been opportunities for me to get involved ... we staff have a big voice.
(Teacher 1, School 2)

Thus, distributed leadership seems to have played a critical role in developing a sense of belonging and motivation toward individual and shared learning at this school, contributing to its overall success. For example, using the LfM approach provided opportunities for teacher leadership and fostered a supportive culture of collaboration. Teachers in S2 recognised the quality of the headteacher's leadership, with a teacher describing him as "one of the greatest leaders" she had ever worked with. The effectiveness of the headteacher was evaluated based on the teachers' motivation, sense of efficacy, and overall effectiveness.

It was interesting to observe that regarding the leadership practices of the school in S2, the leaders shared a common perception with the teachers. According to a teacher who also served as a well-being leader and had been a part of the school for three years, the leadership in S2 was highly democratic.

I think it's really collaborative leadership....I think the head's leadership style is very democratic. So, his style is always taking into account the ideas of middle leaders, teachers, TAs, and everybody has a voice in our school ...
(Teacher 2, School 2)

One key characteristic of democratic leadership is the cooperation and alignment of others with the leader's values and vision (Harris and Chapman, 2002). In S2, the

headteacher seems to have modelled democratic leadership by empowering, encouraging, trusting other staff and clearly respecting their views.

The teachers in S2 furthermore described the headteacher as being similar to "servant leaders" (Greenleaf, 1970), who were humble, calm, and valued the opinions of others, and never used their power to dictate how teachers should teach, which can be attributed for school's success. This led to a distribution of leadership and participative decision-making among the school team. Particularly, one of the teachers described the leadership style of the school through a coaching relationship with one of the assistant heads within teacher research group meetings (TRGs).

... it's all done in a very encouraging and autonomous way. It's never like, 'these are your targets- this is what you have to be.' It's up to you and you are given that responsibility to make a decision ... You can reflect on your own teaching and make a decision for yourself- like leading your own coaching if that makes sense?
(Teacher 2, School 2)

From my observation the coaching style of the school leaders was practised in the context of collaborative professional development in TRGs, where teachers led the meetings, engaged in open and professional dialogue, and impacted one another. Indeed, this approach was in line with one of the key principles of the LfM method used by the teachers in the school, which emphasised the importance of teachers as leaders of learning.

Overall, as quoted earlier, the school culture at S2 was characterised by a collaborative and inclusive ethos, where all staff members were valued as contributors to the school's success. This culture of collaboration and respect appeared to foster a sense of belonging and investment among staff, enhancing morale and job satisfaction.

Acknowledging, the current headteacher at S2 had joined the school eight years ago as an assistant head and had relied heavily on developing instructional leadership in

this school. However, this type of instructional leadership was distributed among the staff rather than the SLT members only:

The leadership of the learning and the development of the school is coming from the middle of the school; is coming from the very people that are responsible for its operation not some hero paradigm where 'super headteacher' comes in and you know, creates everything from new.
(Headteacher 2, School 2)

I noted, both assistant heads in S2 agreed that the school's success was heavily influenced by the headteacher's effective leadership style. It was interesting to understand how the practice of leadership was perceived the same among individuals in different roles within the school:

"the first and probably the most influential factor would be an inspirational leader".
(Assistant Headteacher 1, School 2)

"the success of school is definitely related to the leadership style of the headteacher."
(Assistant Headteacher 2, School 2)

While both the senior leaders agreed on the effectiveness of the headteacher, assistant head 1 also defined an effective leader as: *"someone who leads from the middle and knows when to lead and when to manage."* The headteacher also appreciated the effective leading from the middle (LfM) style in S2 that led to the development of the school:

... really successful organisations, successful schools are heavily led from the middle of the school, from the practitioners themselves ...
(Headteacher 2, School 2)

According to the findings, the LfM strategy was originally proposed by Ontario educators (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018) and was being adapted in S2 to promote deep learning in young learners and enhance their well-being. This method seems to be a key driver of success for the school by empowering teachers to lead the learning process. It was fostered within a culture of collaborative professionalism, which

Hargreaves and O'Connor (2019) defined as a form of collaboration among educators that is open, rigorous, challenging, and evidence informed.

Moreover, the collaborative and inclusive ethos at S2 extended to curriculum development and instructional practices, wherein teachers and leaders worked together to create a supportive and inclusive learning community. The S2's ethos, vision and values seemed to promote a sense of community and encouraged teachers to engage in professional inquiry. By providing opportunities for sustained professional development, teachers were able to enhance their teaching capacity and improve student outcomes.

... the practice we have - the opportunity to research what we want. It just worked out that everybody is going to contribute. Everybody is contributing in a very unique way.
(Teacher 1, School 2)

Overall, the leadership role in S2 was distributed throughout the school and the development of the school was managed by those responsible for its operation. Of course, this approach seemed to promote teacher agency, shared professional judgment, and collective responsibility for initiating and implementing change, and had a systemic impact that benefited all students and staff. Thus, the S2's leadership styles can be described as a combination of the LfM strategy and an integrated form of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership styles. The secret to the school's success seems to be underpinned by the LfM strategy, as it creates suitable conditions for teachers and staff to perform at their very best.

5.3.1 Distributed leadership features in S1

However, the central roles of the headteacher and the Executive Head in S1 limited other members' participation in decision-making due to structural constraints caused by NPM policy (Chapter 2). Yet, I observed some form of Distributional leadership (DL) from the findings in S1, where the headteacher seemed to delegate responsibilities

and ownership to SLT and MLT members with the aim to enhance the school's leadership capacity. For example, the participants (SLT and teachers) in S1 commonly used terms like 'openness,' 'planning,' 'helping each other,' 'working together,' and 'sharing knowledge.' A reception teacher, recently promoted to an SL role, stressed the importance of collaborative work and individual accountability while exchanging information and sharing resources to support each other's goals. The headteacher and other participants agreed with her, and they described the mechanism for working together as a collaborative approach. While individual accountability was encouraged, team members were expected to exchange information and share resources supporting each other's goals:

I think this year we worked on that kind of DL [Distributed leadership] in terms of developing our middle leaders as subject specialists so that people have more people, they can go to... (Assistant Head 1, School 1)

Evidently, the assistant head's comment was based on the headteacher assigning responsibilities among the members of the SLT and Middle Leadership Team (MLT), while other members, such as teachers, had limited authority to take responsibility or influence any of the school's decisions. Furthermore, the assistant head continued to describe their leadership style as:

I think within a school you have different leadership styles for different points of the year. Like sometimes you have to be like more commanding if you know there is a big change that needs to happen, and you need consistency and you are going to have a more rigorous and more like setting targets because you want that routine to be embedded...
(Assistant Head 1, School 1)

In this way, recognising their approach as a combination of styles based on their situations, similar to the contingent leadership style (Fiedler, 1964) where leaders adapt leadership styles according to the situation (Bush, 2008). Although S1 was an academy with a centralised approach of management, but the headteacher was aware of the importance of a collaborative style of leadership in a school:

My English lead leads on training; my Maths' Lead, does the Maths. So, it's nice that we have staff who are confident and experienced enough now to be able to lead training and work ... so, it's a collaborative approach.
(Headteacher 1, School 1)

Suggesting the importance of delegation but within their leadership circle.

5.3.2 Community Relationships, Communication, and Stakeholder Engagement

S1 maintained strong relationships with external stakeholders, such as the schools within the MAT network, but their internal community-building efforts were limited to planning time and CPD meetings. The headteacher confirmed:

So, we have our designated CPD time which is on Mondays ... We also make sure that our PPA (planning time) is protected for the staff- so they have their planning time, where they can do collaborative planning together. We also have our team meetings.
(Headteacher 1, School 1)

While external partnerships may have provided valuable resources and support, a lack of internal collaboration and communication may have hindered trust and cohesion among staff. By contrast, S2 prioritised community-building efforts, fostering strong relationships among staff, students, parents, and community partners. The headteacher commented:

Five years ago we started using lesson study at school which was a way to bring teachers together intentionally ... So we enacted lesson study to start building that culture of meaningful collaboration ... After some of the lesson study had been enacted asking them in an interview: what you think now? They would say what we were doing before was working in the same space at the same time. It was surface; it was taking something that was kind of implicit and making it explicit ... The way things work here started to shift because they saw the value and the impact in working in a network and connected way and they saw that the conclusions they were reaching were not possible without that and what then began to happen is that it wasn't now a lesson study as a collaborative event. So today the culture of collaboration is both formal and explicit through mechanism like lesson study, peer-to-peer observation or teacher research groups but it's also now a deeper more implicit culture whereby the teachers discourse in school has deeply improved so that every conversation is more meaningful and has an impact without the necessity of asking event and that every day is an event now.
(Headteacher 2, School 2)

In addition to having strong internal relationships and meaningful collaboration in school, the school also had extended connection nationally and internationally. As the headteacher continued to explain:

We work both nationally and internationally. We have worked with schools in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Singapore, Malta and Sweden which is fantastic for us because it is all learning and growth for us. And we work with, you know, we currently working with schools in Germany, Belgium and Cyprus. They are doing incredible things that we can share but we're also learning. And then we have a network of schools around England and Wales that we also work with.

(Headteacher 2, School 2)

In my view, these strong community ties can promote a sense of belonging and investment among stakeholders, enhancing support for school initiatives and fostering a positive school climate.

Furthermore, communication at S1 was primarily top-down, with limited opportunities for staff or community stakeholders to provide input or feedback on school policies and initiatives. This hierarchical approach to communication may have hindered transparency and trust within the school community, potentially leading to disengagement and disconnection among stakeholders. When I asked one of the teachers to reflect on the points to improve in S1, she said:

So, I just would say in terms of the communication side and making sure teachers' voices are heard as well. If there are teachers concerns but they are not dealt with- they've been told why that can't happen? So, I do think communication is a very big thing at the moment.

(Teacher 1, School 1)

On the other hand, as noted from the long quotes above, communication at S2 was transparent and inclusive, with regular opportunities for staff and community stakeholders to provide input and feedback on school policies and initiatives. This open and transparent communication approach seemed to promote trust and collaboration within the school community, leading to greater engagement and investment in school improvement efforts.

5.4 Staff Professional Development

Both schools seem to be aware that teachers are the key to their success. Therefore, both schools have integrated teacher empowerment in their practices, however, they used different philosophies. Although continuous professional development for teachers through various training sessions was common in both schools, but S2 focused heavily on staff empowerment through leadership development for its teachers.

As I highlighted in Chapter 2 and 3, staff professional development is a crucial factor in driving school improvement. So, the research in this thesis aimed to understand how different leadership styles observed in the selected schools impacted staff professional development and learning. The Staff Professional Development theme, which emerged from the fourth research question, focused on the contribution of professional development to school improvement. The study's data suggests that both outstanding schools (S1 and S2) prioritised staff professional development, recognising its importance in empowering teachers to improve their practice and contribute to the school's mission and vision. This emphasis on teacher empowerment fostered a continuous learning and growth culture in both schools.

5.4.1 *Teacher Development in S1*

From my conversations with the school leaders in S1, I realised that school leaders were committed to optimising effective professional development to drive improvement. Participants emphasised the value of the diverse training opportunities available through the MAT network, highlighting the importance of ongoing learning and development in the educational field. The headteacher in S1 employed personal characteristics such as visibility, role modelling, and leading by example to motivate

staff, similar to other primary schools with outstanding leaders (NCSL, 2014, p. 15). Despite a busy workload, the headteacher in S1 remained visible in the school, establishing strong relationships with staff, pupils, and parents through effective leadership. In addition, S1 employed other methods to empower staff, including building relationships and exerting influence. As discussed earlier, these strategies align with the headteacher's transformational leadership style.

As noted earlier, transformational leadership at S1 was manifested through the role modelling and support provided by school leaders, who set high expectations for staff performance and provided mentorship and guidance. While this approach may have guided and motivated some staff members to excel, nevertheless the hierarchical culture prioritised compliance over collaboration and individual innovation. The Executive Head served as a mentor for the headteacher, an important aspect of the school's leadership approach:

I have a direct mentor. I see her quite a lot. She comes into school maybe 2 to 3 times a week but that provides me with the support that I need ... I kind of like to double check things with her, for example, spending money ... The plan is next year I will move, in the MAT system, I will become Principal which means I will have the power to do everything.
(Headteacher 1, School 1)

One of the teachers at S1 recognised that high-quality teaching is essential for school improvement and emphasised the importance of following leadership instructions in achieving this goal. The teacher explained, "*I ensure that I am following what I have been told and what I have been instructed to do,*" further emphasising the significance of clear guidance and direction in delivering quality teaching. The teacher elaborated further:

Making sure my lesson planning is to the standard it needs to be; making sure my teaching is up to the standard; and I am following those practices and models that we've been told.
(Teacher 2, School 1)

Worth noting, too much reliance on instructions and standards set by the school leadership team and MAT in S1 may limit teachers' productivity. Also, it was evident that S1 had fostered a culture of coaching and mentoring that included all staff, including the headteacher. As stated above, the Executive Head served as a regular mentor to the headteacher, and in the same way, SLT members provided coaching to both experienced and ECTs, creating a supportive environment for professional growth and development. Additionally, as stated by Assistant Head 1, using the Iris coaching model, which follows the "See it, Name it, Do it" approach, was an effective, practical coaching tool for teachers in S1, which it allowed them to learn through experiential learning, role-playing, and reflection, according to Kolb (1984) (see Chapter 3). Additionally, as I highlighted earlier, school leaders in S1 used performance observation to monitor teaching improvements. Teachers found this tool useful, since it provided objective feedback that could improve and maintain motivation among both early-career and experienced teachers.

So, they are coming and saying, okay next week somebody will come around we will be looking at maths lesson, for example, and then you get feedback from that. I think that [the feedback] really helps a teacher because you feel motivated and think okay, now I can do these things; this is the thing I am going to focus on now. (Teacher 2, School 1)

Teacher observation is the most effective strategy to motivate and improve teacher practices. (Teacher 1, School 1)

Suggesting, teacher feedback helps with improvement. Objectives and reflection motivate teachers during observation. In this case, school leaders attempted to increase motivation by giving feedback, setting targets, and leading by example (S1). Teacher collaboration mainly happened through collaborative planning time, but support staff like TAs were not usually included (S1). While TAs are essential to the learning environment, empowering TAs could create a better learning environment for both staff and students. Furthermore, even though the staff worked together and

cooperated, but it was clear that each member was still seen as an individual (S1). It is important to note that individual accountability among the staff members can enhance their self-efficacy, while collective capacity improves student achievement. As a result, a significant portion of teacher motivation was found to be influenced by extrinsic incentives initiated by the school's Senior SLT members. Although the headteacher in S1 sounded helpless, yet she recognised the crucial importance of teacher development for enhancing their contributions:

For example, lots of people use pupils' premium money to spend on this initiative, that initiative, where actually it should be spent on developing teaching.
(Headteacher 1, School 1)

The school's FME was below the national average, which allowed the headteacher, with approval from the Executive Head to direct funding towards teacher training. This brief sub-theme highlights the school's emphasis on teaching outcomes rather than process.

5.4.2 Teacher Development in S2

As I highlighted earlier, transformational leadership at School 2 empowered staff through ongoing professional development opportunities tailored to their individual interests and needs. This approach fostered a culture of continuous learning and growth, enhancing staff morale and commitment to the school's mission and vision. Evidence from the findings show that, teachers at S2 were encouraged to take ownership of their professional development, with opportunities for self-directed learning and collaboration with colleagues. This emphasis on teacher autonomy and agency appeared to promote innovation and creativity in instructional practices, leading to more engaging and effective teaching.

According to the headteacher in S2, the central role of teachers in leading their learning and that of their students was key to the school's success. Since he claimed,

"if we want the children to do well, the teachers should do well". The importance of teachers in the success of the school was also highlighted in the S2's latest Ofsted report (2019, p. 4):

The quality of teaching is outstanding because it leads to above average outcomes and fosters determination to succeed. Teachers have excellent relationships with pupils and motivate them to want to achieve. Every classroom provides a happy and industrious working environment. Teachers have very strong subject knowledge, including in teaching reading, writing and mathematics. (Ofsted, 2019, p.4)

Furthermore, as emphasised in the distributed leadership theme from S2, it can be said that staff empowerment at this school was primarily accomplished by delegating authority to staff members. This approach played a crucial role in fostering strong leadership at all levels and a collective recognition of the significance of professional development in maintaining the quality of care, welfare, and teaching and learning. Particularly, I observed Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and leading from the middle (LfM) as effective strategies used at S2 to enhance teaching quality and achieve school improvement. These approaches aimed to empower teachers to take ownership of their professional development and make informed decisions based on students' needs and the knowledge base (DfE, 2015; Jackson and Timperley, 2008). The headteacher commented:

...the idea of a learning community is really in correlation with leading from the middle, putting professional people in situations where we're really strategically and statistically talking about learners and learning and our impact on them with data serving that conversation and not leading it. So, I think actually this school is a professional learning community. (Headteacher 2, School 2)

This model was the process of teachers' professional learning, which was elaboratively embedded in the school improvement plan to improve pupil learning, achievement, and well-being.

At S2, the environment for adults mirrored the one created for children, as everyone learned alongside each other. This model according to the school leaders in S2 was

integrated into the school improvement plan to enhance pupil learning, achievement, and well-being (see Figure 5.5 below). Professional development of teachers is a crucial aspect of this process.



Figure 5.5: School Improvement Plan in School 2 (Source: School's Website)

Drawing on the Figure, above, school 2 's environmental priorities were categorised into four areas: professional excellence, world-class learning, outstanding outreach, and the 'H' factor (pupil and professional wellbeing; collaborative decision making) (source: School 2 website). The school improvement plan was developed based on a developmental and growth approach, using the Age of Learning, Wellbeing, and Identity change model (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018) as a guide. As I stated earlier, this model was adapted to set the school's vision and steer it towards the future.

Moreover, as I observed from the findings, the Professional Learning Community (PLC) at S2 was characterised by seven key features, including shared vision and values, equal importance placed on teachers and students, collective responsibility, collaborative inquiry, collective learning, community knowledge sharing, and teacher-led continuous improvement. The school utilised various strategies such as lesson study (LS) (action research), coaching and mentoring, teacher research groups (TRGs), peer-to-peer class observations, and networking to support this approach. For example, the headteacher's Doctoral Research on teacher agency through LS

implementation helped establish a culture of meaningful collaboration at the school.

LS was found to be widely admired by the staff:

It's so great. I think lesson studies are really beneficial things to have in school. I think being there as a teacher to get the opportunity to be in a classroom with your colleagues and with the children you know it's like checking on how they learn and also to critically look at the way we're teaching- it's affecting its learners. (Teacher 1, School 2)

The method can be visualised in the following diagram (see Figure 5.6):

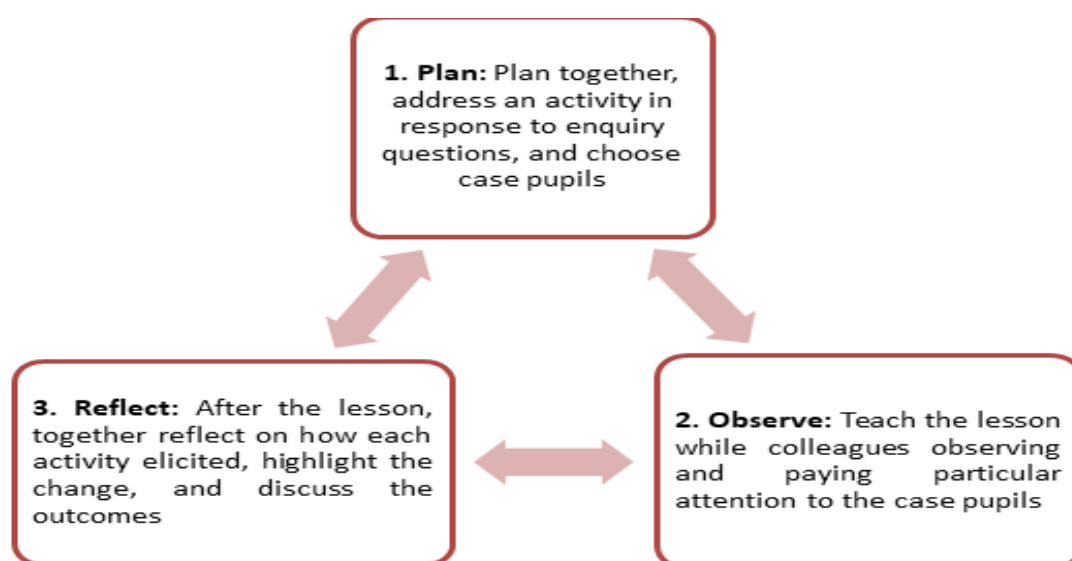


Figure 5.6: The Method of Lesson Study at School (Created by the Researcher)

Another strategy implemented at S2 for the professional development of all staff members, including teachers, was coaching, and mentoring through professional growth partners. The school's senior and middle-level leaders took the role of coaches or professional growth partners, supporting and coaching Teacher Research Groups (TRGs) with their micro-research, which was conducted throughout the year. Transforming the school culture into a culture of collaborative professionalism, wherein teachers were respected as professionals who could lead and manage their own performance. There was no teacher observation, monitoring, or scrutiny of their performance. Instead, formal staff performance management meetings were replaced with friendly collaborations known as '*professional growth meetings*'. This approach to

the professional growth of staff helped to promote collective responsibility and the social capacity of teachers, making them more committed to the school's mission.

Moreover, the adapted change model in S2 led by the headteacher seemed to bring people together, created conditions that fostered a sense of internal accountability in the school. Through the implementation of the model, teachers were empowered to take ownership of their professional growth and development. This sense of accountability was not limited to the teaching staff but extended to everyone in the school community. As a result, the school fostered a culture of collective responsibility, where everyone worked together towards a common goal of improving student outcomes and promoting a positive learning environment. As exemplified in the words of Headteacher 2:

The heart of any incredible school is developing one's internal sense of accountability among everybody in the school which also is about responsibility. It's supporting the organisation to develop desired practices.
(Headteacher 2, School 2)

In S2, teachers were also empowered to develop by taking on additional roles, such as coaching or leadership positions, and were encouraged to step outside their comfort zones and experiment with new ideas. For instance, as stated earlier, teachers were involved in the development of the school's curriculum. In this way, teachers saw themselves as professionals committed to moving the school forward and sought opportunities to learn and grow. Facilitating ongoing professional development and professional collaborations with one another was another means for teachers' contribution. One of the teachers emphasised the importance of sharing experiences and expertise through peer observation and open and ongoing professional dialogues, which aligns with research on how adults best learn (Doe and Smith, 2020).

...just give that little honest feedback about what is working? What isn't working and what could be working if we do things in a different way, and I think that's how you drive improvement by having open lines of communication.
(Teacher 1, School 2)

We need to be able to speak and work with one another because if you can't collaborate, honestly, you are not going to be collaborating and you are not going to be improving.
(Teacher 1, School 2)

It seems that teachers in S2 benefitted from a wide range of opportunities to enhance their subject knowledge and build confidence in their teaching practice, which, in turn, supported the development of their professional agency and identities. Furthermore, teachers played a valuable role in supporting the school by offering their insights and perspectives. Developing professional relationships with colleagues was also seen as essential for supporting both teacher well-being and the well-being of students. One teacher emphasised the importance of these relationships, stating:

You are providing a good model of productive adult relationships to children because we are friends with one another and we want them to see that we get along and work hard together.
(Teacher 1, School 2)

Apparently, due to the S2's focus on teacher empowerment, the school's results seem to have been consistently strong for the past eight years under the current headteacher's leadership. The headteacher attributed this success to the teachers being happy, supported, challenged, inspired, developed, and have agency. His systematic effort to change learning conditions and other internal factors in the school enabled agency in teachers, allowing them to make choices among alternatives, identify the school's needs, and influence themselves and others. The headteacher recognised the key role of teachers in shaping the school context and emphasised their responsibility to continue learning, growing, developing, and becoming the best professionals they can be.

I guess the teachers are the living breathing in correlation of the school development programme. So, they are involved in its creation because they are involved in its action. It's not school development plan is created and then it's given to them. Their ideas, their voice, their hope, and their desires for the school as a community form the school development plan.
(Headteacher 2, School 2)

One assistant head in S2 shared a similar view to the headteacher's statement, describing teachers as "leaders of learning" (Assistant Head 2, School 2). Taking a teacher-led approach to school improvement, senior leaders, including the headteacher, used everyday language to describe the role of teachers, using terms such as "key agents," "creators," and "leaders of learning." These roles not only enhanced teachers' social and decision-making capital but also gave them professional identities as "professional learners" and "professional agents," with a sense of professional accountability to drive change effectively.

Finally, the focus of S2 on teacher well-being had a direct impact on student well-being, and the approach of evidence-based teaching (for e.g., lesson study and teacher research groups) encouraged teachers to be adaptable, innovative, and open to change (Hargreaves et al., 2018). This approach appeared to foster healthy professional development and had a positive impact on teachers and student outcomes.

5.4.3 Leadership Development

Both schools, (S1, S2) invested in leadership development opportunities for the staff who were interested in leadership roles, promoting a culture of shared leadership and collaboration. This enhances the school community's capacity to drive meaningful changes and improvements, creating a pipeline of talent to support ongoing growth and improvement. This investment also helps retain talented staff and creates a positive work culture to benefit students and the wider educational community.

5.4.3.1 Leadership Development in S1

Based on my observation from the findings, all participants in S1 were satisfied with the MAT network's provision of opportunities to share resources, training, and connections with different schools within the network. This involved attending regular

MAT meetings, including subject and cluster meetings, MAT training sessions, and other network events. It seems that there is a wide range of both formal and informal opportunities available to staff within the MAT network to develop their personal professionalism.

Working with MAT it's a lot easier- I like to read journals around education, I keep myself up to date with the latest information.

(Headteacher 1, School 1)

...this will help us to develop our knowledge pool.

(Assistant head 1, School 1)

In order to strengthen my knowledge, I work very closely with other MAT people in terms of inclusion specifically; sharing ideas, sharing things that work, sharing things that don't work. So, we have regular communication with the schools within the network.

(Assistant Head 2, School 1)

One of the benefits of being a part of the MAT network is the CPD they offer for their leaders as well ... that's really supportive and really helpful.

(Assistant Head 2, School 1)

According to a teacher in S1, many training opportunities were available within the MAT network, and staff could choose courses aligned with their developmental needs. This suggests that knowledge development and sharing were happening both formally and informally. Furthermore, teachers supported the importance of effective CPD sessions to strengthen their abilities, knowledge, and skills.

We have CPD sessions which are very information driven and practice driven, for example, tomorrow we're going to the MAT academy which is all the teachers from the MAT are meeting, and we all will be discussing learning and how to improve reading.

(Teacher 1, School 1)

The teachers in S1 recognised the importance of CPD sessions in their personal and professional development, as well as in the school's success as a whole. They were aware of their developmental needs and the areas for improvement through feedback from evaluations, which enhanced their commitment to professional growth. Teachers believed effective professional development improved their self-efficacy, leadership

development, and job satisfaction and supported their career. However, the school system's evaluation had not yet fully empowered teachers to lead their own development. This restriction could negatively impact teacher's agency and leadership development (see Chapter 2). Based on the data, I have created the school system's evaluation and performance measurement (PM) scheme outlined in Figure 5.7 below.

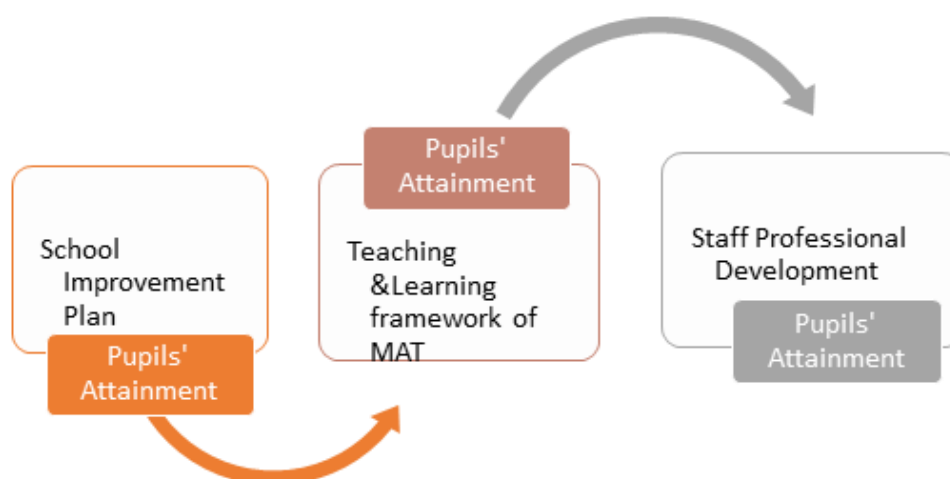


Figure 5.7: The MAT School System's Evaluation and PM Scheme (Created by the Researcher)

Grounded on Figure 5.7, the staff professional development programmes offered by the MAT network were aligned with both the teaching and learning framework of the MAT and the school improvement priorities, ensuring that teachers met the school's vision and mission for teacher effectiveness. This link can increase the effectiveness of professional development programmes (Coldwell *et al.*, 2008). However, the CPD programmes were designed like one-size-fits-all training courses, focusing on the general needs of teachers rather than individual needs (Chapter 3). Further on, I noted that staff movement within and across the MAT network was essential to strengthen the network internally and enhance the leadership capacity of schools. However, staff movement or promotion can enhance workload and create difficulties in time management. For example, Teacher 1 found her recent promotion to a middle leadership position challenging and too quick:

I think I got it quite early in my career and I know that's definitely having an impact on me. There were a lot of things that I was learning on the go whereas if I had more experience, I would be able to do things maybe a lot easier... I am still learning because obviously I haven't got years of teaching experience to back me up.

(Teacher 1, School 1)

Jumping up the career ladder too quickly, especially being promoted into leadership positions, can be advantageous for MAT academies in enhancing the leadership capacity of their schools. Nonetheless, it can also have adverse effects, such as increasing workload and leading to staff burnout and attrition. Despite offering a wide range of professional development experiences, as evidenced by the participants, the school emphasised individual accountability and performativity to achieve better outcomes for students while demonstrating a higher level of cooperation than collaboration.

5.4.3.2 Leadership Development in S2

Evidence from the findings shows that S2 had an inclusive provision for staff professional development. The school leaders were also participating as learners in the professional growth of teachers:

We have lines of inquiries so I guess it's like a coaching role [the headteacher] will be taking on.

(Assistant Head 1, School 2)

It is admirable that professional excellence and providing a supportive learning environment for all staff were identified as one of the four domains of the school improvement plan (see Figure 5.5). While acknowledging, encouraging growth, development, and challenge among staff is crucial for the success of any educational institution. By prioritising the professional development of its staff, S2 was not only improving the quality of education but also fostering a positive work environment where everyone feels valued and supported. One of the assistant heads confirmed:

I think the whole ethos of the school is how we can help someone to be even better or stronger as a person. I think it's important that we develop alongside pupils in order to teach them better ...

(Assistant Head 1, School 2)

Through the perspectives of participants, I also witnessed the determination of the headteacher and other senior leaders to establish lifelong learning in an area of severe socioeconomic deprivation. It was inspiring to see the headteacher, assistant head 2, and other staff undertaking higher education to complete their master's or doctoral research. Their dedication to continuous learning could benefit themselves and instils a culture of lifelong learning among the students.

I think it's good for children to see that teachers and leaders are continuing to learn. So, I often share my experience in university with children; [the headteacher] does it as well to get that culture of learning.

(Assistant Head 2, School 2)

Likewise, there was an effective coaching method for the school leaders too:

In school we have an active coaching programme that exists. So, we have two external coaches, [X] and [Y] who are coming and coach the senior team and that is the headteacher, deputy headteacher, assistant headteachers and the middle level leaders. (Headteacher 2, School 2)

Also, I find it impressive that the headteacher took on the role of a consulting leader and ran a leadership series adapted from the Ontario leadership framework (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2013). By doing so, the headteacher can improve the leadership practice of his school and build relationships with and develop other schools. The fact that 26 headteachers from across the country were invited to the school every half term to share their expertise and practices and learn with and from each other is a testament to the headteacher's dedication to professional development and collaboration. It is inspiring to see an optimistic leader with a big vision who is committed to making a positive impact not only in his school but also in the wider educational community:

So, this is about bringing us together to share our expertise. In the same way we do in our school. So, this year 26, 27 including my school are thinking differently and maybe next year there will be another 26 or 27, 50, 60 schools when over a time there are network of schools moving, there is

a social movement. They can change things- that's the mission!
(Headteacher 2, School 2)

While regular and purposeful collaboration among school leaders is known to be a key characteristic of communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). It was commendable to see that the school's improvement plan included an element of 'outstanding outreach' to expand its internal collaboration with wider networks outside the school. Indeed, this initiative can be related to the headteacher's sense of moral imperative to create a cohesive system in addition to his coherent school.

Bearing in mind, at S1, professional development initiatives for staff were primarily structured around monitoring and evaluation processes, access to external training opportunities, and reflective practice through using feedback from observations to improve teaching practices. Teachers received regular feedback on their performance, focusing on meeting the MAT network's instructional standards. Teachers perceived external training opportunities provided by the MAT network positively, as they provided opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge. Collaboration and networking within the MAT network were also promoted, allowing teachers to share best practices and learn from colleagues in other schools.

In contrast, as it was evident, professional development at S2 emphasised teacher empowerment through active involvement in professional development activities, teacher autonomy in professional development and leadership, collaboration and networking, and reflective practice. Teachers at S2 were actively involved in shaping their professional development journey, with opportunities to pursue areas of interest and expertise. Teacher autonomy in professional development and leadership was fostered among teachers, allowing them to take on leadership roles and initiatives aligned with their interests and strengths. Collaboration and networking were also encouraged within the school community, allowing teachers to share knowledge and

expertise and learn from each other's experiences. Reflective practice was embedded in the school culture, with teachers conducting research and regularly reflecting on their teaching practices and seeking feedback from colleagues to improve their practice.

5.5 Analysis and Implications

The findings from S1 and S2 before the Covid-19 pandemic offer important insights into the impact of different leadership styles and practices on school improvement. By examining the nuances of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership in these two outstanding schools, several key themes emerge that hold implications for educational policy, practice, and leadership development.

5.5.1 *The Impact of Leadership on Teacher Agency and School Culture*

The contrasting leadership styles in S1 and S2 highlight the significant influence of leadership on teacher agency and school culture. S1, characterised by its hierarchical and centralised leadership, prioritised external accountability and standardised performance management. While this approach may have ensured consistency and alignment with the MAT network's goals, it also limited teacher autonomy and innovation, potentially reducing morale and creativity. Conversely, the distributed and collaborative leadership model at S2 empowered teachers, fostering a sense of ownership and investment in the school's vision. This approach enhanced teacher motivation, morale, and professional agency, creating a supportive and dynamic school culture.

The implications of these findings suggest that a balance between external accountability and internal collaboration is crucial. Policymakers and school leaders

should consider fostering environments that combine clear performance metrics with opportunities for teacher-led innovation and agency.

5.5.2 Professional Development as a Driver of School Improvement

Both schools recognised the importance of staff professional development, but their approaches varied significantly. S1's CPD programs, while extensive, were largely top-down, aligning with MAT priorities and focusing on compliance with standardised practices. S2, on the other hand, embraced teacher-led professional growth, using innovative practices such as lesson studies, professional growth meetings, and teacher research groups. This approach not only enhanced teachers' pedagogical skills but also promoted collaborative professionalism and reflective practice.

The key implication here is that professional development should be context-specific and teacher-centred. Schools that prioritise professional growth opportunities tailored to individual needs and that promote collaboration and reflective practice are more likely to foster innovation and sustained school improvement.

5.5.3 Leadership Models and Long-Term Sustainability

The findings suggest that leadership models directly influence the sustainability of school improvement initiatives. S1's reliance on centralised leadership and performance-driven strategies may have led to immediate gains in student outcomes but raised concerns about long-term teacher retention and morale. In contrast, S2's emphasis on distributed leadership and internal accountability created a sustainable model where teachers felt valued and supported, resulting in long-term professional growth and consistent student achievement.

This highlights the need for leadership models that prioritise sustainability. Schools must balance short-term performance goals with strategies that promote long-term capacity-building among staff, ensuring resilience in the face of challenges.

5.6 Summary

The findings from School 1 (S1) and School 2 (S2) before the Covid-19 pandemic reveal stark contrasts in their leadership practices and approaches to school improvement. S1 relied heavily on a centralised, hierarchical leadership style driven by the Multi-Academy Trust's (MAT) directives, which prioritised standardisation, managerialism, and external accountability. In contrast, S2 employed a collaborative and inclusive leadership model that emphasised teacher agency, professional development, and internal accountability. While both schools achieved 'Outstanding' ratings in their Ofsted evaluations, their strategies and outcomes diverged significantly. S1's focus on performativity and compliance appeared to limit teacher autonomy, potentially reducing morale and creativity, whereas S2 fostered a culture of collaboration, trust, and innovation, resulting in higher teacher morale and greater professional growth.

Table 5.8 highlights these differences, offering a comparative overview of their school improvement strategies. It illustrates how S1 adhered to top-down change strategies and imposed professional learning communities, while S2 embraced teacher-led professional growth, collective accountability, and collaborative professionalism. These distinctions underline the critical role of leadership style and approach in shaping school culture and outcomes. The insights gained from these findings, coupled with the analysis and implications discussed earlier in this chapter,

underscore the importance of balancing external mandates with internal accountability, fostering teacher agency, and promoting collaborative leadership practices. These lessons provide a foundation for understanding leadership's role in school improvement and set the stage for the next chapter, which examines the findings from schools during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 5.8: Comparison between the School Improvement Strategies of the Two Schools

School 1- Academy Primary School	School 2- Community Primary School
Relying on external accountability forces	Combining external accountability with internal accountability
A culture of performativity and managerialism	A culture of collaborative professionalism
Top-down change strategies aimed at the school level	Teachers as agents of change
Standardised performance management	Teacher-led professional growth
Lower teacher morale due to heavy workloads and top-down management strategies	Higher teacher morale with trust and autonomy
Imposed professional learning community	Teacher-led professional learning community
A sense of Individual accountability, individual self-efficacy, and individual capacity	A sense of collective accountability, collective efficacy, and collective/social capacity

This chapter presented the findings before the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic from this thesis. In the next chapter I present the findings from schools during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Chapter 6: Leading through the Pandemic

Findings from the Schools during the Covid-19 Crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020 and by this time I had already collected data from School 1 (S1) and School 2 (S2) (presented in Chapter 5). As a researcher, I had to review and update my data collection strategy and interview approach for this study as schools' operations and management were significantly disrupted because of Covid-19.

The first Covid-19 lockdown in the UK started on 23 March 2020, and schools were closed. The schools reopened for a phased return after the first lockdown on 1 June 2020. The second lockdown started on 31 October 2020 and continued until 2 December 2020. The third lockdown began on 6 January 2021 and remained in place until 8 March 2021, when schools reopened for a planned return.

As a researcher, I found it difficult to arrange the remaining data collection for this study. Moreover, follow-up interviews from S1 and S2 with the participants were challenging during the pandemic because the respondents were extremely busy running the schools during these difficult times. Yet, the pandemic provided me with an opportunity to study the schools and their management in real-time in the pandemic, which I would have missed otherwise. I decided to revisit S1 and S2 during the pandemic to explore and compare how leadership in S1 and S2 responded to the pandemic and whether new forms of leadership emerged out of necessity. Then, I recruited four more schools (S3, S4, S5, and S6) for data collection during the pandemic. All six schools studied in this research were located in London and were visited for data collection several times between May 2021 – July 2021.

This chapter presents the data collected from six schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 22 respondents from six schools were interviewed. The interview procedure was the same during the pre-Covid-19 and the Covid-19 periods. However, some new questions were added to the interview questions (see Appendices J and K), which focused on leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I have summarised the key themes and sub-themes that appeared in the data collected during the pandemic in Figure 6.1 below and presented in detail in this chapter.

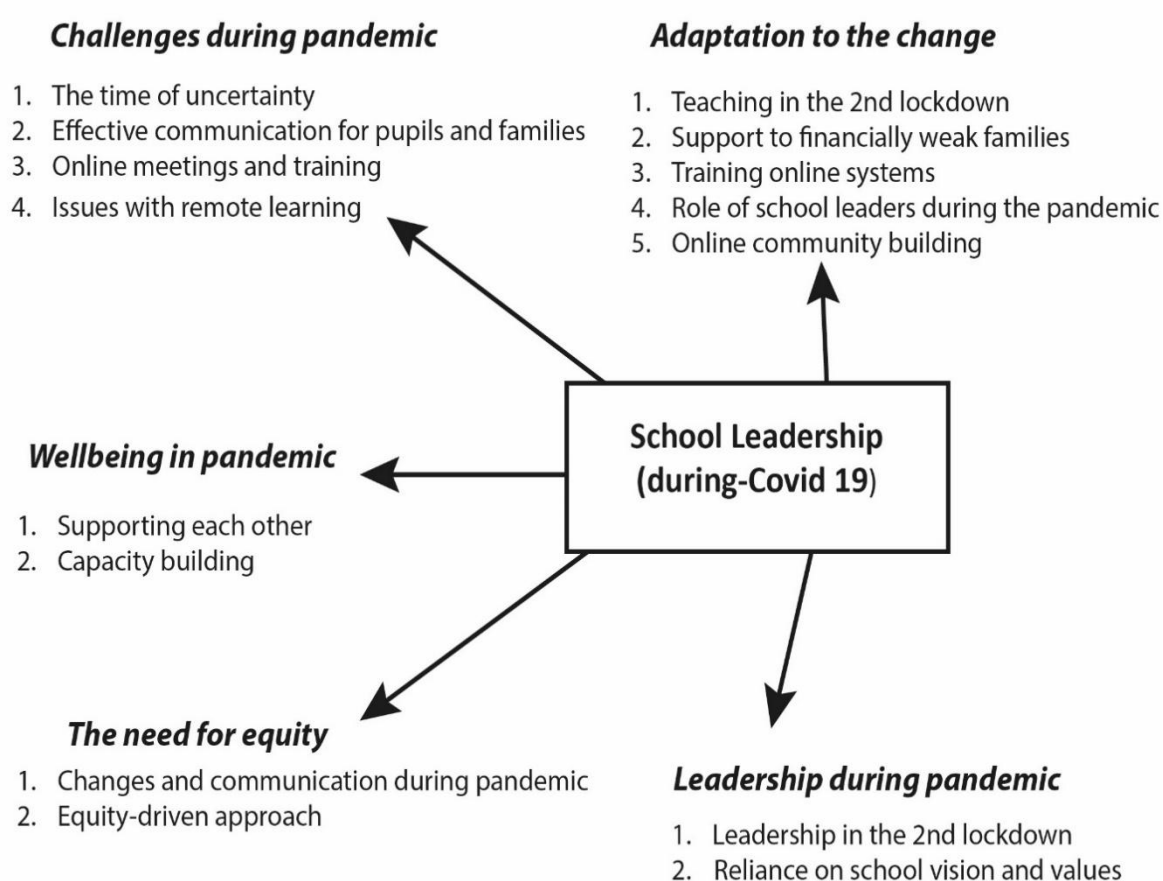


Figure 6.1: A Summary of Key Themes and Sub-themes from the Lockdown

6.1 Theme 1- Challenges during Pandemic

6.1.1 Sub-theme 1: *The Time of Uncertainty*

When the pandemic started, and in the early days, pupils and their parents were anxious and afraid to send their children to school because of uncertainties with Covid-19. Similarly, most teachers and colleagues were anxious, off-sick, self-isolating, and scared to attend school. This affected the schools' operations and productivity around the country and caused high rates of absences in most schools.

More importantly, another major challenge noted, when some of the participated headteachers expressed their emotional reactions to the UK government in handling crises, marked by fear and anxiety. Being under immense pressure throughout this crisis, for instance, the headteacher of S6 perceived himself as being cynical of the government's method of dealing with crises, which can be overwhelming to control the situation. This made the headteacher worried if he was fulfilling his responsibility to create a safe school without making mistakes. He said:

So, everyone needed to know if we were following the guidelines. So, one of the things I did with them was that I had almost opened a dialogue with them to constantly say this is the government guidelines and this is what we are doing.
(Headteacher, School 6)

Meanwhile, schools struggled to maintain staff availability and also access to supply teachers or suitable candidates during the pandemic. This was evident when an assistant headteacher (S6) confirmed: *"We had so many children and staff members who were scared."* When the schools opened after the lockdowns, Covid-19 crisis was still prevailing that may have contributed to its spread and further worsened the absence issue. The crisis also exacerbated the existing issues at schools. For example, although the senior leadership team members (SLT) in S6 attempted to

follow their schools' vision and values, providing quality first teaching (QFT) to all children, either present at school or at home, it was hard to improve families' disengagement. Similarly, the headteachers from S3 and S6 stated:

We were worried about whether our systems were good and what do we do if there is a positive case; and also, how do we support staff with their wellbeing because a lot of people had problems with it.

(Headteacher, School 3)

Constant disruptions to children's education. Constant disruptions to staff working practices and trying to manage the parents who were in a low socio-economic area.

(Headteacher, School 6)

When schools opened again and everyone was back in, we were then faced with bubbles popping. Pupils coming into contact with Covid or Covid cases in the school and then having to send groups of children and staff home.

(Assistant Head 1, School 6)

So, pupil premium children are the pupils that we didn't have much engagement from parents anyway; possibly their attendance is already quite low. Their parents may be don't put the highest priority on coming to school. So, they certainly were not going to do the home learning at home. So, that was quite challenging.

(Assistant Head 2, School 6)

6.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Effective Communication for Pupils and Families

Another challenge faced by schools was the lack of clear government communication in the early days of the pandemic about school operation rules during the pandemic. However, it seems like the school leaders in six schools identified the need for clear and regular communication with colleagues, pupils, and parents during this pandemic because any communication gap could worsen school management during the pandemic and negatively affect teaching and learning practices, which were already significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, S2 used regular online communication as one of the main strategies in responding to the challenges caused by Covid-19. Moreover, the school's electronic means of communication allowed the school leaders to communicate "*swiftly, calmly and reassuringly,*" which supported

parents and children's belief in the school. The evidence from some of the participant schools suggest that:

We were having briefings every morning, making sure everybody had the most up to date information.
(Headteacher, School 2)

The communication, I think, the nuanced and very well-considered communication I think was the most important question... There are many ways to communicate. I could have sent out emails to people but the tone, the nuance, the time, the care that was taken, the language that was used all of that had to be very carefully considered because you can communicate and create a sense of panic and fear in people. You can communicate and people feel like they don't trust the decisions that are being taken.
(Headteacher, School 2)

A method of communication during Covid is different with routine communication.
(Headteacher, School 3)

"we tried to keep communication really clear."
(Headteacher, School 4)

So, I would say the way I have negotiated it is making sure that communication is more regular so it's more frequent.
(Headteacher, School 5)

In this way suggesting that constant and clear communication was another component of empathy for school leaders to pay attention to social and emotional concerns during the crisis as one of the headteachers explained:

I tried to address issues, as we are talking to people all the time, you find out that this worries them; they're not happy about this in school.
(Headteacher, School 4)

That said, the pastoral role and responsibility of school leaders can create a supportive system and positive relations between all members of the school community and ensure the continuity of education. Bearing in mind that it only works, if school leaders also get support, otherwise it will be unsustainable.

Therefore, regular communication for staff was also needed, as suggested by Headteacher 3, "*the staff, I think, first and foremost, needed regular communication*" (Headteacher, School 3). All participants from School 3 believed that communication

in all forms was a critical component of navigating the uncertainty that they faced. For example, the headteacher stated:

We had whole staff briefings every week online and every member of staff was invited; and then we have a whole school WhatsApp which is for updates.
(Headteacher 3, School 3)

In addition to the need for different communication tools, the headteacher also identified the necessity for frequent communication. To launch her communication efforts, she:

tried to do once a week- send a text message to every member of staff to make sure they are okay and not just copy and paste- trying to keep like a little conversation going.
(Headteacher 3, School 3)

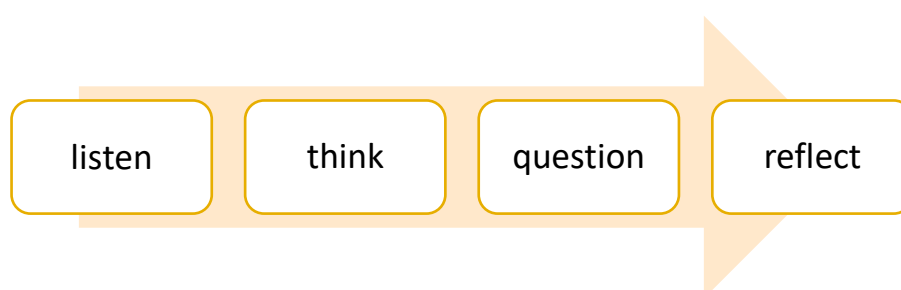
Using various communication channels and frequency of communication can develop a sense of connectivity and provide the kind of support that staff feel is needed to be safe. Also, being mindful to find the right tone for every individual meant that “*one size does not fit all*” (Headteacher 3), which would make the staff feel valuable. Based on the definition of coaching style where the primary objective is the long-term professional development of staff (McBer, 2016), the headteacher established a system of communicating ‘why’ in school: “*for everything we have to have a why*” (Headteacher 3, School 3). For them, ‘why’ had a great value which could inspire them to action and make them to be reflective. They also relied on ‘listening,’ another type of communication skill. Active listening is a known characteristic of the coaching leadership style and culture (Lasater, 2016). As an instructional coach, the headteacher also valued the role of instant and consistent feedback in developing staff and students- she expressed:

We don't like to save it for the end of the lesson. It has to be done straightaway.
(Headteacher 3, School 3)

The two-way communication system of the school was more visible through a habit of conducting regular staff surveys. The headteacher explained:

We do a lot of staff surveys. So, we're doing one at the moment on wellbeing. We did one before about marking. We do quite a lot of them because they don't have to put their names down-it's anonymous, people like to answer maybe more truthfully. (Headteacher 3, School 3)

In this way, school leaders gave teachers a voice and identified gaps in perceptions. This could help leaders to provide the best practice and support for teachers. As such, the communication at school had a pattern of:



Yet, the same model of communication was observable at school after the crisis lockdowns. A prime example is when the headteacher realised that relationships in virtual meetings are not as effective as the ones held in-person. In that case, she emphasised the need: *“to be a little bit more thoughtful of how we do things.”* Furthermore, she summed up her relational efforts:

It's how do we bring people in, what little tricks can we use? you know maybe you can ring people before hand and just ask them about their views and to say something about that in the meeting instead of putting people on the spot. (Headteacher 3, School 3)

The headteacher's relational skills were admired by her staff. For instance, the teaching staff described her communication with terms such as *“calm,” “open”* and *“respectful”* (Teacher 1 and 2, School 3). This has developed supportive working conditions and a safe environment, where the *“staff were able to communicate their need for help and they were comfortable enough to do that”* (Teacher 2, School 3).

Exhibiting such effective communication skills would help the leader to develop better relationships, understanding, and trust among the staff. Worth noting that, according to the staff the school already had a strong relationship with community, particularly the parents, as teacher 1 commented:

We haven't necessarily collaborated with parents any more than we did before, we did already quite a lot.
(Teacher 1, School 3)

Additionally, phone calls became an important method of making connections with students and families. Teacher 2 explained:

It was just speaking to parents, calling, making sure we were doing the welfare calls just to provide them with a bit of feedback and trying to get them back on track.
(Teacher 2, School 3)

We were phoning every family every week; how are you getting on; we can see whether you're online or not, if you have any problems.
(Headteacher 4, School 4)

Creating such a positive and caring relationships with families not only can bring the community closer to school, but it also can benefit students emotional and educational wellbeing. As I discussed in chapter 5, S2 had always focused on clear communication, so the school had already developed a good level of trust among the stakeholders prior to the pandemic, which helped the school during a challenging time such as the Covid-19 pandemic. This shows the importance of establishing trusting relationships for handling the pandemic:

I think if we didn't have trusting relationships, our school would have been in a very different situation.
(Headteacher, School 2)

Before Covid-19, the main mode of communication among colleagues in all the schools was face-to-face and regular staff meetings to ensure meaningful connections were maintained during office hours. However, from necessity, this mode of communication had to be changed. For instance, the headteacher from S5 explained:

I used to have briefings with staff physically on Friday mornings. Then when the pandemic happened, it moved to just being a tight, weekly, briefing to make sure that we maintain that level of professionalism.

(Headteacher, School 5)

Emphasising how face-to-face communication became extremely difficult during the pandemic lockdown, which impacted communication and professional relationships within the school. Therefore, I realised that all the six schools had to rely on various online platforms and telephones as the primary form of communication during the pandemic.

In the second lockdown the communication was a lot better because we got better with the technology.

(Assistant Head, School 1)

There's also an awareness that adaptation might happen because of the pandemic and makes it more difficult to have relationships because the face to face is gone. And it's about being creative; how you still maintain relationships without being physically near each other.

(Headteacher, School 5)

Interestingly, compared to the time before Covid, the school's collaboration had "*matured a bit more than before,*" and there were possibilities to enhance collaboration among stakeholders during the pandemic (Assistant head, School 1).

6.1.3 Sub-theme 3: Online Meetings and Training

The isolation caused by the pandemic lockdown was mitigated to some capacity by increasing reliance on online meeting platforms as a replacement for face-to-face meetings. Staff professional learning meetings continued as usual during the pandemic, on a weekly basis, but "*they were now held online, which maximised attendance*" (Headteacher, School 1). These meetings provided opportunities to communicate and share information, strengthening relationships and giving a sense of connectivity in the school as well as supporting staff well-being. In addition, from my

observation it was evident that weekly virtual, one-to-one meetings with the headteachers were also organised to ensure the well-being of staff.

I had a weekly virtual meeting just for half an hour- just as a checking. It wasn't really to discuss the children or the lessons. It was more to do with how you are? and how are things? And I think staff really appreciated it at that time.
(Headteacher, School 1)

Phone calls became one of the most important initial methods of reaching out to students and families. The headteacher in S2 also encouraged people to come together to maintain their social bonds and identities and socialise. Just as they did before the time of the pandemic, their communication and networking activities during the pandemic extended beyond the school.

The staff hosted online game nights and we joined a programme called 'Let's Localise'. So, while the children and families were at home, we did bingo nights, and we did quiz nights - all of these sorts of things to bring the families together.
(Headteacher, School 2)

I've been the chair of the [X-name of the district] quadrant schools. So, 25 schools in [X]. Also, supporting and managing the emotions of those headteachers and making sure they have very quick and seamless access to resources, to plans, to templates, anything they needed to help make their job, their life easier and then relaying the communications from the local authority and health services to those headteachers in a way that everybody understood what was happening and felt that they could go to their school and make a difference there.
(Headteacher, School 2)

I need a community here; it just doesn't stop at children. It's my staff, it's my parents and it's all the people that work with us and we are a very big community ...
(Headteacher, School 3)

Moreover the headteacher in S6, in addition to phone calls and online communication, also used posters in the staffroom to communicate information through diverse communication channels.

We just spoke through every single aspect that we could. We put posters up in the staffroom about further information and so we kept staff informed.
(Headteacher, School 6)

Moreover, for some parents, lockdowns allowed them to focus on their children's needs and education, in a way that they had not done before, which can have a positive

result in children's outcomes. In this case, teacher 1 in S4 perceived remote learning as an opportunity for parents to get closer with schools and the education of their children:

I think parents, their skills have probably increased as well and can understand now what their children are doing online, and I think you know that needs to be kind of yeah more improved.

(Teacher 1, School 4)

That said, new learning happened with an emphasis on parent engagement with children's learning and their involvement with school operation, thus generating a two-way relationship between the three groups, that is family, school, and students.

6.1.4 Sub-theme 4: Issues with Remote Learning

From the interviews, I also realised that because of the lockdown, most of the SLT responses to crisis focused on the value of health, mental health and safety for staff, students, and families. Although online teaching allowed schools to continue teaching during the pandemic, the technical limitations in early online learning and reduced face-to-face contact between the teachers and the students shifted the teaching focus from comprehensive teaching and assessment to support learning in the difficult time of Covid-19. This meant the monitoring and assessment were relatively less rigorous than the pre-Covid-19 period. One of the headteachers (S6) was concerned about the education gap created by the long lockdowns.

I think one negative in terms of Covid and leadership style is monitoring and assessment. We've been probably less rigorous in a way because of mental health and staff wellbeing. Knowing that staff felt overwhelmed for such a long period of time, going in and using the same style of assessment and monitoring that we had done before was going to have a negative impact on everyone. So, that has changed, that instructional leadership has changed, and I think we have tried very hard to have a much more supportive attitude.

(Assistant Head 2, School 6)

My second terrifying challenge is really thinking through this next generation of children. ... we need a knowledge-based curriculum to be introduced to them which I need to get them to think critically and independently and this is one of my biggest challenges. So, moving

forward, there will be disruptions to education and disruptions to work patterns which will put pressures on parents and then the fact that this will happen again and again and again. I can see if I'm being cynical and my younger generation need to recognise it for what it is and do something about that.
(Headteacher, School 6)

Furthermore, it was observable that some of the schools also embraced familiarity when selecting a learning management system. For example, the Assistant Head at S4 said:

We tried to have some sort of online timetable, so the lessons were taught in sequences that children were used to ... (Assistant Head, School 4)

Additionally, the S4 used its teaching assistants (TAs) to keep track of children who were online and those who were not. In this way, with staff and student support in place, teacher capacity and virtual instructional strategies seemed to be developed.

Teacher One described her own learning journey as:

I feel I really developed myself as a teacher, challenging my children and thinking outside the box.
(Teacher 1, School 4)

Nevertheless, she found her own motherhood responsibility as the greatest of the challenges she faced and said:

When you're at school you can forget home but at home, you're in a room like this. And it was hard telling my own children mummy is still working; mummy is still trying to teach 20 children ...
(Teacher 1, School 4)

Despite these hardships, it seemed like adhering to the school's values and goals helped teachers to do their very best to provide children with the same productive learning that they would in the classroom. Moreover, the headteacher in S4 described a 21st-century teacher as someone with great technological skills and also being able to promote deep learning in classrooms:

Teachers will need to be able to teach online as well as face to face. The other thing is that we are more and more trying to help children understand why they are learning things in school and linking it to future careers, future developments.
(Headteacher, School 4)

While suggesting the need for a person-centred curriculum, it was evident that teachers were empowered by modelling best practices, improving their digital pedagogical skills, familiarising themselves with emerging routines, and supporting their emotional well-being.

6.2 Theme 2- Adaption to the Change

According to the data, I observed that during the first Covid-19 lockdown, schools were not prepared for the sudden closure of schools. So, they had to come up with emergency plans to mitigate the impact on learning. For instance, the headteacher in S1 managed to provide leadership with careful instructional planning to deliver high-quality teaching while exploring the testing of any available approaches for remote learning during the first lockdown. However, printed learning packs were finally handed out to the parents so pupils could continue learning at home, the headteacher explained:

We tried a number of ways in the first lockdown and found that it was more useful to create a learning pack. Physical packs of papers for two weeks of learning and then parents came to collect it on a rota.

(Headteacher, School 1)

As a result, the schools realised that the approach did not work as expected, because not all the parents were necessarily confident enough to support their children's learning at home.

6.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Teaching in the 2nd Lockdown

However, S1 benefited from being part of a network of schools run by a central organisation of MAT. This means the central organisation collated and analysed the learnings from the first lockdown from all the schools in the network. So, the schools

in the network used these learnings during the second lockdown, which made managing the second lockdown relatively less difficult. Similarly, the second lockdown for S1 was more manageable because the central Academy organisation had time to plan and provide resources to their schools, and the schools and the central organisation had better information to reflect on what could be improved from the first lockdown and the resources and support required. Nonetheless, the headteacher suggested that the pandemic made them more creative:

I think the second lockdown was more manageable because we had time to plan; we gathered information about what we could improve on the last time and we conducted parent survey to see the points we improved from the first lockdown. But I would say that it wasn't like that for the first lockdown, because we had no choice. (Headteacher, School 1)

As we were going through the pandemic the creativity then became more and more because I feel when the children are online, you had more time to kind of plan and research. (Teacher 1, School 4)

As a result, during the second lockdown, the organisation, which managed several academy schools, one of which was S1, introduced a digital learning platform in the schools they managed, including S1. This digital learning platform enhanced connectivity and communication among all stakeholders. Furthermore, the school arranged virtual workshops for parents on how to use the digital learning platform, followed by a parent survey about their transition from the first lockdown to the second one, which, according to the headteacher, gave satisfactory results:

So, parents knew how to use it as well....there was a positive shift between people's attitudes and also around the communication from us as the SLT. So, I think because we shifted based on peoples' opinions (parental survey and staff feedback) around the 1st lockdown, we were able to provide a better service. (Headteacher, School 1)

Similarly, the S2's culture of collaborative professionalism valued feedback as a critical component of managing the challenges of remote learning. Just as they did before the

pandemic, I noted that the headteacher of this school kept listening to and appreciated his stakeholders' opinions to help him manage the situation more efficiently:

People needed to feel like they were heard, they needed to feel like their opinion mattered and that they could speak up and say what they were worried about or what they were happy about or what they wanted more or less, how we could do things differently in unprecedented times and those ideas should be listened to and considered and acted upon where appropriate.
(Headteacher, School 2)

6.2.2 Sub-theme 2: Support to Financially Weak Families

From the findings, it was clear that the first lockdown was an opportunity for schools to learn and apply their responses to Covid-19, whereas, during the second lockdown, schools were more prepared to deal with lockdown situations and could apply improved measures to support the pupils' requirements. Moreover, the schools sought help from families to support the level of children's learning at home. According to a teacher:

We were just trying to keep in touch as best as we could to make sure that families were trying a little bit harder with online learning of children.

(Teacher 2, School 3)

For example, "access to technology was a concern for many families" (Teacher 1, School 3). In these situations, all schools arranged for laptops and internet access, which were provided to the pupils so they could access online learning. Similarly, in S1, pupils from Year 3 to Year 6 could join the daily live lessons provided by the teachers from home on laptops provided by the school. This helped create "equity" among students in being able to attend online learning from home.

We got hundreds of Chromebooks in the school for those children who don't have a computer or Internet packages for access at home whenever they needed.
(Teacher 1, School 3)

We were very lucky because we work for a school network, and the network itself- the head office- did a lot of work around sending laptops out. So, all the children that needed a laptop from Year 3 to Year 6 in September 2020 were given a laptop. So, everyday children had to come online. Say hello to their teachers. So, we knew; a) the children are safe and b) they are joining in the learning.

(Headteacher, School 1)

6.2.3 Sub-theme 3: Training Online Systems

Another challenge I observed from schools' data was training teachers, parents, and pupils on online learning platforms. Thus, the teachers were first trained to use the learning platforms to deliver lessons, and instructions were created and provided to the parents and pupils on how to access the online learning platforms at home. Evidence from one of the headteachers confirms the importance of teacher training:

So, that's what we did and by that first half term, we were completely ready and then when we came back, maybe three weeks later the first class went home. But there was no panic, everybody was ready, and all the technology was distributed, and everybody was trained and comfortable ...

(Headteacher, School 2)

I noted peer learning was used in most schools, where an Early Career Teacher (ECT) was paired with other teachers who were proficient in IT skills. This change experience was important for less experienced teachers because it boosted their confidence and experience.

I was showing other teachers how to do video and audio recording and that was really good for my professional development as well because it's sort of gave me the tools and sort of sense of authority about that topic I preferred, and I knew quite well.

(Teacher 2, School 4)

Emphasising the need for teacher agency, autonomy and collective learning.

6.2.4 Sub-theme 4: Role of School Leaders during the Pandemic

From the findings it was evident that school leadership became more important during the pandemic because they could foster equality in children's educational access.

Furthermore, one of the headteachers emphasised the need for a change in the practice of schools, explaining that:

(I think) it's more prominent in everybody's mind now that schools are there to serve the pupils and their communities and to provide equality in some way and accessible platforms. It's not good enough that you are not doing that anymore.
(Headteacher, School 1)

Also, this in my opinion emphasises a need for schools to work more closely with their communities. An assistant head (S1) summed up their approach to ensuring equitable education in terms of:

Understanding our community and the only way that we can truly get that is when the restrictions are over- by having more community events and more opportunities to listen to parents and listen to children and also (to) our staff.
(Assistant Head, School 1)

Subsequently, after attending to the psychological needs of staff, I noted that the schools focused on providing instructional support to teachers. This was done through arranging trainings and activities targeted towards use of IT and online platforms.

We had to upskill everyone, so they knew the system really well and they did that amazingly well over autumn.
(Deputy Head, School 3)

With staff and student support in place, professional development became a key strategic component for building teacher capacity. Similar to S2, the professional provision of S3 was centred around teacher agency and professional growth meetings. After the first lockdown, therefore, teachers in S3 took the lead in their own learning. As teachers began to come together, the need for connection among staff members became paramount. The need for collaboration and collective learning made teachers more creative and took advantage of the coaching approach of the headteacher (S3).

Because we were all going through something new, we all really needed to share good practises with each other. I thought that I will try a live lesson for our classes and see how it goes; then it was really good and that was

all fine. So, then I had to teach all the other teachers how you do a live lesson [synchronous online lesson]. (Teacher 1, School 3)

As noted earlier, this kind of peer coaching was already embedded in the culture of the S3, and it was familiar to people. Hence, knowledge sharing seemed to solidify the ties between staff and created a strong foundation upon which instructional capacity could be built. Other supports provided by the school leaders included stopping the marking policy to reduce teachers' workload and increase their focus on learning. Where the deputy head described their approach as:

We've shifted our focus to a much more 'less is more' approach when it comes to teaching and learning which has been amazing and really good.

(Deputy Head, School 3)

This kind of approach gave the school the opportunity to plan for the future. In this school (S3), direct questioning was the next method they used to remove unnecessary workload for teachers and leaders. The headteacher described the aim as: *"why do we want to carry on like this- doing this in this way; is it having an impact?"* (Headteacher, School 3)- this again can be linked to the school's open communication system and coaching culture. Also, to gain a clear picture of the school's culture and system, I asked the participants if they had any teacher observation in place before the pandemic. In response, the headteacher in S3, despite many school leaders, believed teacher observation is: *"something that puts people in a corner"*- but they paid great attention to instructional coaching to provide support and instant feedback to teachers. Because they *"did not believe observing people is a very good way for helping them to develop"* (Headteacher, S3). Even during the pandemic, the school leaders continued performing their instructional role to support teachers. Attempting to be consistent with their systems was another area of focus for instructional capacity building.

The senior leaders recorded a lot of videos to show us, so we could watch at a later time as well which made it quite helpful. (Teacher 2, School 3)

I would consider this kind of video coaching the same as learning through role modelling, which not only increases instructional capacity of teachers, but it helps them to evaluate their practice and be more reflective and self-aware. Like S4, S3 used their TAs to increase the instructional capacity of their teachers. The headteacher said:

We had a system in school where we had teaching assistants overseeing the key worker children and the lessons on the screen were being live streamed by the class teachers. (Headteacher, School 3)

As a result, the deputy head (S3) declared: *“teachers have really been able to become more confident.”* Bearing in mind, this change can affect the nature of teaching to demand for a greater agency, autonomy, and leadership. Describing a 21st-century teacher, the headteacher emphasised the importance of teacher leadership, teacher agency and being knowledgeable:

Every teacher has to be a subject leader now; they have to have a specialism and they have to know about their subject from early years all the way up and be able to really answer some quite difficult questions about it. (Headteacher, School 3)

Bearing in mind, this was already evident in the leadership structure of the school because every teacher was a subject leader in S3. Overall, the power of the headteacher’s emotional intelligence ability, instructional support, teacher collaboration, and familiarity of emerging routines empowered teachers in S3.

6.2.5 Sub-theme 5: Online Community Building

The schools findings indicate that during the pandemic, virtual time for connection through general staff meetings, during which celebrations, challenges, and needs were shared, became commonplace. In addition, creative virtual social activities began to emerge to maintain connections and relationships. One of the headteachers stated:

On Friday staff used to do something virtual like a quiz or singing. So, they did that themselves though which I think is really nice.

(Headteacher, School 1)

These staff bonding events can strengthen the team building and create a strong foundation upon which instructional capacity could be built. These changes in the academy school also showed that the academy school was moving closer to the maintained community school approaches demonstrated in S2. Attention to expectations, standards, and responsive professional development all formed the basis of the school leaders' efforts to build, sustain and strengthen capacity across the school in S1. Setting the stage for capacity building began with clarifying and embracing a mindset of acceptance, support, and flexibility.

Being modest and knowing that you're not going to get everything right all the time and just owning that really. And when staff come to you with a problem like instead of trying to find a solution for them ... I'll do some coaching with them; a kind of empowering staff to find the solutions which may not be the best solution but it's a solution for them to try and it's something which they own.

(Assistant Head, School 1)

This, too, seems a softer approach than the usual corporate line of MAT policy that we saw them proclaiming in the first set of interviews (Chapter 5). After recognising the importance of infusing capacity building with support and flexibility, the headteacher in S1 began creating specific support for teachers, including encouraging them to make a change in their mindset to improve their self-awareness ability and responsive professional development. She advised her teachers:

... being grateful and receiving praise is one way of feeling good and for your own well-being, but the best well-being is self-gratification.

(Headteacher, School 1, School 6)

Likewise, the assistant head in S1 communicated her emotional support to staff by saying:

We're in this together; it's a bad situation but it's not forever; we have bad days but there will be good days, too. This was to make a point of celebrating the things that were going well. (Assistant Head, School 1)

This kind of mindset could help in growing teachers' confidence and enable them to experiment with additional strategies to increase interactivity. Therefore, with staff and student support in place, staff professional development became a key strategic component for building teacher capacity. Training on technological tools dominated professional learning activities during the pandemic. As participants explained, the critical importance of this type of training especially for teachers without these skills became obvious. For example, the headteacher in S1 shared:

When it was locked down, it was all around good digital lessons, what good learning looks like virtually, for example, using the techniques that we'd already learned in class, how can you do that in a virtual classroom?

(Headteacher, School 1)

The professional learning programmes of this school (S1) according to the headteacher also focused on improving the mental health of staff:

We did other things, for example, around mental health as well; we did some workshops for staff around that. (Headteacher, School 1)

Unlike the pre-pandemic time, teachers during the pandemic experienced self-directed and collaborative learning at school, for example, headteacher in S1 summarised:

On Teams we had a channel and when they [teachers] were planning or doing whatever, they were always talking to each other. Sending a message, has anybody tried this, does anybody know how to do that, have a look what I've done today maybe you could try it.

(Headteacher, School 1)

So, it was not just the SLTs at the front to be a source of knowledge in school, but teachers took over the lead in sharing their own good practice, which the headteacher thought: *"it was a lot more appropriate because it was a lot more responsive to the*

gaps” (Headteacher, School 1). However, the headteacher recognised a shift in the role of teachers:

I do think there's a deeper understanding of their [teachers] children. So, I would say that they [teachers] definitely know their children inside out during the lockdowns; their children's lives, where their children come from, who's in the family home, how many siblings do they have you know that kind of thing which also impacts on teaching and learning when you know your students that well.
(Headteacher, School 1)

In terms of the headteacher’s own resilience, she identified the act of delegation as a key in improving her resilience:

I'd accepted, you can only do what you can do. I'm not a superwoman and delegation has been really key ... I think that's helped my resilience because I know I've got a supportive team behind me, and the MAT also offered counselling for headteachers to have a supervision. The right word is professional supervision.
(Headteacher, School 1)

In this way, having still high expectations for delivering high-quality teaching, the need for teacher-led professional learning, teacher collaboration, and teacher creativity seemed like it had empowered teachers and helped to increase the school’s capacity in S1. Moreover, participants interviewed from S1 recognised that in the crisis, the action was led by the school leadership and supported by the collective wisdom within the school or the network of MAT schools, but also through individual efforts and personal networks. For instance, the headteacher in S1 was surprised to see how her staff researched best practices globally and shared them among themselves:

I think some people went really far with the online learning and some people were a bit anxious and nervous. So, we tried to make people have ideas.

(Headteacher, School 1)

This shows the importance of sharing and creating new knowledge during difficult times. In S1, similar to schools 3 and 4, the headteacher decided that teaching assistants (TAs) should run the community classrooms during the second lockdown

so that the teaching staff workload would be reduced and they could focus on online lessons.

I spoke with the union Rep because the average age of our teaching assistant staff is 25 and the risk for Covid for somebody that age is very minimal- and I said this is the best way of working. So, you know that was tricky, but I had to be a bit of a dictator in that way like this is what's best for the school.
(Headteacher, School 1)

This decision not only may help to create support for students and increased teachers' capacity to "*focus on that high-quality learning*" (Headteacher, School 1), but it can also empower TAs. Describing, how the headteacher's leadership approach demonstrates the school's vision and values for considering high-quality teaching as their number one priority.

6.3 Theme 3: Wellbeing in Pandemic

Based on the finding, as the Covid-19 pandemic progressed, school leaders in all six schools were more aware of the increased importance of the socio-emotional wellbeing of staff, students, and their families because people were sensitive and anxious about the pandemic.

I had to be more understanding and nurture people a little bit more because I was very aware that people were a lot more sensitive and still are actually to the pandemic than I am.
(Headteacher, School 1)

Additionally, teachers seemed to be worried about the children and their wellbeing. A teacher defined the situation:

So, me worrying that are the children understanding, are the children going to get it, is somebody else doing the work for them! You know, because you can't see them, you can't judge what they are feeling, their emotion, do they wake up and have a good morning, you know, what are they going to do in the evening.
(Teacher, School 4)

The lack of face-to-face contacts with children resulted in additional worries for teachers about the children and parents, due to concerns about whether support provided for them was adequate. Staff well-being was also critical because it could impact the students' well-being (S1, S2, S3, S4). For example, the headteacher in S2 created and shared personalised, individual video messages to support and appreciate his colleagues. This school (S2) regularly sent small gifts to staff as a token of appreciation for their hard work during difficult times, while S1 supported their staff's well-being by providing free counselling services.

I did spend a lot of the week ringing individual staff; the SLT team rang the line managed teaching assistants; So, it was keeping that connection going.
(Headteacher, S1)

I made a short video to every single teacher, sent it to them individually that just thanked them for all the work they were doing. We sent home gift boxes to all of the staff at three different times throughout the last lockdown just little treats, teas and coffee, lotions for their hands because they used so much hand sanitiser.
(Headteacher, School 2)

We signposted staff to different kinds of areas of support. So, there's a free counselling service for teachers that they can call.

(Deputy Head, School 3)

It wasn't about whether you are doing your work but about how you are. How is your family? How you're doing?
(Headteacher, School 4)

Making sure staff are aware of what wellbeing packages were available to them from the school point of view and from other packages that we buy in.

(Headteacher, School 5)

The headteachers in S2, S3, and S4 ensured that each colleague was approached regularly so that they could express their comments and concerns and feel valued.

It will be helpful, and it only takes a few minutes, but it makes a big difference.
(Headteacher, School 2)

We obviously wanted them to be very comfortable and well looked after ... So, we did quite a regular call round to staff, checking in, making sure they are okay, their families are okay.
(Deputy Head, School 3)

My deputy head and myself cut the staff in half and we made a weekly pastoral call to every member of staff. So, I did half the staff one week and my deputy did the other half- and then next week we swapped.

(Headteacher, School 4)

School 3 also provided the teachers with a programme focussing on innate, heart, education, and resilience training (IHEART). This programme supported teachers in controlling their own well-being and overcoming obstacles and boosting their confidence. As confirmed by a teacher:

I think every staff member really enjoyed that; so, that helped us in our wellbeing and then prepared us for the scenario that we knew was going to come.

(Teacher 1, School 3)

Moreover, creative activities began to emerge as a way to maintain connection, kindness, and relationships. For instance, assistant head (S6) described:

We were really thinking about ways to boost morale and boost wellbeing, so we've done a lot of work recently. For example, we've got a project called the Kindness Ninjas. So, it's a group of members of staff, they're secret, nobody knows who they are but they're going around and they're doing kind things like setting up a book club or buying treats for the staff. What's been nice is that other people have kind of started to do kindness things off their own back and it's just spreading this at work.

(Assistant Head, School 6)

Being aware of one's own abilities, the headteacher in S5 described herself as:

I am quite a resilient person, having a positive attitude, and making sure what support systems are available both for my staff and myself that might be local authority support, guidance from the DfE but also locally.

(Headteacher 5, School 5)

As I highlighted earlier, the headteacher's self-awareness skill is an aspect of her reflective leadership style. This ability can significantly impact not only her own well-being but also the well-being of the teachers.

6.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Supporting Each Other

As noted, so far, staff bonding events can solidify the ties between staff and create a strong foundation for building instructional capacity. Acknowledging the instructional role of leaders had changed due to the pandemic, as mentioned earlier, therefore, some of the headteachers believed the quality of staff professional learning and staff creativity had been dropped. For example headteacher 6 explained the reasons:

The reality is that in pre-pandemic I found that our professional development was stronger, much stronger because we have everybody on site, and I can see them. For example, on Zoom you can mute, you can look at the screen or just look down from the screen and play with your phone. In my view creativity was stifled. (Headteacher, School 6)

This may depict the headteacher as an authoritative leader who likes to influence power and have control over subordinates. As a result, it can be argued that the power of information sharing, creating a safe school building, and ensuring government guidelines were followed to empower teachers at this school (S6).

As the pandemic took hold, it became clear that access to mental health and well-being support needed to take priority over access to instruction. Headteacher in S2 intentionally and explicitly reached out to all stakeholders. Senior leadership and teachers from this school made efforts to keep in touch with pupils and parents through phone calls.

Every fortnight every family had a phone call; how are you doing, what's happening, how can we be helpful... Teachers made a phone call home to every child in their class every two weeks because they would see them online, three times a day ... (Headteacher, School 2)

6.3.2 Sub-theme 2: Capacity Building

Efforts in caring for staff wellbeing helped gradually build an organisational capacity during the pandemic (S2, S3, S4, and S5). Subsequently, setting the stage for capacity

building began with clarifying and embracing a positive mindset and support. The headteacher at S5 stressed the critical role of support during a time of change and crisis and appreciated the support she received through different sources and explained:

Lots of headteachers are in a consortium with other headteachers ensuring to engage and learn from each other... As a new headteacher, another source of support for me was that I had a mentor, he was [headteacher 2]. And also, because I am in an Academy it means that I have an executive headteacher. So, I will also say that they also provide another element of support as well as the government bodies.

(Headteacher, School 5)

In addition to recognising the significant role of support, this headteacher suggested that she had provided responsive, professional development programmes to build, sustain, and strengthen capacity across the school. She commented:

We have weekly insets and we've still maintained it and we just do it virtually. So, it just means you have to be a bit more creative about what you do and how you do it, but it was very important to us and that's why we're still making progress, we're meeting our targets, but we maintain a high level of virtual CPD for our staff including myself.

(Headteacher, School 5)

Moreover, it was claimed that another area of focus for instructional capacity building was prioritising systems and structures, as well as listening to pupils' voice:

We do have a system; we do have a monitoring cycle, but it just had to shift the focus and the platform had to shift during Covid. And it was very much more engagement rather than standards whereas before you were kind of looking at standards. But also, pupil's voice became very much more important; it's always important but I would say it became more important.

(Headteacher, School 5)

Also, the headteacher referred to the school's schedules which were simplified in an effort:

When we delivered high quality teaching, we only did one live session a day because we didn't want our children in front of the screen for so long.

(Headteacher, School 5)

Since the teachers' voice from the S5's data was absent therefore, I cannot make a certain conclusion on the way S5 had empowered its teachers and instructional capacity. The headteacher in this school recognised a need for 21st-century teachers to focus their attention "*more around a safeguarding and pastoral role*" (Headteacher, School 5). Additionally, she argued about some new priorities to consider post-lockdown, both at her school and in the education system. First, she suggested a need to recognise the nature of teaching as an emotional practice. Second, she emphasised the importance to understand the role of teachers beyond test scores. The headteacher explained:

Because we were in an area of high economic deprivation and some of the teachers, they were doing home visits, it brought to them a little bit more what impact they have on children in their wider life not just in the time they come to school.

(Headteacher, School 5)

Third, she highlighted a need to focus on children's holistic development. This value was already evident in the school's ethos and environment and the headteacher confirmed:

Yes, it is about learning - and we provide those values and skills [discussed in theme 1] in children. So, they can cope in a fast-changing world and the world that throws pandemics at them.

(Headteacher, School 5)

Such a holistic approach can help in protecting and promoting children's mental health and well-being both in post-covid and into adulthood.

6.4 Theme 4- The Need for Equity

All the studied schools were already situated in highly diverse socio-economic areas, so there was a high need for equity among school stakeholders for holistic progress. The pandemic further increased socio-economic gaps, meaning that more significant measures were required to achieve equity during and after the pandemic. Issues of educational access and digital equity were at the forefront as schools had to provide access to remote education platforms (OECD, 2020). To foster equity in education, every student needs to be supported with the resources necessary to successfully access what is needed to learn and thrive in an educational setting (UNESCO, 2017). Supporting students from weak socio-economic backgrounds was needed. For example, the poverty level in S1 had increased by 10%. Considering that S3 was also situated in a low socio-economic community, the school leaders in this school ensured they provided practical and equitable solutions and continued to strive to support students to the greatest extent possible. However, leading in a poor community, the S3 leaders had to lower their expectations about the support parents can provide. As the headteacher summed up their approach:

We have had so many families who were not able to feed their families. They lost their jobs etc. And they might happen to be homeless, or they might be in bed and breakfasts. It's very hard for them. It's all down to the school really and it's this idea that you can't really say things like: they're not reading their books at home. We have to do all of that. We haven't got extra money for that, but we have to find a way to help some children to learn everything at school because at home it is not possible.

(Headteacher, School 3)

This long quote demonstrates how inequality increased during the pandemic crisis, especially for schools with a low socio-economic demographic. However, in common with many other schools, the teachers and school leaders here were phenomenal.

Their efforts not only provided continuity of education but also supported the community.

Subsequently, after addressing the primary needs of staff, students and families, issues of instructional equity came into focus. Even though one of the headteachers (S2) judged their online system as: “*a good electronic online system operating for the children*”, he wanted the children to improve further. Therefore, he used their existing relationship and partnership with other community leaders, local government, and businesses to add to the effectiveness of the overall school programme.

I spoke with a charity, and we got a grant for £12,000. We bought every single person a Chromebook so there was not one child in our school that could not access remote learning, not one. (Headteacher, School 2)

This had created a sense of accountability among everyone, included children, to be involved in the operation of school. The headteacher’s equity-focused leadership actions had also established an inclusive ethos and mindset where everyone was a leader (see Chapter 5). Likewise, a teacher in S3 said: “*here every single teacher is a middle leader as in subject leader.*” In addition to the need to develop the school’s leadership capacity, there was also a whole-school approach to the voices of everyone in the school community, including pupils, parents and school staff. With an acknowledgement that involving children in decision making can create a meaningful change and better student outcomes, as well as facilitating a sense of empowerment and inclusion (Harris, 2014; Mitra, 2006).

The children are the ones who have got the saying, in what should really happen, what really matters in their school. (Teacher, School 3)

Teacher 2 highlighted two priorities for aftermath of the pandemic that school leaders need to consider:

I think the way the leaders should be after this time is: a) how they introduce the change is going to change; and b) they will need to be a little bit more mindful of looking out for the emotions, the mental wellbeing of the teachers and really have that at the forefront.

(Teacher 2, School 3)

6.4.1 Sub-theme 1: Changes and Communication during Pandemic

However, when the Coronavirus pandemic broke out, the needs and priorities for schools shifted. From my observation, I realised that leading through uncertainty was daunting, school leaders had to deal with the immediate, while remaining focused on the future, to achieve the best possible teaching and learning environment, and outcomes for students. The deputy head in S3 pointed out their inclusive approach as:

We made sure not only to keep in touch with the senior leadership team; we kept in touch with all the staff.

(Deputy Head, School 3)

Equally, the school made check-ins on parents' wellbeing and informed them of the situation. One of the teachers confirmed:

It was just speaking to parents, calling, making sure we were doing the welfare calls just to provide them with a bit of feedback.

(Teacher, School 3)

We were phoning every family every week; how are you getting on; we can see whether you're online or not, if you have any problems.

(Headteacher 4, School 4)

While attending to the basic needs of staff, children and families, the headteacher needed to change her priorities and adapt quickly to increase stability- she outlined:

My priorities were shifted and mapped on to the urgency to get the remote learning to all of the children.

(Headteacher, School 3)

6.4.2 Sub-theme 2: Equity-driven Approach

I noted that leaders in all schools focussed on increasing the instructional capacity of teachers. To provide high-quality education options for all students, for example, the

headteacher (S4) took an equity-driven approach to distance learning. She stated: “*I really tried to keep things fair*”. She summed up the effort:

I divided the staff into two. Teams of teachers and teaching assistants and they did a week in school and a week at home. So, it was fairer and it's just looking after people. So, people feel they are not exploited; they are not less important because their job is different. (Headteacher, School 4)

Using terms such as ‘fair’ and ‘fairer’ as well as the act of ‘dividing into two’ refer to the concept of equality and fairness, which is about giving equal opportunity and treatment to everyone. Such an emphasis on inclusion through the school leadership can strength the experience of staff, students and parents and will help to transform the culture of school. The headteacher in S4, like S2, held the principles of equality at the heart of everything they did. For instance, the school’s value of ‘family’ transformed the school’s culture into an inclusive culture where the assistant head declared:

The reason why I love working in this school so much is because everyone matters, and it doesn't matter if you're Mrs (X) the cleaner who gets here at 6:00 o'clock in the morning and works for an hour and half you know mops out outside. Or Mr (Y) the caretaker who's from Poland who comes in at the weekend- everyone plays a role ... (Assistant Head, School 4)

It seemed like the school leaders strived in working towards equality by adjusting the system to meet the needs of other people. A prime example was when a teacher reinforced a need for school leaders to be responsive to staffs’ individual needs and abilities during the pandemic. She summarised:

Leaders should not judge people by their performance during that time. Because everyone performed differently; everyone reacted differently to Covid; everyone's home situation (I'm talking about staff) was different. So, you know when people are having performance management or any type of kind of professional development, their circumstances should be taken into consideration because they are humans. (Teacher, School 4)

In most ambiguous conditions such as the current crisis, people are more likely to make quick judgements which can lead to more bias. While I believe it is important to know how to recognise the efforts of some staff who are stepping up during this

challenging time without penalising those who have needed to lean out. It is, therefore, advisable for crisis leaders and managers to balance the need for flexibility that is specific and supportive to the individual's needs with the need to also be equitable to others. As such, the equity-driven approach of the headteacher (S4) was notable when she described her actionable response to Covid: "*We actually thought of people as people and how they feel.*" Furthermore, the headteacher also had to manage the issues of educational access and digital equity. In this regard, the assistant head described the situation:

There was something that I was very proud of: that we gave out over 100 laptops to the children of this school to make sure they can continue their studies.
(Assistant Head, School 4)

At the end, when I asked the teachers (S4) how to build a more equitable system for the future, they both recognised the need to provide extra support for teachers through access to more supporting staff.

6.5 Theme 5- Leadership during Pandemic

Across all six case study schools, headteachers were on the frontline during the pandemic, dealing with the emotional and educational needs of their staff, children, parents, and the whole school community. The Covid-19 lockdown forced the schools to operate virtually, unprecedented for the school leaders and teachers because they had no experience managing virtual schools and a history of delivering education online. This was more challenging for schools such as S1, where the headteacher relied heavily on visible identity in the past.

In the lockdowns, the MAT network told me I had to stay at home even though I didn't want to. So, I was a virtual Headteacher. So, I had to rely on others to probably do more of what I would have done if I was in school- that was a strange feeling!
(Headteacher, School 1)

It seems that the headteacher (S1) had to adapt her leadership style to be more collaborative because of limitations set by the pandemic, as well as her health condition during the pandemic which forced her to lead virtually from her home. In this way, the headteacher had to become a virtual ‘coaching leader’ for her two newly appointed assistant heads, and as a result, the leadership and responsibilities were delegated to the SLTs.

I think I've been allowed to work more collaboratively during the Covid-19 purely because of my health condition. (Headteacher, School 1)

The phrase “*I’ve been allowed*” can refer to the centrally managed academy management, which expects staff to follow rules and procedures. Even though the headteacher realised that collaborative leadership helped the SLTs to grow as leaders during the pandemic, she still insisted on a centralised leadership approach.

The fact that they had to do stuff and make decisions without checking on me because I wasn't here to do that, but I think, you know me, I'm pretty much as I am. I don't think I have changed- I don't think Covid-19 changed me, no! (Headteacher, School 1)

I've had to take the dictator style a little bit with Covid-19 rules and restrictions around safety and it has to be, this is what the risk assessment says, sorry this is what we're doing you know you are employed here; we've got a job to do, I'm sorry we can't do it like that ...

(Headteacher, School 1)

An assistant head, acting as a headteacher in the absence of the headteacher, conceived the role as a huge responsibility. On the other hand, she believed her new responsibility had made her grow in strength and learn leadership skills. She understood her style at the start of the pandemic as: “decisive because there wasn't that much time to kind of consult with staff”. (Assistant Head, School 1)

Subsequently, when the schools reopened, she described her leadership style as a “*pacesetting style*” to help her support the school in catching up with the learning loss. Gradually, moving throughout the pandemic, her style became: “*less pacesetting and being able to return to a kind of more normal style of leadership*” (Assistant Head 1,

School 1). In the end, the assistant head appreciated that the pandemic had given her a chance to rediscover the softer skills, “*the human side*” of leadership. While realising that she needed to make a balance between both the harder and softer skills of leadership if she wanted to be a successful leader:

I can't just be like a bulldog, you know, tearing through. I need to make sure I still have that humility and like the human side.

(Assistant Head, School1)

Furthermore, the importance of feedback in the school's communication strategy was also recognised by the headteacher as an important component of managing the challenges of remote learning: “*I tried to let people have a voice. Even if we couldn't agree to whatever the feedback was*” (Headteacher, School 1). Interestingly, the headteacher suggested that the pandemic has changed the role of teachers in her school because “*they are more and more moving the curriculum forward*” (Headteacher, School 1). As a result, these changes have given opportunities to the leadership of this school to move away from being just an operational manager, engaged with the operational level, to a strategic leader- the headteacher confirmed:

Now, I'm having more and more time to do the big picture thinking because I'm not having to help that teacher do that, this teacher do that, because people are just doing it. They are taking initiatives and leading themselves.

(Headteacher, School 1)

In addition to focusing on strategic issues and making strategic decisions, the headteacher had a renewed recognition of the importance of the collective wisdom of the educational community. She described her experience as, “*people learnt something and brought it to school to share it with others*” (Headteacher, School 1). Moreover, the headteacher at S6 in which was his first academic year at this school,

described his leadership style during the crisis as: *“I quite like to share the whole picture.”* Additionally, he specified:

All leaders are not like this. There are leaders that keep all the information to themselves for whatever reason, it's not good or bad, it's just this that we are different. People keep the information to themselves; they don't want to burden people with information ... So, mine is I quite like to share openly with everybody.
(Headteacher, School 6)

Moreover, in other schools such as S5, distributive leadership appeared to be the headteacher's (S5) leadership style when she said: *“I very much welcome distributive leadership (DL), that's my style.”* She explained:

What I mean by that is making sure I entail other leaders in school to take on responsibility and to drive things and not to micromanage people and to trust in my staff and that they'll be able to do this.

(Headteacher, School 5)

Though this was in contradiction with the way in which the headteacher did not allow the staff to participate in this research. Particularly, the headteacher recognised DL as the main leadership style for the times of change and crisis. She suggested:

So, I think distributive leadership works very well when the schools are in trouble which my school technically is but also in times of crisis like the global pandemic. But sometimes you might use elements of authoritative when you need to. Say there is a major safeguarding issue so you might default to that style but that's not really my style.

(Headteacher, School 5)

Moreover, a reflective style appeared to be another element of the headteacher, not only as a solution in responding to the Ofsted action plans, but also to provide support and manage the crisis. The headteacher suggested: *“I would say definitely in a time of crisis, it's also about being a reflective practitioner”* (Headteacher, School 5). The headteacher's reflective style, as will be mentioned throughout the coming sections, can be characterised by three skills such as self-awareness, monitoring, as well as

adaptable and flexible responses (see Figure 6.2, which was suggested by the Headteacher, School 5).

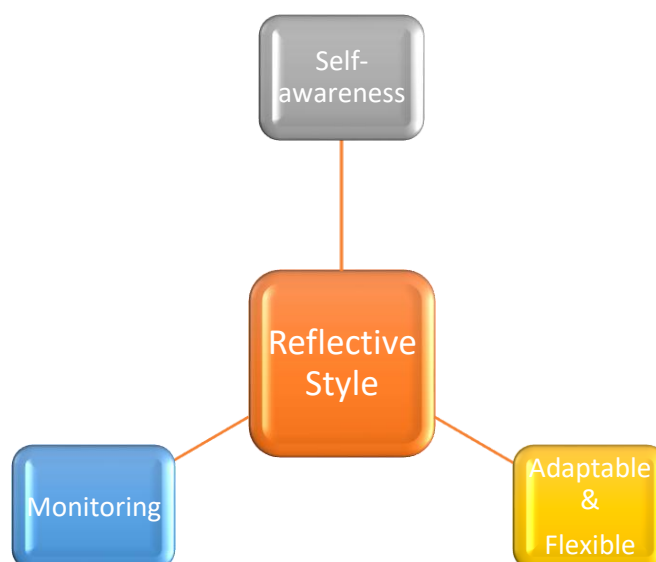


Figure 6.2: The School Leader's Reflective Style (Created by the Researcher)

Drawing on the above figure, the headteacher especially emphasised the need for being an adaptable and flexible leader and explained:

I guess this is another value and attitude of leadership. It's always being adaptable and flexible because you just don't know what's going to happen. So, you always got to have that, always got to have that. You've always got to have those values and attitudes. (Headteacher, School 5)

Considering these two attributes (adaptability and flexible) of leadership are closely associated with the value of resilience (McLeod and Dulskey, 2021), the headteacher highlighted:

In a time of crisis, you adapt quickly, and you reflect with your team. So, if things need to change very quickly or you need different eyes to look at risk assessment that we do that. (Headteacher, School 5)

This suggests that being a resilient leader can help to withstand or recover quickly from unexpected or complex conditions and adapt to change. In this way, the

headteacher's values-driven crisis responses could only occur if she followed the school's vision to be reflective, encourage adaptive and flexible practices, and prepare staff, students, and wider school community to be resilient. Moreover, the headteacher at S4 described her leadership style and behaviour as:

I knew at the beginning, I needed a crisis management approach, and, in that mode, you understand that you have to take decisions with limited information. So, that's a mind shift of knowing that you will not have enough information, but you have to take decisions based on what you know. But then also be very light on your feet and flexible and be clear about the fact that you may have to change a decision as new information comes to light.

(Headteacher, School 4)

In the same vein, this required the headteacher at S3, to be an adaptive leader and to draw on different skills and types of leadership- where she appreciated the experience since it has helped her “*to become a more assertive leader.*” Similarly, the deputy head thought that Covid has changed them for the better:

I think it has made people more resilient especially when it comes to technology, and I think it has given our schools time to think about where we can grow.

(Deputy Head, School 3)

These findings suggest that the pause created by the pandemic gave schools the time and opportunity to reflect on their practice and rebuild a more effective system. The headteacher at S3 identified her leadership style as an integrated form of leadership and stated:

Before Covid I'd like to think that I had a style that is more about coaching, collaboration and collegial approach. Where I tried to get people on board and obviously, we go with what we decided to go with- that seemed to work really well for me.

(Headteacher 3, School 3)

In parallel, a teacher from this school, also considered the leadership practice as a collaborative process. Particularly, she identified the headteacher's style as “coaching” and mentioned:

Our headteacher is very big on coaching as well as she has individually coached quite a few of us and then training us to then up-coach other people as well. So, that coaching culture, and it's a strategy too.

(Teacher 1, School 3)

It seemed like coaching was a predominant leadership style and school improvement strategy for the headteacher to move the school forward. Nevertheless, when Covid came along, the headteacher perceived the situation very different and explained her focus as:

You're looking at health and safety. So, the problem there is that you're talking about peoples' lives- your staff, your families. And you have a slightly different reaction to things.

(Headteacher 3, School 3)

Apart from being adaptive to adjust to uncertainties, she shared her feelings and added: *"I felt like I was in an army- going into a battle a little bit with the Covid."*

Moreover, she elaborated to clarify her approach:

It wasn't about going around and trying to have a style which is about collaboration. It was actually, meeting the senior leaders, we need to do this- more command and control ... I was under a huge pressure, and I found myself telling (them)- just do this.

(Headteacher 3, School 3)

This kind of decisive approach was adapted in the first lockdown when the schools foregrounded health, safety, and wellbeing before curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. But as the time went on, the headteacher noted that their priority *"shifted and mapped on to get the remote learning to all of the children"* (Headteacher 3, School 3). Like other schools, they took time to identify a coherent and long-term plan of how they would change their paper learning packs to online remote learning. But because the school already had the capability of technology such as using Microsoft Teams before the pandemic, so the deputy head found the remote learning *"as an easy shift for staff."* Drawing on the data, the S3 coaching leadership style can be presented as below in Figure 6.3.

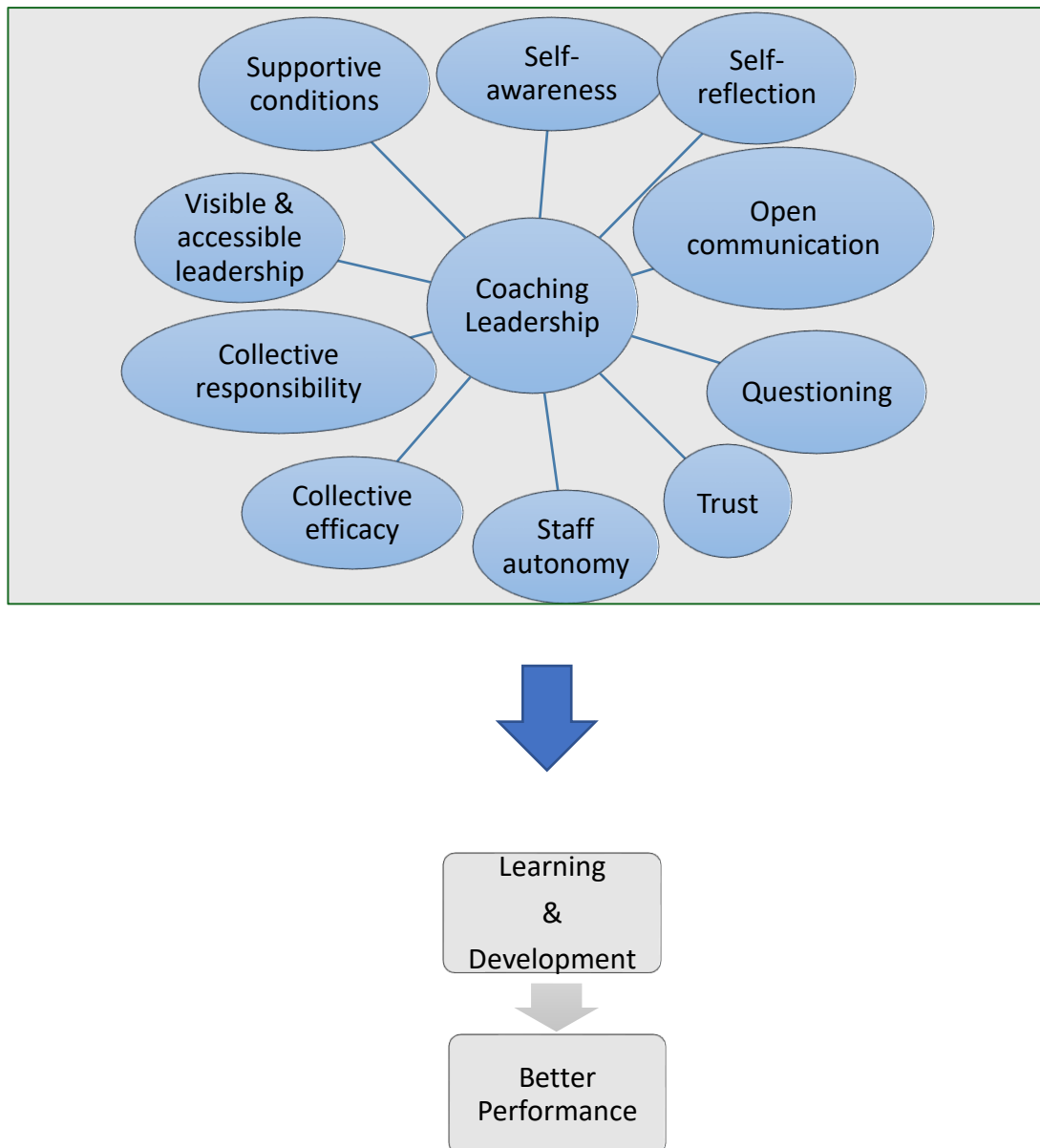


Figure 6.3: The School's Coaching Leadership (Created by the Researcher)

As a result of this coaching approach and collaborative culture, other values surfaced in the school's crisis response process, including honesty, consistency, openness, authenticity, empathy, and trustworthiness. At the end, one of the teachers in S3 highlighted two priorities for the aftermath of the pandemic that school leaders need to consider:

I think the way the leaders should be after this time is: a) how they introduce the change is going to change; and b) they will need to be a little bit more

mindful of looking out for the emotions, the mental wellbeing of the teachers and really have that at the forefront. (Teacher, School 3)

6.5.1 Sub-theme 1: Leadership in the 2nd lockdown

Subsequently, in the second lockdown, school leaders began to practice their instructional role more effectively. In the case of the headteacher at S4, her instructional role was hugely expanded due to recruiting a new assistant head in midst of the pandemic. One of the two teachers from this school summed up part of the assistant head's role as follows:

He [the assistant head] would look through videos and have a look at the videos that we're doing for approval ... when he came to the school, he did an inset as well on kind of this is what lessons should look like. So, he was kind of taking the lead on the online videos. (Teacher 1, School 4)

Furthermore, the school established a clear system about the expectations from teachers. One of the teachers appreciated the effort and explained:

In regard to actual planning and everything it was very clear what was expected from you, which was really good, and you know it wasn't just pointless messing around ... It was more just like; on this date this needs to be here; this is how you can do it; here's a set of documents that you can use to help scaffold that in your own teams ... (Teacher 2, School 4)

Although it can be argued that this kind of step-by-step instruction may hinder teacher's creativity and autonomy, teachers in the participant schools found it useful during this complex time. Setting the stage for capacity building of the school was continued with clarifying and embracing a mindset of acceptance and support. The assistant head (S4) said: *"we did the best that we could in a very difficult situation."* In doing so, he claimed that they reduced the workloads by: *"ensuring that we didn't have a marking policy and loads of unnecessary meetings"* (Assistant Head, School 4). In addition, like S2, schedules were simplified in an effort for shorter teaching hours, as the assistant head described the approach:

We made sure that the days were broken up. The teachers had a lot of time in their day to ensure that they had time for breaks; they had time for comfort breaks into rests and things like that.

(Assistant Head, School 4)

These small changes happened to maximise efficiency of teachers and students. However, they encountered “*all manner of technological problems*” but, as the assistant head reinforced, the SLT used role modelling to coach the teachers through- he summed up part of the process:

Well, I will show you how to do that; I'll show you how to upload videos to a computer so the children can access from home.

(Assistant Head, School 4)

Moreover, in the case of the headteacher in S6, he believed in shared leadership and accounting for being transparent and open to others' ideas. However, I noted the anxiety from the pandemic affected his risk perception and made his sharing become oversharing. For example, the headteacher explained part of his experience when he showed disagreement about the current conditions and disputed team members' beliefs:

*I was moaning a lot. I was frustrated with what was going on. I should have kept that to myself, that was my own personal view, that was my own personal feeling, my own personal thoughts... I should have kept quiet and just respected that everybody has got their rights to think and believe what they want. Staff were in agreement with everything because I'm in a difficult position, **I'm the power, I'm the boss**. So, **they have to listen, they have to listen**, I'm aware of that. So, they won't necessarily challenge me because you don't want to challenge **the boss**, right? - and I put myself in; **I'm the boss** ...*

(Headteacher, School 6)

Which is a wonderful approach outside of a crisis but in a crisis sometimes leaders should keep their thoughts to themselves. This invokes the idea of Contingency Leadership, the right leader at the right time (Fiedler, 1964). Although the whole process seemed to be like a learning experience for the headteacher when he showed

regret for revealing his vulnerability to others, yet I can draw two interpretations from the long quote above. Firstly, due to new initiatives and changes in the school, the headteacher was under pressure and not sure how much of his worries he should reveal. Also, he did not have any kind of wellbeing support, therapist or coaching experience like School 4. This willingness in leaders to be open and honest, even if it makes them vulnerable, is important because it can build trust and improve relationships. But if people exaggerate, the opposite can happen and they end up completely undermining themselves (Fosslien and West Duffy, 2019). Secondly, there was a contradiction between what the headteacher said and what he did in practice. For example, using terms such as “*I’m the power*,” “*I’m the boss*,” and “*they have to listen*” shows authority and hierarchy and defines the headteacher as a manager rather than a shared leader, but he insisted:

My leadership style is very open ... I'd like to share everything, pretty much. If everybody knows that as a leader, they can then grow internal leaders because they can see the model that I think is very successful. So, we will have groups of teams where one person leads the entire team and I pick the best person to lead that team. They share with everybody the way they're doing things and they are interchangeable. So, I can promote from within, and we keep sharing best practice. So, my style of leadership is that sharing of information with a purpose. (Headteacher, School 6)

As a result, this kind of hierarchy shared leadership style of the headteacher can be diagrammed as below in Figure 6.4:



Figure 6.4: The School's Shared Leadership (Created by the Researcher)

As such, all these values-driven crisis responses could only occur if leaders shared information, modelled and encouraged best practices, and empowered staff from within.

6.5.2 Sub-theme 2: Reliance on School Vision and Values

Leadership in all six schools seemed to rely on their schools' vision and values to navigate and stay focused during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, S1 relied on its values of Exploration, Endeavour, and Excellence (S1 website), and other schools took a similar approach. Similarly, adopting a values-driven approach to crisis management resulted in actionable responses to the Covid-19 pandemic founded on the S2's values of relationship, flexibility, connectivity, collective wisdom, collaboration, empathy, moral purpose, and adaptive risk-taking:

I think in the pandemic a school and school leader have to rely on the things that are second nature. The things that have been well established, well

embedded within the school and you know as a leader and I think as a school your true culture, your true climate, your true ethos comes through and because I've been at this school for quite a long time, we had a long time to establish those things.

(Headteacher, School 2)

Moreover, the actionable responses of S3 to Covid were founded on the values named above, such as relationship, reflection, resilient, resourceful, and collective responsibility. The deputy head described their approach as:

A calm and well-mannered approach; not rushing into things. That was probably our kind of mantra because we didn't want to be reactive.

(Deputy Head, School 3)

Another school's (S6) ethos was learning without limits and achieving together. With this philosophy, the value of quality first teaching (QFT) was at the heart of the school, emphasising high-quality, inclusive teaching for all children in a class. Nevertheless, the findings from this school indicate that it was challenging for them to perform this due to the pressures in the early days of the pandemic which caused the uncertainty and stress about how to continue to provide pastoral care to vulnerable children and their families. One of the assistant heads from this school explained:

We have a number of vulnerable families, a number of children who we really have to keep track of, we want to see them every day, we want to make sure that they are well, and they're being looked after and when they're at home in lockdown we don't have access to seeing them in the same way that we do when they're coming to school.

(Assistant Head, School 6)

In addition, S5 used UNICEF Right Respecting school to underpin their school values including diversity, opportunity, resilience, moral values, empathy, respect, and self-belief. Their goal was:

To help the children to value education as a life-long process. Inspire a love of learning within all children and help them to achieve their full potential and to acquire the concepts, knowledge, skills and attitudes that will equip them for life in a fast-changing world.

(Headteacher, School 5)

Moreover, School 4, like the other schools took time to identify a coherent and long-term plan of how they would approach the work for distance learning. As such, attention was paid to other school values like “flourishing” (S4). This helped the headteacher to set their “*expectations about online learning*” (Headteacher, School 4) and enhanced both teacher and student learning. Thus, despite these hardships, I realised adhering to the school’s values and goals seemed to help teachers do their best to provide children with the same productive learning that they would in the classroom. These efforts by schools to provide additional resources to help pupils and their parents can create a sense of belonging to the school community and also provide an opportunity for parents to engage more with learning and the school. This was particularly demonstrated by the parents' use of the online learning platform during the virtual workshops (S1). According to the headteacher (S1), the school's support during difficult times strengthened the parents' overall relationship and sense of belonging with the school. This was evident from a quote by the headteacher describing to me the parents visit to the school after the lockdown:

They [parents] were saying they didn't realise the level of work their children were doing in school until the lockdown. (Headteacher, School 1)

These findings offer a detailed account of how school leaders navigated the complexities of the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrating both the challenges they faced and the strategies they employed to ensure continuity and equity in education. To fully understand the broader significance of these findings, it is essential to analyse their implications for leadership practice, policy, and future research.

6.6 Analysis and Implications

In synthesising the findings from this chapter, it becomes evident that the leadership practices during the Covid-19 pandemic reflect a dynamic interplay between resilience, adaptability, and community engagement. The challenges of uncertainty, communication, and equity underscored the need for leaders to transcend traditional models and adopt innovative approaches to school management. The emergence of adaptive leadership highlights its critical role in crisis contexts. Leaders demonstrated flexibility in addressing disruptions to learning, fostering teacher collaboration, and maintaining stakeholder trust. These practices align with the Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI) model introduced in this thesis, emphasizing the importance of equity-driven strategies to support marginalised communities during crises. Similarly, the findings reinforce the significance of community-engaged leadership in bridging gaps between schools and families, particularly in diverse socio-economic contexts. Building on the Holistic Approach to Student Success (HASS) framework, which I have developed as part of this research, the implications for educational policy include prioritising inclusive practices that address both academic and socio-emotional needs. This framework emerged from the data analysis and case study findings, synthesizing insights on leadership practices, student support structures, and school improvement strategies.

The implications extend beyond immediate crisis responses. By embedding adaptive and equity-focused strategies into leadership development programmes, schools can cultivate resilience and preparedness for future challenges. Policymakers must consider these findings to inform reforms that balance accountability with the holistic well-being of school communities.

These insights not only validate the conceptual model proposed in Chapter 3 but also extend its applicability, demonstrating the necessity of context-sensitive, collaborative, and innovative leadership approaches. This analysis offers a roadmap for integrating research findings into actionable strategies for sustainable school improvement.

6.7 Summary

In examining the responses from six diverse schools amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, several key themes emerged, shedding light on the challenges and adaptive measures undertaken by school leadership. Across all schools, regular communication and transparent decision-making were highlighted as critical factors in navigating the uncertainties of the pandemic. School leaders recognised the importance of keeping stakeholders informed and involved in decision-making processes to maintain trust and cohesion within the school community.

Moreover, the need for adaptability and flexibility in instructional methods and leadership styles became evident as schools grappled with rapidly changing circumstances. School leaders demonstrated agility in adjusting to new learning environments and supporting teachers and students through innovative approaches. Ensuring the well-being of both teachers and students emerged as a central concern for school leaders. Mental health support for teachers was prioritised to sustain morale and prevent burnout. Similarly, efforts were made to provide emotional support for students and foster social connections in virtual learning settings. The findings also highlighted the acceleration of digital transformation in education. The integration of technology became central to teaching and learning, prompting schools to adopt digital learning platforms and provide training and support for both teachers and students. However, the pandemic also underscored the critical need for equitable access and

resources, as leaders worked to address disparities among students. The **Analysis and Implications** section revealed the broader significance of these findings, emphasizing the importance of equity-driven leadership, community engagement, and resilience in navigating crises. The emergent themes of adaptive and community-engaged leadership extended the theoretical and practical understanding of leadership practices during the pandemic. These insights provide actionable strategies for educational leaders to address systemic inequalities and build capacity for future challenges. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, schools maintained strong partnerships with parents and the wider community. Collaborative efforts ensured the continuity of education and provided additional support to vulnerable students and families. While each school faced unique challenges and employed context-specific strategies, common themes of communication, adaptability, and well-being emerged as foundational to effective leadership during the pandemic. The findings suggest a nuanced understanding of leadership practices, grounded in communication, flexibility, and empathy, as essential for navigating crises and promoting school improvement in the post-pandemic era. This perspective offers an alternative approach to school improvement that emphasizes social capital, rather than the competitive and standardisation-focused framework of New Public Management reforms.

Having detailed the key findings and implications of my research, I now turn to a comprehensive discussion of these results. In the following chapter, I will critically analyse their significance within the broader context of existing literature and address potential limitations and future directions suggested by this study.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesizes the study's findings to explore how school leadership contributed to school improvement before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The discussion connects these findings to the research objectives, conceptual models (instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership), and broader implications for educational leadership. Key themes include leadership adaptability, teacher empowerment, and systemic resilience. Reflexivity, discussed in the Methodology Chapter, underpins the analysis, ensuring the findings are rigorously interpreted. Participant feedback enriches the discussion, providing practical validation of the themes. The chapter concludes with reflections on the study's broader contributions to leadership theory and practice.

The two preceding chapters presented the six case studies comprising the research component of this thesis. Their findings were presented within each case study chapter, exploring in depth key themes and issues emerging from the data. In this chapter I pull together the discussion of findings across the case studies, drawing from the literature review and theoretical framework chapters to inform an analysis, and discuss the implications of the findings and their potential impact.

The original aim of this thesis was to explore the role of school leadership in driving school improvement before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. By addressing theoretical gaps in understanding leadership practices, particularly in complex and crisis contexts, this study sheds light on how instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership evolved in response to systemic challenges. I intend to uncover

how school leaders in six primary schools in London adapted their strategies to maintain equity, collaboration, and resilience while navigating crises. Five research questions guided the process of discovery including, firstly, which forms of educational leadership are more likely to contribute to school improvement; secondly, how do educational leaders contribute to school improvement; thirdly, what is the role of teachers in school improvement; fourthly, what is the contribution of staff professional development for school improvement; and finally, what was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on school leadership?

Initially, I designed this study to examine the effective leadership practice of quality school leaders within a number of outstanding primary schools. It was set out to understand what common factors, if any, could be derived from successful schools. Of particular interest was if there were any leadership styles or behaviours that could be successfully shared, and then concluded with a series of recommendations, both for school leaders and policymakers. However, with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the study got a new direction with a shift in the research design and methodology. But considering the disruption as an opportunity, I determined to know about the phenomenon of leadership during crisis, in which there are a limited number of empirical studies conducted to date. This divided the project into two phases. Phase one, in the pre-Covid time, with a focus on the leadership practice of schools in the context of educational reforms of New Public Management (NPM). Phase two, during the Covid-19 time, to understand whether this crisis changed the way schools behaved, and if so, what forms of educational leadership emerged.

Four key findings emerged from the findings across the case studies that I have used as a means of structuring the analysis of the final chapters. These findings include:

1. Leadership for learning
2. Creating conditions for learning
3. Teacher leadership
4. Self-led and ongoing professional development

A further two dominant findings emerged across the analysis of the case studies that revealed a need to redefine the concept of school leadership and how school improvement should be taken forward in post Covid. Those themes are returned to within the final conclusion chapter to present a new model of school leadership and school improvement strategy proposed by the findings of this thesis. It is acknowledged that similar findings have been submitted by other educators (e.g., Groves, Hobbs, and West-Burnham, 2017; Groves and West-Burnham, 2020), however, the research in this thesis makes a clear departure from them and much of the research within the field to date. It is unique in terms of the research design and the scope through analysing and comparing the performance of school leadership in two different timepoints, before the Covid-19 crisis and during it. This can therefore add something new to the existing knowledge in the field of educational leadership and school improvement and as such should be considered a strength of this research.

7.1.1 Revisiting the Conceptual Model and Implications

The conceptual model presented in Chapter 3 served as a guiding framework for this research, integrating instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership theories to explore their collective impact on school improvement. This model provided a structured lens through which the relationships between leadership practices, teacher development, and systemic school improvement could be examined. By grounding the research in this framework, I sought to address the overarching

research objectives, particularly in understanding how leadership evolved across stable pre-pandemic contexts and the unprecedented challenges of the Covid-19 crisis. Reflecting on the findings, this section highlights the extent to which the model was validated, identifies new insights that emerged, and discusses the broader implications for educational leadership. These reflections also lay the groundwork for the leadership and school improvement frameworks proposed in the conclusion.

The findings of this research strongly confirmed several elements of the conceptual model. The integration of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership theories proved essential in explaining how school leaders influence teaching and learning quality, foster professional development, and sustain systemic change. Instructional leadership emerged as a critical driver of teaching and learning improvements, with headteachers leveraging classroom observation and feedback to enhance teacher effectiveness. These findings align with existing literature, including Robinson (2007) and Hallinger (2003), and validate the model's emphasis on instructional practices. Transformational leadership was evident in the motivational and inspiring roles of leaders, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, as leaders encouraged innovation and resilience, supporting staff morale and fostering a shared vision amid uncertainty. Distributed leadership further highlighted the importance of collaboration, enabling schools to leverage collective expertise and build resilience. This was particularly evident in schools that adopted teacher-led initiatives like lesson study and professional learning communities.

Two significant themes emerged from the findings that extended the conceptual model's scope. First, community-engaged leadership was identified as a crucial factor in supporting student success. Building strong relationships with parents and the wider

community was found to foster trust and shared accountability, particularly in diverse urban contexts where schools act as hubs for broader social support. Participating schools demonstrated this through initiatives such as outreach programmes and partnerships with local organisations, underscoring the importance of community engagement in leadership practices. Second, adaptive leadership was identified as pivotal during the Covid-19 pandemic. Leaders who exhibited flexibility, innovation, and problem-solving were able to navigate challenges effectively, maintaining a focus on staff well-being and student outcomes. These findings expand on existing literature, including Sarkar and Clegg (2021), and provide unique insights into adaptive leadership within primary school settings.

The findings underscore the importance of a flexible conceptual model that aligns with the interpretivist paradigm. While the model guided the research, it did not predetermine interpretations, allowing emergent themes like community-engaged and adaptive leadership to enrich the framework. This highlights the dynamic nature of leadership in education, particularly in crisis contexts. The findings suggest the need to expand traditional leadership frameworks to incorporate adaptability and community engagement as central components. These additions reflect the increasingly complex and interconnected challenges faced by schools. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for school leaders, policymakers, and leadership development programmes. Fostering adaptive leadership through targeted professional development can better prepare leaders for future crises. Emphasizing community engagement can enhance trust and collaboration among stakeholders, strengthening school-family partnerships in diverse contexts.

The insights from this research contribute to developing new leadership and school improvement models that prioritise adaptability, equity, and collaboration. These models are explored further in the conclusion (Chapter 8), where I propose practical frameworks to address systemic challenges and foster sustainable improvement in education.

7.2 Leadership for Learning

7.2.1 *School Leadership in pre-Covid Time*

Prior to the pandemic, in this project I studied two different outstanding schools within the context of NPM. One academy school part of MAT (School 1) and one maintained community school (School 2). It was important to gain insights into the practice of these quality school leaders and learn about their leadership styles and actionable responses to the educational reform of NPM. To date, although much has been written about the importance and intentions of this performance-based policy, however, according to educators such as Pashiardis and Brauckmann (2018), little empirical research has been undertaken to analyse what school leaders, in particular headteachers do or prioritise in this context. Therefore, the theoretical framework that I suggested for this thesis included three leadership models of Instructional, Transformational, and Distributed theories grounded in the philosophy of school improvement as being about people improvement, to provide a solid foundation for understanding effective leadership practices within schools. These theories emphasise different aspects of leadership, such as promoting teacher development, fostering a shared vision, and distributing leadership responsibilities across the organisation. Acknowledging these leadership theories were popular in the current

literature, I found them as suitable models to answer the research questions of this thesis.

Furthermore, the relevance of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership features during the Covid-19 pandemic was also underscored. The adaptive curriculum and instructional decision-making illustrated the instructional leadership, focusing on meeting students' educational needs during the crisis. Transformational leadership was highlighted by leaders inspiring and motivating their staff, fostering resilience and maintaining a shared vision. The distributed leadership approach was evident through shared responsibilities and coordination, ensuring collective efforts in navigating the challenges of the pandemic. These aspects demonstrate how different elements of leadership were essential in responding to the crisis, bringing together instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership in a unified approach.

From the findings, it became clear that the leadership practices before the Covid-19 pandemic varied significantly across schools, reflecting different applications of instructional leadership. In **School 1**, the academy school, leadership was hierarchical, emphasizing accountability and staff compliance within a defined structure. This approach created stability but limited teacher autonomy. In contrast, **School 2, the community school**, adopted a distributed instructional leadership model, fostering collaboration and shared decision-making. The headteacher noted, "Fostering trust and staff well-being through distributed practices laid the groundwork for navigating subsequent challenges during the pandemic." These contrasting approaches highlight the adaptability of instructional leadership, aligning with its focus on optimising learning environments while addressing staff needs.

In my observations at the academy, I noticed a strong reliance on principal instructional leadership and rigorous performance monitoring, which reflected the principles of NPM standards. This top-down approach emphasised accountability and efficiency, with a focus on achieving measurable outcomes through standardised practices. The instructional role of school leaders made them involved with strategic planning for the school where, as Hallinger and Murphy (1986) confirmed (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1), their focus was on analysing data, identifying areas for growth, setting priorities, and developing action plans to address identified needs of teachers and students. Conversely, at School 2, the community school, I witnessed more collaborative approaches to leadership and professional development. Operating as a professional learning community, the school fostered teacher agency and collaboration through practices like lesson study. This decentralised approach prioritised teacher autonomy and collective learning, challenging traditional NPM standards. Suggesting a distributed type of instructional leadership (Ng, 2019), in which teachers lead their own learning and the instructional programme of school. As a result, I identified several distinctive change strategies within the practice of these schools, which placed each school on two sides of the NPM spectrum- School 1 with a high degree of NPM impact and School 2 with a power to overcome the policy. Figure 7.1 below is a comparative model that I generated from the data of these first two schools.

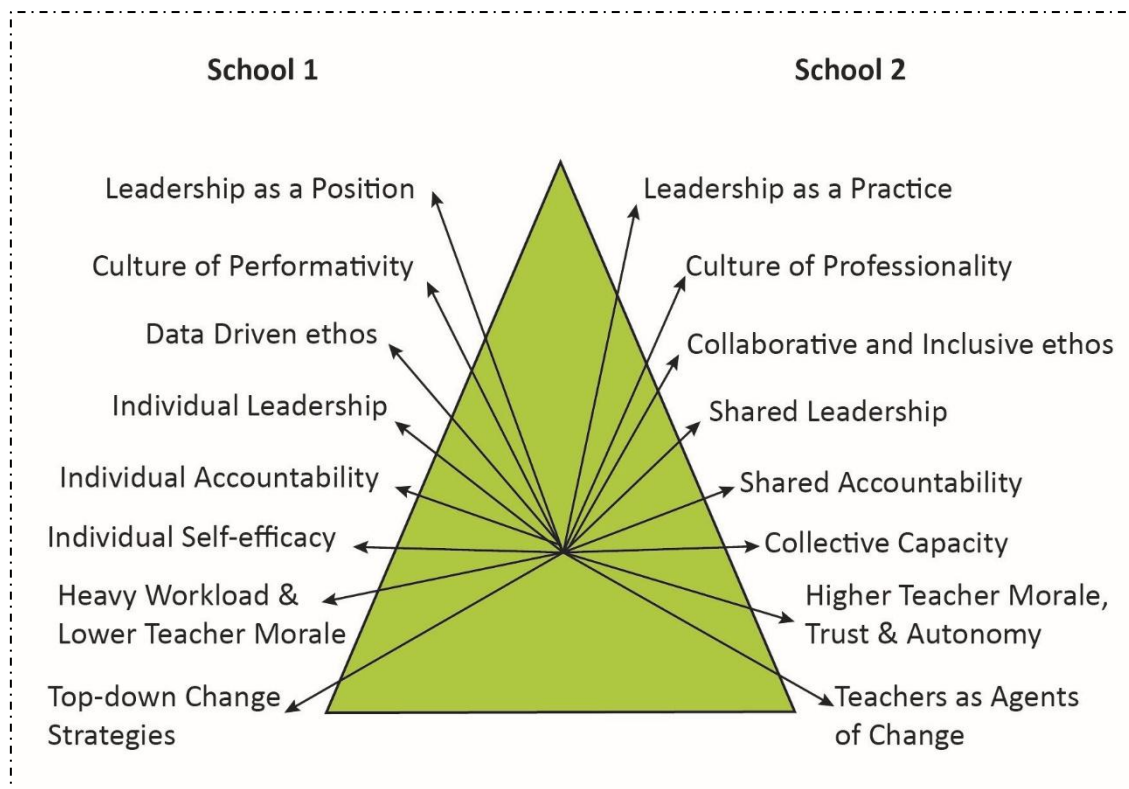


Figure 7.1: The NPM Spectrum (Created by the Researcher)

Particularly, comparing the leadership styles of these two schools against the three suggested leadership models by this thesis, the findings from both schools showed traces of most of the leadership theories and the importance of staff professional development. However, School 2 which was a community school had more collaborative approaches and teacher agency. They were a professional learning community and using lesson study to improve teaching. While School 1, the academy, relied on principal instructional leadership heavily and monitored the performance of teachers rigorously. The centralised context of School 1, influenced by the impact of NPM, demanded the role of school leaders to be implementing external imperatives forced by the government and their sponsor organisation (MAT). The position of such schools between the government and their sponsor organisation have caused Hargreaves *et al.* (2018) to name the leadership model of these rule driven schools as 'Leading in the Middle' (LiM). Where there is strong direction from government, along

with marketplace competition for schools, attention to some kind of middle seeks to plug policy implementation gaps, enforce compliance, and head off resistance to change. In this view, the middle improves efficiency and performance. It does so by breaking down the miscommunication that can plague large school systems. The middle moves things up, down and around. However, this middle does not have much driving force, momentum or identity of its own. It conveys others' messages rather than exercising leadership on its own (ibid. 2018).

With regard to transformational leadership style, while I noted a top-down approach to vision setting in School 1, the headteacher and her leadership team empowered staff through role modelling (Sergiovanni, 2019), visibility, and promoting the practice of quality assurance. Describing, the instructional work of headteacher 1 and her leadership team to be focused on a managerial aim of greater efficiency characterised by managerialist tasks such as classroom observation, performance management, and target setting regimes. Therefore, I identified managerial leadership (Bush, Bell and Middlewood, 2019). to be the main leadership style of School 1. However, whilst it can be discredited as a bureaucratic approach to school organisation, it is an essential component of successful leadership for supporting teaching and learning and its relationship with instructional leadership (IL) or 'leadership for learning'- the new label of IL (Ng, 2019). Nevertheless, as the data showed, the instructional leadership of School 1 only involved leadership team members as a sole source of influence, expertise and knowledge with a central focus on managing an instructional programme. Ng (2019) describes this model as heroic/principal instructional leadership which can invite criticism for being overly hierarchical and centralised.

In terms of distributed role of school leaders, although headteacher 1 and her leadership team called their leadership style distributed and collaborative. Yet, it can

be argued that their delegation style was more related to a managerial style. Because the authority structure of this school promoted by the NPM policy provides a barrier to the successful introduction and implementation of distributed leadership (Wilkins, 2020).

In contrast, School 2 was a maintained community school which challenged the NPM policy and operated differently to School 1. The data indicated that the entrepreneurial skills and behaviours of headteacher 2 involved creating their own privately organised system to fill the gap of the support system. Hence, increasing their leadership influences on areas such as decision-making where the school could not decide autonomously (Pashiardis and Brauckmann 2018, Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1). With reference to transformational leadership style, I recognised the transformational work of headteacher 2 through adapting the change model of '*Age of learning, wellbeing and identity*' (Hargreaves, Shirley and Wangia, Bacon and D'Angelo, 2018) into the practice of School 2. With its central focus on learning, this adapted change model supported the headteacher to restructure the school internally through setting clear roles, goals, and responsibilities among the staff. This was important in developing a safe environment where teachers knew what was expected of them thus enhancing the level of their satisfaction and organisational commitment (OECD, 2009). The data also revealed that headteacher 2 was an effective change leader because he had successfully transformed the school from a good Ofsted rated school (2014) to an outstanding school (2019) (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3, Table 5.4). Regarding the instructional style of the headteacher, Pashiardis and Brauckmann (2018) recognise this form of leadership as the baseline of effective school leadership (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.1). Though, I perceived the conception of instructional leadership in School

2 to be different from School 1. Here, headteacher 2 exercised indirect instructional leadership, where Ng (2019) calls it team/distributed instructional leadership.

In addition to the practice of distributed instructional leadership and change or visionary leadership in School 2, leading from the middle (LfM) was another dominant leadership model identified by the school leaders emphasising the existence of distributed leadership practice in this school. Worth noting, leading from the middle is different from the idea of leading in the middle (LiM) as practiced in School 1, I defined earlier in this chapter. The strategy of leading from the middle, as I will discuss in the coming sections, was an aspect of the adapted change model in School 2. Considering this strategy had promoted the idea of teacher leadership in School 2, I view the model as a whole idea of trust with the headteacher acting as a servant leader (Greenleaf, 1970) to facilitate, serve, and trust his teachers in knowing what is really important both for their students and for themselves. Moreover, the behaviours of headteacher 2 displayed other related characteristics such as democratic and distributed. Suggesting that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to school leadership. Both NPM-driven and teacher-led approaches can be effective, depending on the school's context and leadership style.

7.2.2 Crisis Leadership

Subsequently, with the advent of Covid-19, I made follow-up visits to these two schools. Firstly, to understand the crisis responses of these successful schools. Secondly, using these two schools as exemplary schools, I recruited another four schools to find out whether the crisis changed the way schools behaved, and if so, what forms of educational leadership emerged. Considering a lack of clarity about the impact of Covid-19 crisis on the performance of schools during the crisis lockdowns (Huber and Helm, 2020), the research in this thesis is amongst the first to explain how

educational leaders address an unforeseen and threatening event requiring ongoing attention (Urlick *et al.*, 2021). The four new schools recruited during the crisis included three maintained community and one converted academy school. However, due to the pressures caused by the advent of Covid-19 and busy schedules of school staff, fewer participants were recruited from each school for the second round of interviews, and this could be viewed as a limitation to the findings at time 2.

7.2.3 Differences and Similarities between the Six Schools

Crisis leadership during the pandemic required adaptability, blending compassion with authority. Feedback from **School 2** emphasized a “high challenge, low threat” approach that fostered resilience while managing systemic pressures. Similarly, the headteacher of **School 3** highlighted the importance of balancing compassionate leadership with assertiveness to implement necessary changes effectively. These findings align with transformational leadership theory, which prioritises collaboration, trust-building, and inspiration during crises. External systemic pressures also posed significant challenges. The headteacher of **School 6** noted, “The overwhelming volume of policy updates created a constant state of adjustment.” These insights underscore the importance of emotional intelligence and strategic communication in crisis leadership.

When I asked the schools to compare their experiences of leading their school during the pandemic with their experiences prior to it, participant headteachers believed that most things stayed the same. However, their focus had to change. The differences among the schools in perceiving the crisis and facing various challenges can be explained in terms of schools having diverse values and vision. For instance, in overcoming the crisis challenges, the two successful schools aligned their crisis

responses with their values and vision. Indeed, this was a common approach amongst all the six participant schools. This supports the extant literature that the best decisions in turbulent times are those which are aligned with the institutional values (Boin *et al.*, 2013). Also, the data during the crisis showed that school leaders, particularly headteachers, played a crucial role in ensuring learning continues, even at a distance. Leading their school during such a difficult time was a highly significant experience and caused headteachers to reflect deeply on their leadership. Drawing from this data, it was essential for headteachers to change or adapt their practice as a school leader.

As schools moved between online learning and face to face teaching, it was necessary for headteachers to utilise distributed forms of leadership (Harris and Jones, 2020). In doing so, the participant headteachers reported on the importance of established practices related to collaboration and of relational trust, particularly when staff and pupils were remote. Leading from strong organisational values and visions facilitated headteacher 2's sensemaking in making critical decisions and helped him in managing the crisis (McLeod and Dulsky, 2021). This was congruent with the practice of the other two community headteachers, headteacher 3 and headteacher 4, wherein they had already established a positive culture and strengthened relationships in their schools. These practices, on the other hand were distinctive from the practice of the two new headteachers (headteacher 5 and headteacher 6), who due to their lack of awareness of their schools' contexts (Fullan, 2019), found relationship building difficult and had to use control instead of trust to manage the crisis.

In comparison with the crisis leadership framework introduced by Boin *et al.* (2013), as will be transparent throughout this thesis, almost all participant schools exercised the ten executive tasks on the framework (see Chapter 3, Figure 2.3) but in varying

degrees. Equally, the data during the crisis, confirmed that the conditions enhanced the demand from participant headteachers to develop into transformational leaders (Burns, 1978)- the second leadership model of this thesis. In other words, this type of approach was similar to the change leadership (Fullan, 2020) with qualities like moral purpose to make a difference, understanding change to emphasise the importance of teamwork and knowing your team, creating caring relationships, creating and sharing knowledge for deeper learning, and making coherence (see Chapter 2, Section 2.7.1). Furthermore, the model of instructional leadership or leadership for learning remained substantive during the crisis. Nevertheless, the role and responsibilities had to be shared with teachers. This was particularly evident through the practice of School 1, which used to have a principal instructional leadership practice prior to this crisis, but with the crisis, the school leaders recognised the need for a more supportive and collaborative approach. Confirming that leadership for learning has been a common theme throughout this thesis.

With regard to the crisis leadership style, I noted that all participant schools used a number of Goleman's (2004) six leadership styles (see Figure 7.2), based on the emotional intelligence (EI) framework discussed earlier (see Chapter 2, Section 2.7.1). Reinforcing the importance of emotional leadership as an essential component of effective leadership.



Figure 7.2: Crisis Leadership Styles of Participant Schools (Source: Goleman, 2004)

To gain deeper insights into the crisis leadership of the participant schools, I have developed a four-phase process framework, which focused on four different timepoints such as: before the crisis (**phase 1**), beginning of the crisis (**phase 2**), during crisis lockdowns (**phase 3**), and after crisis lockdowns (**phase 4**) (see Table 7.3 below).

Table 7.3: Crisis Leadership Styles of Participant Schools

Schools		<u>Phase 1:</u> Before crisis	<u>Phase 2:</u> Beginning of crisis	<u>Phase 3:</u> During crisis lockdowns	<u>Phase 4:</u> After crisis lockdowns
School Academy	1-	Instructional leadership in the form of Managerial leadership and Transformational leadership	Directional leadership style	Coaching & collaborative leadership styles	Pacesetting leadership style
School Community	2-	Instructional leadership, Distributed leadership (in the form of leading from the middle), and Transformational/visionary leadership	Directional, informational & transmissional leadership styles	Directional, informational & transmissional leadership styles	Dialogic leadership style
Schools		<u>Phase 1:</u> Before crisis	<u>Phase 2:</u> Beginning of crisis	<u>Phase 3:</u> During crisis lockdowns	<u>Phase 4:</u> After crisis lockdowns
School Community	3-	Coaching leadership style	Directional leadership style	Directional & informational leadership styles	Coaching leadership style
School Community	4-	Coaching leadership style	Directional leadership style	Affiliative & pacesetting leadership styles	Coaching leadership style
School Converted academy	5-	Distributed & Reflective leadership styles	Directional leadership style	Directional leadership style	Distributed & Reflective leadership styles
School Community	6-	Instructional leadership style	Directional leadership style	Directional leadership style	Shared leadership

Drawing on the table, above, all schools adapted 'Directional leadership style' in the early stages of crisis. This leadership style also known as 'Commanding leadership,' is defined as a useful style in times of crisis when the time to make decisions is minimal (Goleman, 2004). It should be born in mind that the emotional responses of the participant school leaders to crisis were particularly observable in their commanding

approach. Among the six headteachers, headteacher 2 was the only school leader who used the directional style in an integrated form in the early stages of the crisis. As highlighted by studies (such as Duckers *et al.*, 2017; Mutch, 2015 a; Sutherland, 2017) the success of this new role of headteacher 2 and his leadership team as a source of information about the Coronavirus with stakeholders can be associated with the trust already existing between them (see Chapter 2, Section 2.7.2). Interestingly, Schools 3, 4, and 5 all mentioned that they will return to their original style after the crisis lockdown. Confirming the context dependent nature of leadership as stated in the earlier evidence provided by educators including (Sarkar and Clegg, 2021) that leadership changes as the contingencies change (see Chapter 2, Section 2.7.1). While the other three schools (Schools 1, 2, and 6) demonstrate having learned from the crisis and moved on to adopt a different attitude.

Overall, across the six selected headteachers, I identified headteacher 2 to stand out in terms of his leadership behaviour and activities including areas of expertise, personality traits, personal qualities, relational skills, and situational skills. Expanding the same criteria among the other five headteachers, it became clear that there were some similarities between headteacher 2 and two others such as headteacher 3 and headteacher 4. For example, headteacher 2 with a PhD in teacher efficacy promoted the ideas of lesson study and teacher research groups to shift the culture in School 2. In a similar vein, headteacher 3 with a PhD in coaching and mentoring used coaching both as a leadership style and culture to build strong relationships and improve the school. Therefore, an argument can be made for a need for higher academic qualifications in school leaders as opposed to just years of experience.

Moreover, as it will be transparent throughout the following sections, these three headteachers (2, 3, and 4) shared a similar set of interpersonal skills including being

calm, resilient, effective communicators, and having great social-emotional skills for themselves and others. Understanding both the past and immediate contexts of their schools, these headteachers reinforced the importance of adapting to changing needs, responding flexibly, and thinking creatively. This was particularly clear through the transition time into crisis when the headteachers had to shift their strategies. For instance, in the case of headteacher 2 using the dialogic leadership approach, Issacs (1991) explains that the essence of dialogue is an inquiry that surfaces ideas, perceptions, and understanding that people do not already have. Suggesting, this leadership approach was used to develop a reflective practice in School 2 and helped deepen staff insight and understanding about the Covid context through questioning and dialogue. Based on the crisis leadership framework (Chapter 3, Section 3.2.4, Figure 2.3), this was in line with the task of 'reflecting on and learning from a crisis', like the reflective practice of other coaching leaders including headteacher 3 and headteacher 4.

On the other hand, using the same criteria as the above, I gathered the other three headteachers including headteacher 1, headteacher 5, and headteacher 6 into another group (see Figure 7.4 below). Drawing on the data in Table 7.3, above, although headteacher 6 defined his leadership style as sharing, his authoritative language exemplified earlier contradicts his shared leadership claim. Likewise, headteacher 5 described her leadership style as a combination of distributed and reflective in response to both an Ofsted action plan (received from inspecting their performance) and the Covid related challenges. Nonetheless, the lack of evidence from School 5 and the contradiction in the language of headteacher 5 make it difficult for me to decide whether headteacher 5 was a distributed leader. In the following figure, I have summarised the above discussion into a diagram (see Figure 7.4).

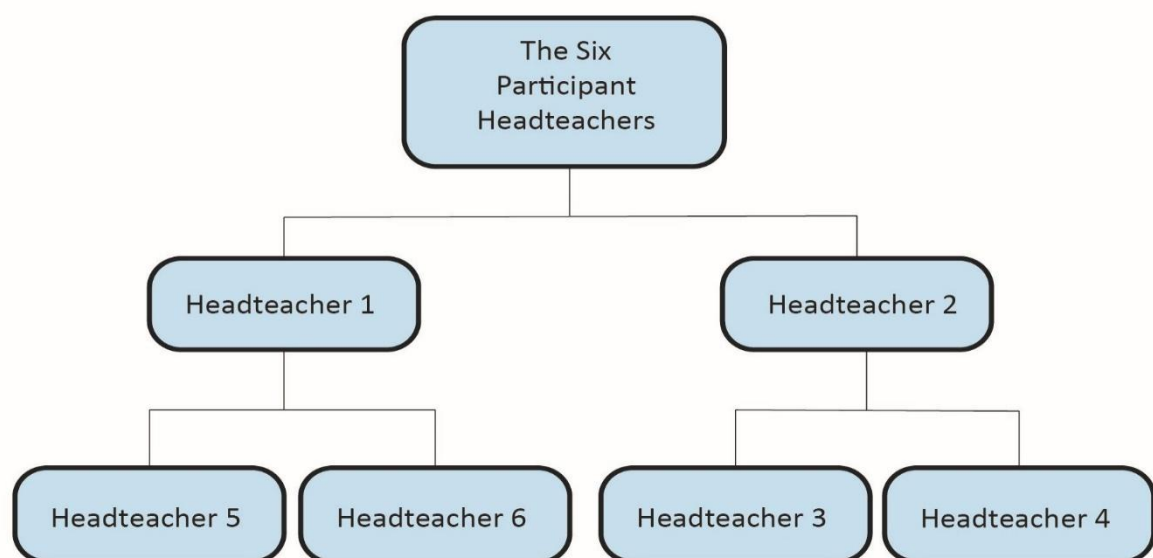


Figure 7.4: Grouping Participant Headteachers based on their Similarities and Differences

In sum, although the theme of leadership for learning was a common theme running through the practice of participant schools, I also found the need for adaptability and collaboration between schools. These findings emphasise the consistency of the practice of School 2 with qualities of distributed instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership.

7.3 Creating Conditions for Learning

7.3.1 Role of School Leaders in pre-Covid Time

Evidence from this thesis suggests that a fundamental role of school leaders is to create the conditions in which teachers can flourish and students can succeed (Harris and Jones, 2021; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020). In doing so, as the pre-Covid data revealed, the priorities of the first two outstanding school leaders were different from each other. This can be explained in terms of their distinctive responses to the performance based NPM policy. The practice of School 1 was highly influenced by the impact of this policy

while School 2 had challenged the policy. As a result, I noted two individual cultures were established in each school, including: School 1 with a culture of performativity and School 2 with a culture of collaborative professionalism. Each of these cultures along with their features are discussed below.

School 1: A Culture of Performativity

Drawing on the pre-Covid data, the contribution of school leaders in School 1 was through their strategic role practising behaviours of transformational and instructional leadership styles (Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1). The combination of these two leadership styles is highly recommended by researchers in the field including Day and Sammons (2009), who emphasised the importance of this integrated form of leadership in establishing clear educational goals, planning the curriculum, and evaluating teachers and teaching. Therefore, I identified the instructional role of headteacher 1 and her leadership team defined by duties such as curriculum development, standardised teaching and learning strategy (prescribed by MAT organisation), supervising, coaching, and managing teacher performances. In addition, their transformational work mainly focused on staff empowerment, shaping the culture by role modelling, visibility, and promoting practices that support teaching and learning (Chapter 5, Section 5.2). The language used by headteacher 1 to describe her transformational work included terms such as '*visibility*,' '*role modelling*,' and '*being supportive*.' Comparing this finding with the literature shows that the power of role modelling that headteacher 1 adopted, known as '*Do as I do*' (NCSL, 2014, p.15), is much evident in primary schools with outstanding leaders. However, the development of managerialism and the impact of NPM reform policy on the practice of School 1, had led to greater emphasis on performance and stricter focus on performance

management (Chapman, 2013, Wilkins, 2016). This had created a culture of performativity throughout the school, where teacher productivity was limited to following the instructional decisions of the school leadership team and the teaching standards set by the MAT organisation. Hence, decreasing teacher autonomy and creativity in the classroom (Ball, 2016; 2021; Brown and Johnson, 2016) (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2). Wherein teachers should make active use of their professional space that is related to the amount of autonomy teachers have in their own teaching practice rather than growing emphasis on standardisation (Marchand *et al.*, 2017).

Acknowledging the pivotal role of staff professional development in school improvement, one of the priorities of school leaders is to provide and participate in effective professional development programmes and activities. In this thesis, I hypothesised a framework of nine great professional development (GPD) claims that leads to great pedagogy (Calvert, 2016; DfE, 2016; NCSL, 2012). This framework (see Chapter 3, Table 3.2) reinforces the idea that professional development of staff can be enhanced if the training practice of schools supports the principles of adult learning theories such as experiential learning, communities of practice, and the strategy of professional learning communities (see Chapter 3, Figure 3.3). In comparison with these nine claims, I realised that the training practice of School 1 focused on activities such as: continuous professional development (CPD), coaching, monitoring and evaluation, and staff movement, which are unpacked below.

7.3.1.1 Continuous Professional Development

The findings from School 1 indicate that all participants from this school were satisfied with the way the sponsored organisation provided them the opportunities to share resources; have a wide range of training and CPD workshops; as well as connecting

them with different schools within the network of organisation. The senior leaders appreciated the information and a variety of options that were available to them in developing their knowledge pool. Consistent with the leaders' perceptions emphasising the crucial role of CPDs to empowering their leadership knowledge, skills and the success of the school, teachers also conceived the important role that CPD played in the success of individuals and the school as a whole. However, based on the data, these workshop and meetings were formal events, designed like the training courses (one-size-fits-all) where their focus was on the general needs of teachers. Wherein, formal workshops are unlikely to impact on teaching practice (Saroyan and Trigwell, 2015) instead, educators need to learn from colleagues to help them to apply knowledge in practice (Chapter 3, Table 3.2, Claim 7)- similar to a coaching model.

Additionally, despite providing the freedom to teachers to choose, and offering a wide variety of professional development programmes, I noted that teachers in School 1 lacked autonomy over their professional development goal setting. Whereas teachers' autonomy over this crucial need has been recognised as the most often associated factor for higher job satisfaction and retention (Worth and Van den Brande, 2020). A positive point recognised about the school's CPD in relation to being a mix of both job-embedded learning (Kraft *et al.*, 2020) and external expertise (see Chapter 2, Section 2.6.3), which was one of the claims of GPD on the framework as (Chapter 3, Table 3.2, Claim 4); on the other hand, they were only based on the individual needs of staff instead of focusing on both individual and team needs (Chapter 3, Table 3.2, Claim 3). This can be related to the performativity culture of school which had given an individual nature to the teaching practice and enhanced the human capital of school rather than the collective/social capital of school (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1). Another pitfall in the school's CPD programme was that it was not

including support staff. Therefore, not allowing everyone the same chance to grow and learn. As a result, this can hinder the relations among staff and promote a sense of inequalities in school.

7.3.1.2 Coaching

Moreover, I identified coaching as a part of School 1's professional development programme. For instance, the Executive Head was acting as a regular mentor to headteacher 1; subsequently, the SLT members were coaching both experienced and early career teachers (ECTs). While the coaching model was based upon hierarchies of seniors to teachers wherein the recipient may not be able to facilitate an open discussion. That said, teacher learning occurred through structured discussions around fulfilling standards, such as performance management targets and providing objective feedback. However, there existed an effective coaching tool called 'Iris' recommended recently by the MAT organisation. Using filming equipment, this coaching tool was based on the model of 'See it, Name it, Do it'- similar to the experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984) suggested earlier in this thesis as an effective method for adult learning (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4). Both models defined learning as an active engagement occurring from reflection on experience. As a result, teachers liked this type of reflexive and independent learning. I also observed that the school followed a model of communities of practice (CoPs). But their CoPs was based on the theory of knowledge management (Saint-Onge and Wallace, 2003) rather than social learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to manage knowledge within and across the school in the network. Examples were, sending both senior and middle leaders to courses for training in order to increase their intellectual capital and pass the knowledge for improving individuals practice and organisational performance. In this way, knowledge sharing and possibly creation, seemed to happen at the individual level for those in

power and then was extended to the organisational level.

7.3.1.3 Monitoring and Evaluation

Surprisingly, the two participating teachers from School 1 liked the regular observations on their performance and conceived it as an important part of learning how to teach and enhancing the teaching and learning quality of school. In this way, despite working together, everyone was individually responsible to fulfil the required standards. This kind of individual accountability among the staff was again a result of the school's performativity culture, which can create competitive relationships between staff; as well as enhance their individual self-efficacy rather than collective capacity or social capital, which is an influential contributor for higher student achievement (Freeman, 2008; Ross and Gray, 2006). Therefore, with the influential role of school leaders in School 1 and their emphasis on performance observation and performance management, it can be argued that a big proportion of teacher motivation was done via extrinsic incentives initiated by the SLT members such as: providing objective feedback, setting targets, and to some extent encouraging teachers to reflect on their own performance (e.g., by using the Iris equipment).

7.3.1.4 Staff Movement

Finally, staff movement in the form of promotion within the MAT organisation was another way in improving school capacity. Although this might be seen as great progression opportunities which may support retention, but both senior leaders and teachers were dissatisfied with the process. The importance of developing capabilities of others has been recognised and increasingly cited in the literature, and there is an emphasis on the distribution of leadership and the promotion of middle leaders in sponsored academy schools (e.g., Dinham *et al.*, 2018; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018).

However, it seems doubtful for the promotion to have a positive effect because giving extra responsibilities and having unrealistic expectations from the staff who are not ready to take it yet, can eventually make their workload heavier with possibilities of dis-morale, burnout, and leaving (Ball, 2016; 2021; Evans and Smith, 2019; Worth *et al.*, 2017) (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2). Because of an excessive amount of workload, limited time was therefore available for staff collaboration in School 1, where I observed the main source of teacher collaboration through co-planning meetings. Whereas professional development is much more likely to be successful when it involves wider collaboration between staff (Chapter 3, Table 3.2, Claim 8). Equally, the school's networking activity was limited with other schools within the MAT organisation. The kind of support and collaboration academies give and receive can be explained in terms of the cooperative relationships existing within and across their schools in order to enhance the capacity of schools and foster stronger networks. In effect, it can be argued that a poor infrastructure (such as, lack of scheduled time for teachers to meet; lack of teacher ownership of the process- perception that school leaders dictate what teachers do during their collaborative time; and a lack of teacher influence in school's decision-making) and a culture in which teachers tend to compete rather than collaborate had influenced an imposed model of PLC upon teachers by school leaders. This is why leadership and culture are known as key players in the formation of PLCs (Dufour and Eaker, 1998).

School 2: A Culture of Collaborative Professionalism

On the other hand, School 2 challenged the performance based NPM policy and operated differently from School 1. Headteacher 2 who described the school as a "*hybrid school*," adopted the change model of '*Age of learning, wellbeing and identity*' (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018) from Ontario into the practice of his school. Through this

change model he established structures and systems in school that promoted teacher agency and distributed leadership. Having systems and structures in place were among the criteria which helped good primary schools in the London Borough of Camden to become outstanding (CfBT, 2011). Moreover, through his strategic role (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.1) with structuring specific vision and giving directions, headteacher 2 shared his vision and values with staff to influence their thinking and behaviours, so they became motivated to work harder and improve the performance of school (Emmanouil *et al.*, 2014; Murphy, 2023; Sergiovanni, 2019). Furthermore, the adapted change model contributed to a wide range of developments in this school. One of the most important features, as mentioned earlier, was the strategy of leading from the middle, which defined the headteacher as a facilitator, promoted teacher leadership, and encouraged teacher-led and evidence informed school improvement. This was in parallel with the school improvement strategy of using PLCs.

Relatively, with designing the school's improvement plan based on the adapted change model, all of the school's priorities were fallen to one of the four categories of the plan (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.5). This had led to a collaborative ethos, vision and values promoting a development of a sense of equality, common identity, integrity and humility throughout the school. Accordingly, this kind of inclusive ethos had developed a sense of internal accountability or responsibility among everyone for continuous improvement and success of all students. This approach is called 'professional accountability' model (Fullan *et al.*, 2015) in which the external accountability is nurtured and sustained by the development of strong internal accountability. Hence, instead of being limited to focusing on test scores like School 1, the core of accountability at School 2 was on deeper and more meaningful learning for all

students. Consistent with several studies (such as Matthews, 2007; 2012), these are the characteristics of highly effective headteachers as school leaders.

Bearing in mind, the success of such professional accountability relies on developing the professional capital of teachers and school leaders to make sound decisions in their classrooms and schools based on their best collective and individual professional judgment (Fullan *et al.*, 2015). The data suggested that School 2 had nurtured a professional culture of continuous improvement, collective responsibility and shared leadership in and across the school. The most recent example of this kind of culture is the culture of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves and Braun, 2018), which is a form of collaboration among educators that are professional in the sense of being open, rigorous, challenging and evidence informed (Hargreaves and O' Connor, 2019). As such, teachers' judgements in School 2 were rooted in collaborative inquiry, joint work and collective responsibility for the success of all students. The language used by both senior leaders and teachers to describe the school's culture included: "*a flexible culture;*" "*everyone feels like being a part of something,*" and "*the school is a nice place to work.*" Therefore, it was evident that, as a result of the culture of collaborative professionalism, the training practice of School 2 focused on collaborative and reflexive methods such as: such as lesson study, coaching, and collaboration and networking, which are discussed below.

7.3.1.5 Reflective Practice-Lesson Study

Originated in Japan, 'Lesson Study' is defined by Tsui and Law (2007, p.1294) as "*a systematic investigation of classroom pedagogy conducted collectively by a group of teachers rather than by individuals, with the aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning.*" As such, using existing evidence, teachers collaboratively conducted action research to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in School 2. This was

a form of PLC. Referring to the school's findings, the process of lesson study in School 2 included three stages of: plan, observe, and reflect (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.6). Promoting reflective thinking to foster pedagogical improvement. This approach can be a great professional development strategy (see Chapter 3, Table 3.2, Claim 2). The three stages of lesson study are in parallel with the principles of the experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984) (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4). Congruent with Kolb and Fry (1975), both models are meant to support the best way adults learn, such as learners are not passive recipients, but actively explore and test the problem in the environment.

7.3.1.6 Coaching

I also learnt that the inclusive professional development provision of School 2 provided support and development for everyone. School leaders at this school received coaching and then the leaders were assigned as mentors or "*professional growth partners*," coaching and supporting teachers with their research throughout the year. This method followed the Teacher's Network model from Singapore- where they provide powerful ways in which peers and professional development experts collaborate (Jayaram *et al.*, 2012). In the same vein, the school's mentors with a group of randomly selected teachers shared insights and solved common problems about their research in a collegial fashion. As an outcome of the school's culture of collaborative professionalism therefore, teachers were respected as professionals to lead and manage their own performance. Because if teachers are treated as self-regulating professionals with sufficient time and resources, they would be able: "*to construct their own learning experiences and develop a more effective reality for their students through their collective expertise*." (Timperley *et al.*, 2007, p.25). This kind of dialogue can also promote the development of genuine relationships that are based

on authenticity and care instead of relationships as a product of networking (Lewin and Regine, 2000). This collegial relationship could promote the collective responsibility and social capacity of teachers (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018). Also, being a university student, the headteacher and other senior leaders were engaged with external training practices to support the vision of establishing lifelong learning in an area of severe socioeconomic deprivation.

7.3.1.7 Collaboration and Networking

According to the data, another way for staff professional development was through the habits of collaboration to share knowledge and experiences. Leaders sharing their experiences with the teaching staff could also increase the teachers' capacity and consequently their motivation (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2006). Though, not only the school leaders had the opportunity to share their experiences and knowledge, but the teachers also had the time and space to do so and learn from and with one another. Peer observation was an example of collaboration to share knowledge and experiences among teachers (see Chapter 5, p. 163). Teachers had the opportunity to come out of their classrooms and spend some time around the school like looking at other people who were working to gain some ideas and inspirations. This supports one of the GPD claims made previously that professional development can be enhanced through collaborative learning and joint practice development (see Chapter 3, Table 3.2, Claim-7).

Looking at the improvement plan of School 2, 'outstanding outreach' was another domain of the plan encouraging collaboration and networking across the school. Based on the data, the intention of this element was to expand the school's internal collaboration with a much wider network outside the school. Quoted from the Ofsted

inspection (2019, p. 8) on this school: *“Leaders at this school provide support and training for several schools and receive many visiting leaders and teachers, including from abroad.”* In doing so, headteacher 2 was running a series of consulting workshops to provide peer-to-peer support to other headteachers both nationally and internationally. This kind of regular and purposeful collaboration and networking among the school leaders can improve practices (Little 2020) (see Chapter 2, Section 2.6.2) and is a common characteristic of communities of practice (CoPs) (Wenger *et al.*, 2002)- the other adult learning model that I suggested in this thesis as an effective staff development strategy (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4). Therefore, this makes the school PLC strategy comparable to the professional learning communities I identified earlier in this thesis (see Chapter 3, Figure 3.3).

7.3.2 Comparing the Role of School Leaders During Crisis

The collected data suggests that the crisis required the role and responsibilities of school leaders to be expanded, but the central role of school leaders in providing opportunities for learning became even more essential during the pandemic. This was transparent through the testimony of almost all participating headteachers who used strategies such as: clear and open communication; building of strong home-school relationships; and a focus on equity and wellbeing, which are discussed as follows.

7.3.2.1 Clear and Open Communication

Looking back into the practice of the first two outstanding schools, the data showed that the communication tools of School 1 included collaborative online tools such as digital learning platforms and Microsoft Teams. The senior leaders identified the need for frequent communication with stakeholders through methods including, phone calls and online social events. Even though the school had a centralised structure, during

the pandemic they realised the importance of taking the views of others into account. This was done, for example, through conducting parent surveys and receiving feedback from staff. Whilst headteacher 2, who was acting as a key communication channel, identified the distinction between routine communication and crisis communication. The terms used to describe crisis communication included: ‘*very carefully*,’ ‘*considered*’ and ‘*calmed communication*.’ This demonstrates the calm persona of the headteacher, which is known to be beneficial when managing the difficult issues of crisis (Ng, 2021). Furthermore, the moral imperative of headteacher 2 and his involvement with system leadership roles led him to expand the communication across the school. This was in line with the ‘rendering accountability’ task of the crisis leadership framework (Chapter 3, Figure 2.3).

Additionally, in order to share up-to-date information with stakeholders, headteacher 2 referred to his knowledge and skills to filter information to staff, conveying what was essential for them to know and what was unnecessary. As an effective communicator he did four things: a) gave people what they need, when they need it- because people’s information needs to evolve in a crisis (Boin *et al.*, 2013). As such, he was thoughtful about what matters most in the given moment; b) communicated clearly, simply and frequently with all stakeholders- because he knew crises limit people’s capacity to absorb information in the early days (McLeod and Dulsky, 2021); c) he was honest and maintained transparency which strengthened the existing trust and loyalty and supported him to lead more effectively; and d) he distilled meaning from chaos by helping people to make sense of what happened. Helping others to make sense of the situation or ‘meaning making’ was another task of the crisis leadership theory (see Chapter 3, Figure 2.3, Task 6. Meaning Making). Moreover, the electronic means of communication of School 2 allowed headteacher 2 to communicate “*swiftly, calmly and*

reassuringly" (Headteacher 2, Interview 2, p. 176), which supported parents and children's belief in the school. Likewise, for the staff, they relied on "*frequent, considered and calm communication*" (ibid, p. 176). This kind of effective crisis communication can be linked to the dialogic style of headteacher 2, which had certain qualities such as: to evoke people's voices, to listen actively, to respect other people's views, and to broaden awareness and perspectives (Goleman, 2004).

In a similar vein to headteacher 2, I noted that the coaching style of headteacher 3 and her school's reflective environment had already established a two-way communication system in the school (e.g., the habit of conducting regular staff surveys). The language used by the teaching staff to characterise the headteacher's communication style included: "*calm*," "*open*" and "*respectful*" (Teacher 1 and 2, School 3, p. 179). As a result of the coaching style of headteacher 3, she had already established a great relational skill with a sense of trust and a basis for effective communication within and across the school. Like headteacher 2, headteacher 3 believed in "*one size does not fit all*" (Headteacher 3, Chapter 6, p. 178) and provided personalised support to staff by making "*individual text messages*" to thank the staff and provide wellbeing check ins. As another feature of her coaching style, headteacher 3 relied on active listening, instant and consistent feedback (Lasater, 2016). Drawing on the findings, the communication system of School 3 had a pattern of four stages of: listen, think, question, and reflect (see Chapter 6, p. 179). Additionally, headteacher 3 exhibited a similar calm persona with headteacher 2. Promoting supportive working conditions for staff to feel safe, be open, and share their needs (McLeod and Dulsky, 2021).

Moreover, headteacher 4, akin to headteachers 2 and 3, had also recognised the distinction between routine and crisis communication. Like headteachers 2 and 3,

headteacher 4 valued the need for frequent communication. This was evident through regular collaboration among teachers. Whilst the relationships moved to a virtual environment, headteacher 4 realised a rise in relationships in and across the school. As a feature of the coaching style of headteacher 4, feedback was a critical component of the school's communication strategy. This had led the senior leaders into becoming active listeners (similar to headteacher 3). Relying on the value of connectivity, headteacher 3 and headteacher 4, created a culture of '*we are all in it together*' (Brighouse and Waters, 2021), which they recognised had made their staff members closer to each other.

In harmony with the previous headteachers, headteachers 5 and 6 also recognised communication as the most effective strategy in managing the Covid related challenges they encountered. However, unlike their colleagues, these headteachers found it difficult to build new relationships and maintain the existing relationships during the crisis. This can be related to the short period of time they had been at their schools (Fullan, 2019). To solve this issue, headteacher 5 emphasised the importance of "*being creative*." Therefore, she ensured communication was more "*regular and frequent*" at her school (ibid. p. 177). Similarly, headteacher 6 reinforced the need for regular communication with staff through various channels. Through this strategy, headteacher 6 intended to transmit information among the stakeholders because as he stated, "*they needed to know what was going on*" (Headteacher 6, p. 175) and to ensure others that they were: "*following the government guidelines*" (ibid, p. 175). However, a task of working within guidelines, interpreting, translating, and implementing school guidance was both difficult and stressful for headteachers (Ofsted, 2022). Especially, as there were challenges to prioritise and balance the ever-changing government advice with the limitations of the school building, the welfare of

students and staff, and the needs of community had made the task even more complicated. This had caused the staff from School 6 to believe that the crisis had strained relationships, as had School 5.

7.3.2.2 Strong Home-School Relationship

Comparing the data gathered during the crisis pandemic against that gathered prior to this pandemic, I observed the need for schools to pay more attention to social and environmental factors beyond the school gates and seek to exert more influence over them than is currently the case. Given the fact that it has been recognised that between only 20% and 30% of the factors that influence educational outcomes are directly within the control of school (Groves, Hobbs and West-Burnham, 2017; Grove and West-Burnham, 2020). Among the other factors which are not in the control of any school is ‘family background,’ which Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) have recognised as the biggest factor influencing educational attainment, how well a child performs in school, and later in higher education. This explains the earlier literature where Rigby *et al.* (2020) identified one of the promising practices for schools through treating families as equal partners in learning (see Chapter 2, Section 2.7.2). This kind of relationship can be associated with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ‘ecological systems theory,’ recently known as bio-ecological theory. The author maintains, for children to thrive in one domain (e.g., school) there needs to exist good relationships with the other domains a child lives within, for example home. Therefore, with the belief that both parents and schools play a key role in the education of children (DfE, 2019), I offer the following diagrams to summarise the school-home relationship efforts undertaken by the first two outstanding schools (see Figure 7.5).

Figure 7.5: Partnerships of School 1 with Home and Community

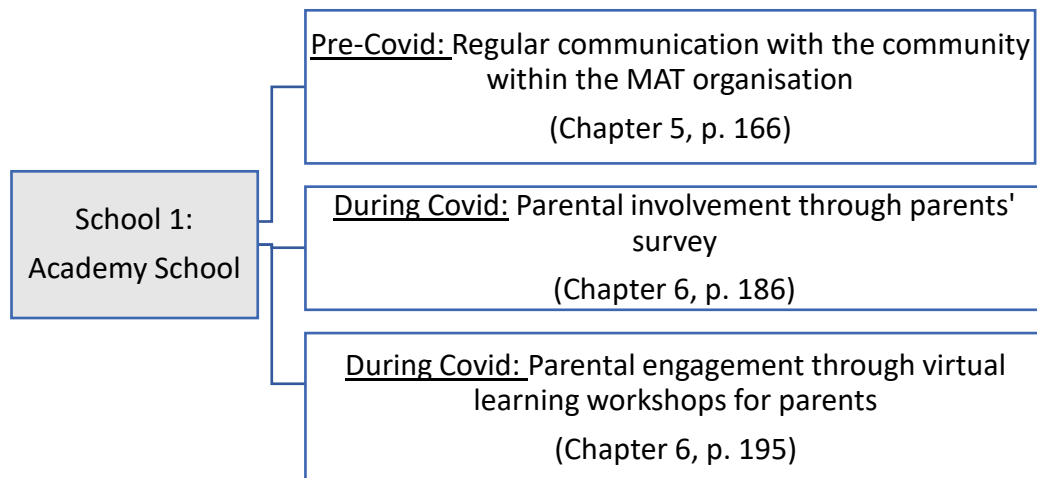
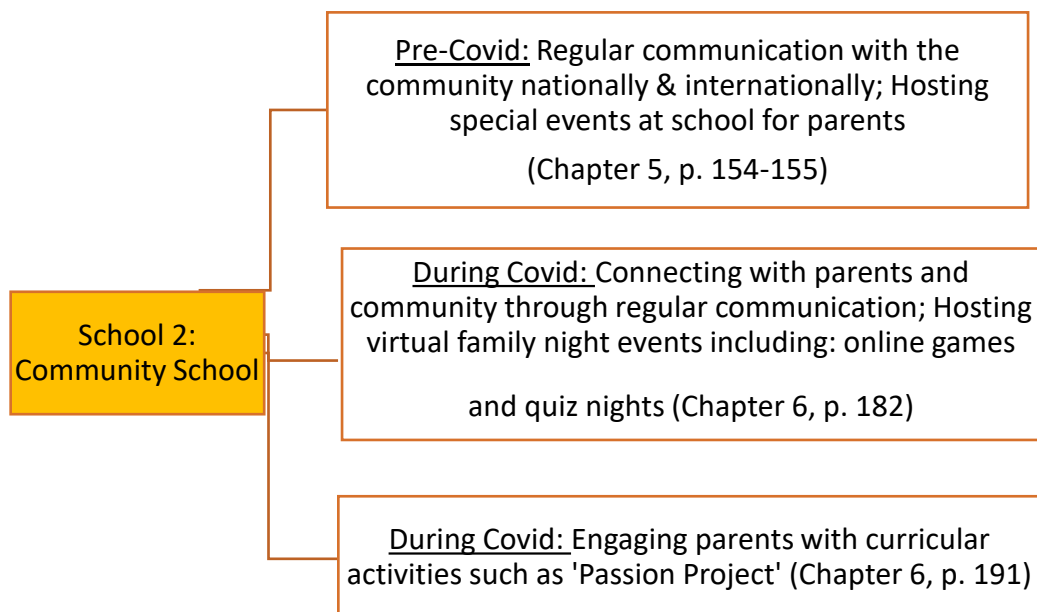


Figure 7.6: Partnerships of School 2 with Home and Community



The distinctive patterns of school-home relationships presented above, can be related to the schools' structures. For example, the academy nature of School 1, had led their community relationships to be limited within the schools of the MAT organisation. Also, the implications of marketisation on the school's structure, had developed business like values to hold the school leaders accountable in satisfying parents as their consumers. While School 2 with the background of collaborative culture and inclusive

ethos, had already established trusting relationships with families and community members to foster student support. This refers to a claim submitted by Daniel *et al.* (2019) about community schools that are well-designed to engage families and community members through various mechanisms in the school. For instance, the strong coordinating ability of headteacher 2 had brought the opportunities for all children to have access to digital devices. This is an example of the 'coordinating' task of the crisis leadership framework (Chapter 3, Figure 2.3, Task 4. Coordinating). Also referring to the diagrams, above, School 2 exhibited parental involvement behaviours (Harris and Goodall, 2007) including parental participation in school activities and parental communications with teachers. Moreover, representing parental engagement with curricular activities such as a 'Passion Project' to support staff, children, and parents' learning (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

Additionally, I observed similar results through the practice of other selected community schools including Schools 3 and 4. For example, headteacher 3 as an experienced coaching leader, emphasised on the important value of 'community' and creating positive relationships with diverse stakeholders in supporting the children. As a result, the school already had a strong relationship with community, particularly with parents. This can give an opportunity to a school's staff to get to know the families better and understand the sociocultural backgrounds of their students so that they can teach in ways that are culturally relevant and sustaining (Daniel *et al.*, 2019). Likewise, headteacher 4 with the same coaching leadership style had taken a similar approach in enhancing the school-home relationships. Looking at the school's website, it was evident that the school had provided free adult education and training programmes for families. Welcoming families and creating space for competencies can create trusting

relationships and respect, as well as a sense of belonging in school, which can in turn support improved student learning and engagement (Epstein, 2018).

Conversely, School 5 was different from the last four schools. Headteacher 5 noted maintaining relationships was difficult during the pandemic. Yet, she did not comment on the importance of school partnership. Rather, she only highlighted the school's cooperation with other social and wellbeing services to support the social-emotional wellbeing of herself and staff. Similarly, School 6 also found the pandemic a huge obstacle to building new relationships (e.g., with new staff) and maintaining the existing relationships for example with parents. They described the situation with terms such as "*really tough*." Whilst studies including Harris and Jones (2022) highlight the necessity of community and family engagement in assisting school leaders to manage their way through the challenges of the pandemic. I also recognised more factors affecting family engagement with School 6 including language barriers and working conditions of the families, which had made them uncomfortable to use collaborative tools including Zoom. Nevertheless, to address this issue, the staff ensured they contacted those families via different channels even through home visits. Table 7.7 below has been developed to understand and demonstrate the behaviours of the rest of the participant schools (including Schools 3, 4, 5 and 6) in fostering school-home relationships:

Table 7.7: Partnerships of Participant Schools with Home and Community

Schools	Pre-Covid	During Covid
School 3: Community School	Having a strong relationship with parents and local community (Chapter 6, Teacher 1, p. 180)	Connecting with parents through regular communication in sharing information and feedback about their children (Chapter 6, p. 203) Providing pastoral care to parents through making regular welfare calls to them (Chapter 6, p. 191) Connecting with local community through providing counselling support to other schools in the borough (Chapter 6, p. 209)
School 4: Community School	Connecting with communities around the world (School website)	Providing pastoral care to parents through making regular welfare calls to them (Chapter 6, Headteacher 4, p. 180) Providing parental engagement through remote learning (Chapter 6, Teacher 1, p. 183)
School 5: Academy School	No Comment	Coordinating with other organisations to support the social-emotional wellbeing of Headteacher and staff (Chapter 6, p. 197)
School 6: Community School	Parental involvement through volunteering at school as a parent governor	Providing pastoral care to parents through regular welfare calls to them and home visits (Chapter 6, p. 176)

The key outcome therefore is that there should be a partnership between school and community as well as looking for ways in which families can contribute to and shape the direction of a school's travel. Guiding us to believe that the key to the next stage of improvement is to take a holistic approach to student success.

7.3.2.3 The Need for Equity and Wellbeing

School closures related to the Covid-19 pandemic mean that students from diverse backgrounds who are more likely at risk of increased vulnerability are less likely to

receive the support and extra services they need (OECD, 2020). While schools were closed during the Coronavirus lockdowns, many educational institutions, including the six participant schools, used digital pedagogical tools and virtual exchanges between students and their teachers, and among students, to deliver education. Noting vulnerable students had little access to such tools and required further attention and support. In doing so, almost all participant schools developed strategic plans to provide equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources (e.g., by distributing free materials, laptops or Chromebook as well as providing internet access) enabling children to join the daily live and recorded lessons provided by teachers from home. In this way, attempting to maintain education continuity and students' sense of belonging to the school community (OECD, 2017). In this context, although parental support for home-schooling was needed more than ever to provide children with the best learning conditions and support them in their studies during school closures, but not all students received the same amount of parental support

While it is expected by UNESCO (2017) that leaders at all levels need to establish the conditions that build consensus and commitment towards putting the universal values of inclusion and equity into practice. As such, headteacher 2 who had already established an inclusive ethos for School 2 (Chapter 5, p. 148), continued to coordinate with other community leaders, local government, and businesses to foster digital equality and add to the effectiveness of the overall school programme. Accordingly, as headteacher 2 stated: "*all the teachers were trained in how to use the digital learning platforms*" (Headteacher 2, Interview 2, p. 188). Equally, the parents and children were supported to have practice with these new platforms at home. Therefore, learning applied to everyone. Likewise, the equity-driven leadership approach of headteacher 3, which was rooted in the school vision and values, had created a sense of

accountability among everyone, including children, to be involved in the operation of the school. Taking a “*less is more*” approach to teaching and learning (see Chapter 6, p. 190). For example, the senior leaders stopped the marking policy to reduce teachers’ workload and create a balance. Moreover, to simplify the complexities of the crisis (Fullan, 2010), school leaders in School 4, like School 1, used inclusive strategies such as dividing the staff among themselves to make sure every member of staff receives a weekly pastoral call. Similarly, to balance the workload, they divided classes in year groups among the senior leaders. That said, school leaders play a critical role in building a positive learning environment where the whole school community feels included, connected, safe and respected (Australian Student Wellbeing Framework, 2018). Particular forms of leadership are known to be effective in promoting school equality, equity and social justice. These approaches, according to Kugelmass and Ainscow (2005), focus attention on teaching and learning; creating strong communities of students, teachers and parents; nurturing the understanding of a culture of education among families; and fostering multi-agency interaction. A similar view has also been suggested by Daniel and his associates (2019) that collaborative leadership and practices support the inclusion of stakeholders in important decisions about learning as well as addressing classroom related issues- examples were Schools 2 and 3. Besides, many factors can work either to facilitate or to inhibit inclusive and equitable practices within education systems. Some of those factors are teacher skills and attitudes, infrastructure, pedagogical strategies, and the curriculum (ibid. 2019). There is also evidence that school-to-school collaboration can strengthen the capacity of individual organisations to respond to diversity among learners (Muijs *et al.*, 2011)- such as in the case of Schools 2, 3, and 4.

More importantly, however almost all participant schools realised wellbeing was a strategic priority for them. This can be explained in terms of the centrality of high levels of wellbeing to high levels of achievement (Groves, Hobbs and West-Burnham, 2017). This was evident, for example, in School 2 where wellbeing was part of a central vision for school. Similarly, Schools 3, 4, 5 and 6 ensured physical safety as their absolute first priority, while psychological safety was also important. The participating headteachers also had to consider the wellbeing and equity in the broader education ecosystem – for instance, among teachers and families. Hence, access to mental health and wellbeing support took priority over access to instruction. This kind of ‘Maslow before Bloom’ (Doucet, Netolicky, Timmers and Tuscano, 2020) approach to distance learning, as a result of the crisis, could be a positive change for the future of education. Where participating teachers in this research, advise that this approach should be at the centre of the vision we have of teaching the whole child. Therefore, at the onset of an emergency like the Covid-19 crisis, formal education was not the priority. Considering children at home do need an education, but first and foremost, they need to be fed and protected. This was the priority for all participant schools.

7.4 Teacher Leadership

I found that like school leaders, the role of teachers is rapidly evolving becoming broader and, in many ways, more difficult than when learning took place only in person. As discussed in chapter 5, during the pre-pandemic time, School 1, which was an academy school, considered the role of teachers as followers of standardised instruction and teaching (Chapter 5, Teacher 2, p. 135), with a limited autonomy and authority in leading their own learning and participating in the school’s decision-making. Nevertheless, with the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, headteacher 1 realised the need for a shift in the role of teachers. More importantly, emphasising on the

opportunity that Covid had brought for teachers in getting closer to students and their families (Headteacher1, Interview 2, p. 194). On the other hand, in School 2 with a community structure, headteacher 2 perceived teachers to be as important as children and assigned them with multiple roles such as role models of lifelong learning for children, leaders of learning for their own and school, and agents of change (Headteacher 2, Interview 1, p. 164). This was quite like the style of teacher leadership where teacher role expands beyond the classroom, supporting the professional learning of peers, and targeting student learning (Wenner and Campbell, 2017). The efforts taken by headteacher 2 can be explained in terms of Daniel and his colleagues' (2019) recognition that community schools are designed to give teachers' expanded roles and responsibilities. School 2, with an inclusive practice and strong relationships beforehand, are better situated to manage crises that may occur (Mutch, 2015a, see Chapter 2, Section, 2.7.2).

The findings highlight how teacher leadership evolved during the pandemic as a distributed practice. Feedback from **School 1** emphasized the role of teacher autonomy in fostering professional growth and sustaining morale. The headteacher reflected, "Empowering teachers with decision-making responsibilities enhanced their ability to adapt to crisis conditions." In contrast, **School 6** highlighted systemic barriers, such as excessive government directives, which required greater self-led professional development among staff. These findings align with distributed leadership principles, which promote shared accountability and collective problem-solving. Yet two crucial factors had to shift due to the pandemic. Firstly, pedagogical adaptations proved to be pivotal as the traditional teaching in-person models did not translate to a remote learning environment (Day, Taneva and Smith, 2021). Teachers needed to adapt their practices and be creative to keep students engaged as every household had become

a classroom - more often than not - without an environment that supported learning (ibid. 2021). I observed a great number of teacher-led efforts throughout the findings in the forms of working individually and collectively to find technological solutions to ensure learning continuity. Although there is limited evidence about teacher leadership during education emergencies, such as that of the Covid-19 pandemic (Wenner and Campbell, 2017). Secondly, the pandemic had recalibrated how teachers divide their time between teaching, engaging with students, and administrative tasks. Therefore, a need for flexibility and more time for student-teacher interactions emerged. For instance, teachers in School 1 were given autonomy to adjust the curriculum, lesson plans, and their time allocation- although still with the approval of the senior leaders. Similarly, School 3 and School 4 (e.g., see Chapter 6, p. 213) adjusted their marking policy to free teachers' time from administrative tasks. Rather, most of the participant schools focused on what was pedagogically effective and provided socio-emotional support for teachers.

Despite systemic barriers such as limited resources and increased demands, participant schools demonstrated how empowering teachers fostered resilience and innovation. For instance, headteachers in Schools 3 and 4 reported that decentralising decision-making allowed teachers to take ownership of pedagogical adaptations. This approach not only enhanced teacher morale but also encouraged a culture of shared responsibility. Such findings underscore the importance of creating institutional structures that support teacher leadership as a core component of school improvement.

Moreover, some research has indicated that the major digital leap during the pandemic, including the adoption of a significant number of new digital tools and

pedagogical solutions (OECD, 2021), has multiplied the sources of teacher stress (MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer, 2020). This was evident among all four participating teachers, recruited from Schools 3 and 4, who identified online teaching as their biggest challenge. The reasons for this challenge according to Winter and colleagues (2021), are firstly, factors external to teachers such as availability of equipment, access to resources, training, and support. Secondly, are factors internal to teachers such as attitudes and beliefs about technology use, their skills and knowledge (ibid. 2021). Either of these factors can limit efforts to integrate technology. Hence, effective strategies such as in-school help were critical to address both factors. In this way, professional development became a key strategic component for supporting teachers and building their capacity.

Another challenge faced by teachers, particularly parent teachers (e.g., Teacher 1, School 4, p. 184), was keeping school and personal life separate. This was even more difficult during the lockdowns when teachers had to teach from home. In support with MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer (2020), lack of physical, temporal, or psychological boundaries between work and home, and educators' competing responsibilities that run parallel to teaching, such as helping their own children with assignments, caring for vulnerable family members, or managing their own mental health, can present a highly stressful situation for teachers (Kim and Asbury, 2020). This complex problem of work-life balance was especially evident in the practice of senior leaders such as headteacher 6. While research conducted by Ofsted (2019) during pre-pandemic time concludes that a poor work-life balance can be a consequence of a high workload affecting wellbeing, job satisfaction and retention. Whereby, the UK's Health and Safety Executive (2018) suggest that teaching staff and education professionals report the highest rates of work-related stress, depression and anxiety in Britain. Therefore,

action should be taken to improve occupational wellbeing in schools nationally, as a matter of priority. This particularly applies to the wellbeing of teachers and middle leaders (ibid. 2018). However, with the occurrence of Coronavirus breakout, the issue has grown larger. Going forward, the four participating teachers recruited during the pandemic suggested the need for more of a focus on the emotional wellbeing of teachers (School 3, Teacher 2, p. 203). Because it has been recognised that the wellbeing of staff and pupils' parents are inextricably intertwined with the wellbeing and achievement of pupils (Grove, 2016).

Hence, it becomes clear that teachers' roles and skills have been irreplaceable and their daily contact with students places them among the most important agents of inclusion in education.

7.5 Self-led and Ongoing Professional Development

Based on the underlying belief of this thesis, school improvement is achievable through improvement of its people. However, the ways in which the first two outstanding schools defined improvement in pre-pandemic time differed from each other. On the one hand, the agenda for improvement in School 1 concentrated on enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms (Groves, Hobbs and West-Burnham, 2017). On the other hand, School 2 took a teacher-led and evidence informed approach to school improvement thus emphasising the importance of enhancing the social capital of a school (Brighouse, 2020). Providing the staff with time and space to share knowledge, experiences, and expertise through open and ongoing professional dialogues (Knowles, 1978), and professional collaborations with one another (Brodie, 2019) to increase the social capital of school.

Subsequently, with the Covid-19 crisis there was a rapid shift from contact teaching to distance teaching in schools, which caused a suspension of schools' activities including the school improvement agenda. Although in-person meetings were cancelled, but professional development remained important, even more so as no one knew what shape our new normal might take. Recalling the definition of professional development in chapter 3, the activities involved were both formal and informal (Bubb and Earley, 2009, Chapter 3, Section 3.4). Formal professional learning activities, as described by Jansen In de Wal *et al.* (2014), are when they include prescribed learning frameworks, structured environments, organised events, credits or certificates, and a specified curriculum with learning goals. Whereas informal professional learning is not restricted to a certain environment and the control of, and responsibility for, learning lies with the learner, which has even been described as the only option for teacher professional learning in many cases (such as Boshuizen, 2006 and Van Eekelen, Vermunt). More specifically, to clarify informal professional learning activities, Hoekstra *et al.* (2009) have suggested four main categories: (1) learning by doing, (2) learning by experimenting, (3) learning by considering one's own teaching practice, and (4) learning by getting ideas from others. This was transparent throughout the schools' findings when the rapid and unexpected transition to distance teaching in the beginning of the pandemic posed an unprecedented challenge for school leaders and teachers. Notably, all four participating teachers during the crisis (two from School 3 and two from School 4) reported that they were continuously learning by reflecting on (Chapter 3, Figure 2.3, Task 9. Reflecting on and learning from a crisis), discussing and sharing their experiences of the everyday classroom practices and activities they undertook (Chapter 3, Table 3.2, Claim 7). Furthermore, individual professional learning activities, such as learning by doing, experimenting, and considering one's

own teaching practice, were also observed during this time. Interestingly, these findings were in harmony with the framework I presented earlier in chapter 3 (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4, Table 3.2) and the professional development provision of School 2, where teachers learned from their experiences of the everyday classroom practices and collective activities, they undertook.

Similarly, School 3 with a teacher-centred professional learning provision noted that despite teachers' stress and exhaustion during the pandemic, teachers were able to become more confident (Chapter 6, p. 191). This change can affect the nature of teaching to demand for a greater agency, autonomy, and leadership. Bearing in mind, they also require support and structure to ensure the work is sustainable and productive (Kraft *et al.*, 2015). In effect, extensive integration of technology across the participant schools forced teachers to acquire or increase their own digital proficiency; and attempting to cultivate for self-direction and self-determination both for themselves and among their students so they could work independently. Moreover, the findings also indicate that the enhanced collaboration among colleagues was perceived as influential for both participant teachers and school leaders in this emergency. Therefore, professional learning was not restricted to a work community, since most participants were willing to collaborate in online groups by sharing practices and adopting ideas to improve teaching, including distance teaching and issues with leadership practice. This highlights the crucial need for schools to support each other. For instance, it was noted that among all the six participating headteachers some of them were involved in such roles (including headteacher 2 who was mentoring and counselling and headteacher 3 who was involved in leadership beyond her own school by being a professional partner, helping colleagues in the borough during the crisis).

That said, professional development during the pandemic required significant adaptability from both leaders and staff. Feedback from School 1 highlighted the value of empowering teachers with autonomy, which supported professional growth and improved morale. In contrast, School 6 pointed out systemic barriers, such as excessive government directives, which necessitated greater self-led initiatives among staff. These insights align with distributed leadership, emphasizing the importance of shared responsibility and collective problem-solving in professional growth.

Also, worth noting that professional development as a learning process requires emotional involvement of staff individually and collectively (Avalos, 2011). This was evident in the work of participant school leaders, who not only addressed most of the ten executive tasks of Boin *et al.* (2013) to manage the crisis, but they also had to focus attention on the physical and psychological needs of their stakeholders. However, there was a limited amount of information regarding how these leaders attended to self-care practices. This can be related to the deficiency of the field of education and educational leadership for being behind in its empirical examination of the importance of self-care and its practitioners (Mankki and Raiha, 2022). Overall, headteacher 6 was the only school leader that experienced high levels of stress affecting his emotional ability. Demonstrating that EI is a critical component of leadership, relationships, and getting things done (Goleman, 2004). Other headteachers highlighted several ways in which they sought to attend to self-care (such as counselling, talking with their governing board, headteacher meetings, exercise, therapy, and self-talk). There was no consensus as to the importance of self-care, nor the ability to prioritise self-care amongst the range of duties associated with these school leaders during the crisis. Whilst consistent with educators including Harris and Jones (2020) self-care must be the main priority and prime concerns for all school

leaders. Along with this, comes the need for crisis and change management skills which are now the essentials of a school leader more than routine problem solving.

In sum, the key outcomes I outlined in this thesis emphasise models of professional development with a focus on people being able to internalise new models and approaches which help them to change their mindset and through that, their behaviour. Rather than a set of skills and strategies obtained through courses or wrapped up in a training manual, this formulation means a need for approaches to learning that facilitate understanding and enable application such as learning by doing and coaching and mentoring in the form of learning by getting ideas from others, which demands for a greater agency, autonomy, and leadership. This form of professional collaboration, similar to the PLC model I suggested earlier in chapter 3 (see Figure 3.3, p. 92), follows the principles of adult learning theories such as experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and the theory of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) (see Chapter 3, Table 3.2) to enhance the collective capacity of schools.

7.6 Reflexivity

This section builds on the broader reflexivity framework discussed in Chapter 4 by illustrating specific instances, such as mitigating bias during interviews and ensuring ethical awareness in the analysis process. Reflexivity has been integral to this research, allowing me to critically examine my role as both an insider and outsider researcher. My professional background as an educator influenced the ways I interpreted participants' insights, particularly during sensitive discussions regarding Covid-19's impact. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to capture my assumptions, decisions, and positionality. For instance, while working with School 6, where I had previous connections, I acknowledged the potential for bias and employed

member checking to validate interpretations. Conversely, in unfamiliar school contexts, I carefully built rapport with participants to ensure trust and openness. Reflecting on these dynamics allowed me to balance subjectivity and rigour, enhancing the study's ethical and methodological transparency. For example, while interviewing participants at School 6, where I had prior professional connections, I became aware of the risk of influencing responses due to my familiarity with some staff. To mitigate this, I adopted a neutral tone, avoided leading questions, and carefully cross-referenced data with other schools to ensure consistency. This reflexive awareness helped me remain conscious of the power dynamics at play and strengthened the credibility of my findings. For a comprehensive discussion of reflexivity, including the researcher's positionality and its impact on the study design, see Chapter 4, Section 4 (Pages 102-103; 105-108).

Additionally, while conducting interviews at School 4, I became aware of the potential influence of cultural and contextual differences on my interpretations. By revisiting my reflexive journal and seeking participant feedback, I ensured that these differences were considered when analysing themes. Similarly, in School 2, I encountered moments where participants were hesitant to discuss leadership challenges openly. To address this, I adjusted my interview approach by asking more open-ended, non-threatening questions and revisiting responses during follow-ups to clarify ambiguities.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter highlights the dynamic nature of school leadership across two distinct time points—before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings demonstrate how leadership practices evolved from more traditional instructional approaches in the pre-crisis period to adaptive, transformational, and distributed strategies during the crisis.

Participant feedback validated these themes, offering practical insights into how school leaders navigated systemic pressures, fostered resilience, and supported staff well-being. These findings contribute to theoretical discussions on leadership and emphasize the importance of equity, emotional intelligence, and systemic adaptability in sustaining school improvement during times of crisis.

To operationalise these findings, policymakers and leadership programmes should prioritise the following: (1) embedding emotional intelligence into leadership training to improve crisis management capabilities, (2) fostering teacher autonomy and leadership to strengthen collective problem-solving, (3) establishing systemic support mechanisms for professional development that prioritise adaptability, collaboration, and equity. These recommendations provide a pathway for sustaining school improvement and resilience in dynamic educational contexts.

The next chapter consolidates these findings and introduces two key contributions of this research: the Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI) model and the Holistic Approach to Student Success (HASS) framework. The ALEI model provides a structured approach for school leaders to navigate uncertainty, ensuring resilience, adaptability, and equity-driven decision-making. The HASS framework presents a holistic school improvement strategy, emphasizing teacher leadership, collaborative professionalism, and the well-being of both students and staff. Together, these models offer theoretical and practical contributions, equipping school leaders and policymakers with structured pathways to foster sustainable and equitable educational change. Chapter 8 elaborates on these contributions, offering final reflections and recommendations for future research and policy development.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

8.1 Introduction

This final chapter consolidates the findings of this research to address the overarching research objectives and their alignment with the thesis title: "The Role of School Leadership in Driving School Improvement Before and During the Covid-19 Pandemic." By synthesizing insights from leadership theories and empirical findings, the chapter highlights the dynamic and adaptive nature of school leadership across two distinct time periods: pre-pandemic and during the crisis.

The chapter is structured to demonstrate how this research contributes to theoretical, methodological, and practical advancements in the field of educational leadership. It provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, school leaders, and leadership development programmes, ensuring that the findings have practical relevance beyond academic discourse. Moreover, it reflects on the limitations of the study and offers directions for future research to build on these contributions.

By addressing the challenges and opportunities of leadership during crises, this chapter bridges the gap between theory and practice. The Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI) model, proposed in this research, encapsulates the study's core contributions, emphasizing resilience, collaboration, and equity as critical elements for driving sustainable school improvement. This chapter concludes the thesis by providing a roadmap for future efforts to enhance leadership in complex and evolving educational landscapes.

The following sections detail these findings, contributions, and recommendations, culminating in reflections on the study's limitations and its implications for future research.

8.2 Summary of the Findings

The findings of this study highlight the dynamic nature of school leadership across two time points: before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. They demonstrate how leadership styles evolved in response to systemic challenges, emphasizing instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership models. Key findings include:

1. The pivotal role of instructional leadership in enhancing teaching and learning outcomes, particularly in hierarchical school settings before the pandemic.
2. The shift towards distributed leadership during the pandemic, enabling schools to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.
3. The emergence of teacher leadership as a critical factor in fostering resilience and innovation.

Participant feedback post-research reinforced these findings, offering practical insights into how schools navigated challenges while maintaining a focus on student and staff well-being. These findings align with the research objectives, contributing to a deeper understanding of how leadership practices influence school improvement under different contextual pressures.

Chapter two of this thesis provided a review of the literature relating to the field of school effectiveness at two different timepoints, before the Covid-19 pandemic and during it. In that chapter I developed an argument based on the existing link between leadership styles and school effectiveness (Cruickshank, 2017). The greater importance of leadership in the success of both general and educational organisations has led to various leadership theories and further development of new models of leadership (Bush and Glover, 2014). Therefore, considerable conceptual confusion was identified, rooted in the diversity of views on effective leadership models in the field of educational leadership (Bush and Glover, 2003; Day *et al.*, 2016; Harris, 2004; Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; and Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009). Particularly, two sets of perspectives on effective leadership styles were recognised. On the one hand, a single form of leadership model was considered as an effective variable for improving school outcomes. In doing so, the most regularly cited theories were the two theories of instructional leadership (Arnett *et al.*, 2018; Robinson *et al.*, 2008) and transformational leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Shatzer *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, an integrated form of leadership styles was suggested effective for a sustainable school improvement (Day *et al.*, 2016; Reed and Swaminathan, 2014).

Additionally, under the circumstances of NPM educational reform policies, it was noted that the role and expectations of school leadership have changed. These market-based reform policies (Tolofari, 2005) however, strengthened the status and the importance of educational leadership to schools and allowed more leadership styles by choice or necessity to be practiced; but they changed the internal operation of the school to more closely resemble a business with all the incentives and trappings that are necessary for setting up and running a business such as performance management and measurement, business-like management styles and key

performance indicators (Gobby and Wilkins, 2020). School improvement for this model was defined in terms of improving the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms, which in turn has led to an excessive focus on internal structural change rather than engaging with wider contextual factors. In this way, a great portion of the literature on school improvement focuses attention on school improvement through teaching and learning. Whereas taking a holistic view, similar to Boyer's (1995) belief, I suggested that school improvement is about people improvement. This notion of school improvement is closely linked to the development of teachers, school leaders (Burner, 2018; NGA, 2020; Postholm, 2012), and students, as well as the creation of a collective learning environment (Armstrong, 2015; Gilbert, 2017; Greatbatch and Tate, 2019; Muijs, 2015) to develop learning communities for the professional growth and development of everyone (Jones *et al.*, 2013; Louis, 2015; Reynolds *et al.*, 2014). Although some schools comply with the NPM reform policies, there are many others that do well in overcoming the implications of these reforms. Hence, conceptual confusion was again apparent in relation to what school leaders, particularly headteachers do or prioritise in the context of NPM (Pashiaridis and Brauckmann, 2018). In which, the case study chapters recognised the elements beyond the success of school leaders in this context as to promote a sense of internal accountability within their schools.

This constantly changing landscape of education whether caused by political ideologies, economic reasons, or a health pandemic has increased challenges especially in the performance of school leadership and called for effective leadership styles and behaviours (Fullan, 2019). For instance, in response to the NPM reform policies, chapter two identified a hybrid style of Edupreneurial leadership model necessary for the practice of schools regardless of their type and context. Additionally,

Change leadership was introduced as an effective leadership model, necessary for the complex world we live in (Fullan, 2007; 2008; 2020; Hargreaves, 2009; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). However, the disruption caused by the Covid-19 crisis revealed the fallouts and the systems that already struggled to support all learners (Fullan *et al.*, 2020). It became clear that school improvement through NPM is no longer achieving all the movement set out to accomplish in terms of equity and opportunity for all (Fullan *et al.*, 2020). Suggesting new pedagogies for deeper learning as a solution, which provides learning for all and helps students to become knowledgeable and skilled change makers through deeper learning (Fullan and Langworthy, 2014, see Chapter 2, Section 2.7.2). As well as demanding a focus on social improvement rather than school improvement alone to foster educational success for all (Groves and West-Burnham, 2020). Considering a lack of clarity about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the performance of schools during the crisis lockdowns (Huber and Helm, 2020), I realised that this thesis is one of the few studies to explain how educational leaders address an unforeseen and threatening event requiring ongoing attention (Urlick *et al.*, 2021). Though the shocking wave of the Covid-19 pandemic as a disaster of our time, demands for leadership scholars and practitioners to engage in new conventions for leadership and organisational change at a time when there is an opening for new practices to emerge. As such, defining leadership was associated with terms such as resilience, adaptation, innovation, and distributed leadership (Sarkar and Clegg, 2021; Sergi, Lusiani and Langley, 2021; Uhl-Bien, 2021). In addition, however, the crisis leadership theory of Boin *et al.* (2013) proves sound as a comprehensive framework among the other conceptual theories in the field (McLeod and Dulskey, 2021), but the concerns revealed in the case study data, in line with the literature (e.g., Duckers *et al.*, 2017), was a need to extend the framework to address a psychological dimension

as another important task of crisis leadership. As such, suggesting the focus of school leadership preparation and training programmes to be on wellbeing and self-care, as well as crisis and change management skills that are now essential skills of a school leader rather than routine problem solving.

This study set out to explore the experiences and perceptions of school leaders, including headteachers, as well as teachers about effective school leadership styles and strategies leading to school improvement both prior and during the pandemic time. Beyond school leadership literature and policy discourse, the multifaceted nature of school leadership surfaced at various points of the research process. How the school leaders, particularly headteachers, enacted in this changing landscape of education, their role, performance, and behaviours remained prominent throughout, explored through the two case study chapters and the chapter concerned with the analysis of the findings.

The methodological choice of mine was a consequence of conducting a small-scale systematic review (from 2016 to 2019) to identify the most popular methodological approaches used by scholars and researchers investigating leadership in the field of education. Overall, the study's method was successful in enabling its aim to be met. Through its empirical research using interpretative enquiry, a depth of understanding was reached, focusing on six case study schools. The school leaders and teachers of those schools had a voice through a sequence of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The methodological approach I used was case study to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, whilst at the same time considering that phenomenon in terms of the participants' views, their cultural backgrounds and day-to-day experiences.

8.3 Contribution to Knowledge

This research makes significant contributions to the field of educational leadership through its theoretical, methodological, and practical insights. Theoretically, it extends the existing literature on instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership by demonstrating their complementary application during crises. The introduction of the Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI) model offers a novel lens to address the complexities of school leadership in crisis contexts. Unlike traditional models, ALEI emphasizes adaptability, equity, and stakeholder well-being, bridging critical gaps in leadership theories by integrating the psychological and emotional dimensions of leadership during uncertainty.

8.3.1 *The Original Contribution Made to Existing Theoretical Knowledge*

This study makes significant theoretical contributions by addressing conceptual confusions within educational leadership theories and extending the limited empirical research in this field. By recognising the challenges and ambiguities faced by headteachers and school leaders, the research bridges critical gaps in understanding leadership practices, particularly in complex contexts such as New Public Management (NPM) and the Covid-19 pandemic.

A key contribution of this study lies in advancing leadership theories in practice. It extends the empirical understanding of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership styles, exploring their relationship with school and student improvement. While previous studies, such as those by Bush and Glover (2003) and Day et al. (2016), have often discussed these theories in isolation, this research demonstrates their complementary application, particularly during crises. By examining the impact

of NPM-driven accountability policies, the study highlights the tensions between efficiency-focused models and the human-centred needs of school improvement. It provides new insights into how headteachers navigate these tensions, contributing to underexplored aspects of leadership in NPM contexts.

Another significant contribution is the bridging of gaps in crisis leadership research. Existing literature on crisis leadership has predominantly focused on non-educational settings (Urlick et al., 2021). This study uniquely examines school leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic, offering insights into how leadership styles evolved to address unprecedented challenges. It underscores the critical role of teacher leadership in fostering resilience and collaboration, emphasizing the importance of shared leadership practices during crises.

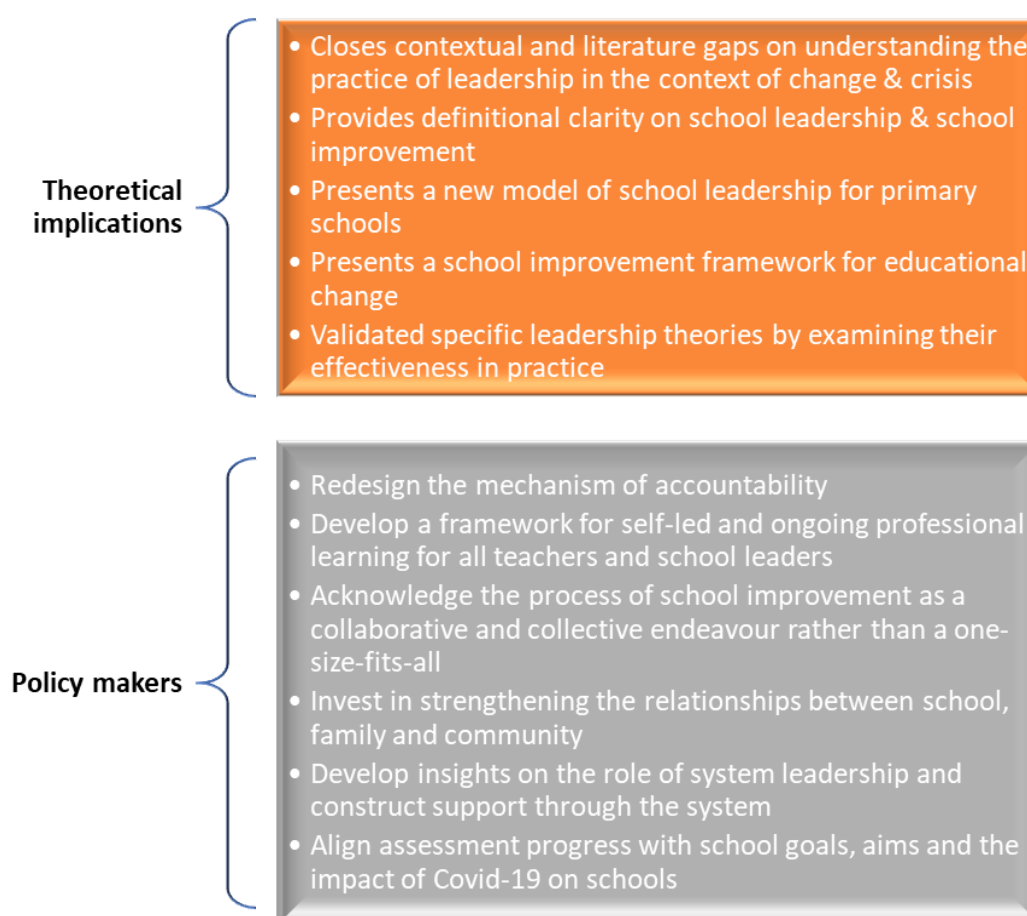
This research also introduces the Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI) model, which combines resilience, equity, and innovation as critical components of leadership during uncertainty. By prioritising adaptability and stakeholder well-being, the ALEI model addresses gaps in traditional frameworks and offers a practical guide for school leaders navigating crises. This model contributes a new perspective to leadership theories, emphasizing the importance of equity and innovation in promoting sustainable improvement.

Finally, the study proposes a unified theoretical framework for school improvement by integrating instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership theories. Grounded in the principle that school improvement is fundamentally about "people improvement" (Boyer, 1995), this framework critiques the data-driven instructional focus of NPM policies. Instead, it highlights the value of holistic, collaborative, and

human-centred approaches to leadership, offering a more inclusive and sustainable perspective on school improvement.

These theoretical contributions directly address the research objectives, providing fresh perspectives on leadership practices and their impact on school improvement in challenging contexts. By bridging theory and practice, the study validates specific leadership theories through their application in participant schools, offering actionable insights for future research and educational reform. The theoretical contributions are further illustrated in the accompanying diagram, where the orange section highlights these advancements, while the grey section outlines broader practical implications discussed in subsequent sections.

Figure 8.1: Contributions of the Study



8.4 Recommendations

The recommendations presented in this study are grounded in the lived experiences and insights of school leaders and classroom teachers. They reflect the complexities of leadership in both routine and crisis contexts, offering practical pathways for fostering resilience, equity, and collaboration in educational settings. However, given the limited empirical understandings of educational leadership behaviour and styles in the two contexts of NPM and the Covid-19 crisis in schools, they are made with the intention of provoking further debate and discussion. In that spirit, recommendations are made for policy makers, school leaders at all levels, and for leadership development programmes.

8.4.1 Recommendations for Policymakers

Policymakers must adopt leadership frameworks that emphasize equity, resilience, and adaptability to address the complex challenges faced by schools, particularly during crises. A key recommendation is the reform of accountability measures, shifting away from rigid performance metrics toward holistic evaluations that prioritise the well-being of both staff and students. Such an approach would encourage schools to focus on broader aspects of educational success, including emotional and social development, rather than solely academic outcomes.

Another important recommendation is the promotion of collaboration across schools. Policymakers should facilitate partnerships that enable schools to share resources and provide mutual support during times of crisis. Collaborative networks can foster collective problem-solving and strengthen the overall resilience of the educational system.

Investing in professional development is also crucial. Ongoing training for school leaders and teachers should focus on building skills in crisis management, emotional intelligence, and adaptive leadership strategies. By equipping educators with these tools, policymakers can ensure that schools are better prepared to navigate uncertainty and foster sustainable improvement.

These recommendations align with the findings of this study and highlight the need for a leadership approach that prioritises well-being, adaptability, and collaboration in shaping the future of education. There is no need to think too much about how schools are structured and organised because schools in England have had more than enough of that in recent years with limited benefit. It should be acknowledged that the root of the problem lies in NPM reform policies, which have led to increased competition, too much choice, stronger accountability, and a heavy reliance on standardised testing. In their post-research feedback, School 2 emphasized the need for systemic reforms to move beyond narrow, data-driven approaches. They highlighted how such models fail to capture the complexity of educational leadership and the broader human elements critical to meaningful change. This perspective underscores the importance of rethinking current policies to prioritise equity, collaboration, and long-term sustainability. While what followed NPM reforms, was a move towards new forms of responsibility for quality and effectiveness, bringing with it the changing role of headteachers charged with taking forward national policy directives within a new managerialist perspective. Leadership was positioned as different from and morally superior to management, enabling formal leaders to influence staff and engage them in school improvement. Both Schools 2 and 3 adopted coaching-based approaches during the pandemic, moving away from traditional teacher observation methods. These practices emphasized professional growth through trust, collaboration, and

constructive feedback, fostering a supportive environment for teachers to thrive. This approach reflects a broader need to shift from accountability-driven practices to strategies that prioritise teacher development as a cornerstone of school improvement. Nevertheless, in School 1, leadership was implemented as a position with a focus on managing the instructional programme of school through tasks such as classroom observation, monitoring of teaching and learning, and feedback was an effective channel for the senior leaders to fulfil accountability of standards (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009), influence the teaching and learning process, and promote professional development at school (Ovando, 2005).

As such, school improvement through NPM concentrated on improving the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms. Whilst that focus is necessary and important on its own, it is not sufficient, either to develop fully that broader set of skills and attitudes which will equip young people to flourish in a rapidly changing world, or to bring about sustainable long-term change in schools (Groves, Hobbs and West-Burnham, 2017). The agenda of NPM improvement defines school improvement by the school's journey through the Ofsted grading structure. Emphasising top-down performance management, in turn, leads to a sharper range of narrower outcome measures, a tighter inspection regime, and the encouragement of a range of new school providers. On the other hand, even if the NPM model was operating optimally, the notion of a self-improving school system still poses several difficulties and misunderstandings about the mechanisms of accountability, each of which has helped to lead to where schools are now. Some of these difficulties include, a) promoting a simple market-based consumer choice model where parents/carers are simple consumers rather than considering them as educational partners who contribute directly to the final outcomes; b) defining school success in terms of measurement- encouraging an

emphasis on assessment and test scores and teaching to the test; and finally, c) establishing the knowledge of a school-centric view. While schools make a difference to educational outcomes, and good schools make a greater difference, there are factors which are not in the control of any school that make an even greater difference—such as the role of parents, community, and family background (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Nonetheless, this knowledge is largely unused by policy makers. Therefore, one can argue that the system is set up to fail. However, with the hit of Covid-19, the gap has grown across early years, primary school and secondary school, and specific groups are increasingly left behind (Hutchinson, Reader and Akhal, 2020).

As I learnt from the data, in keeping educational provision functioning during Covid-19 pandemic, schools responded quickly to the multiple impacts this outbreak was having on their communities. I noted, the forms of support they offered went well beyond the educational needs to ensure, for instance, that pupils reliant on free school meals would not go hungry, and that families most in need of other support services could access them. As a public resource, schools recognised, they had a vital role in keeping communities together at a time of crisis and responded accordingly. Yet, they have received little public recognition or credit for this. Rather, policymakers' attention has been narrowly focused on reinstating the current test and accountability system, and the fast-paced curriculum delivery it mandates, with very little regard for actual circumstances on the ground. While the evidence, including that I revealed by this research, shows that school improvement through NPM in England is stalling. The findings from this study, particularly those shared by participant schools, underscore the importance of systemic reforms that:

Shift accountability measures to focus on holistic evaluations that prioritise staff and student well-being.

Promote coaching-based approaches as an alternative to traditional teacher observation models.

Develop policies that empower schools to foster collaborative and innovative practices. Reduce the bureaucratic burdens created by excessive data collection, allowing leaders to focus on teaching and learning.

Recommendation 1: Redesigning Accountability

Participants identified that, in order for schools to be able to achieve school improvement, performance and inspection-based accountability culture was particularly highlighted by most of them as a key barrier that needs to first be shifted. For example, some of the school leaders from community schools were pushing back against external, top-down measures of performance and growing a culture of development upwards, starting with their approach to staff continuing professional development (CPD). Additionally, they offered insights around how barriers have been successfully overcome in reality through creating a culture in which staff were trusted and had freedom. Table 8.2 below briefly summarises some of the efforts:

Table 8.2: Recommendations arising from practice in case study schools

Schools	Requests	Solutions
School 2	Both school leaders and teachers found school improvement through performance based NPM reforms challenging and requested an alternative perspective on the mechanism of accountability in the education policy of England	The headteacher created a culture of collaborative professionalism to enhance the power of collective capacity and manage the balance between external and internal accountability within the school
School 2 and School 3	Both school leaders and teachers highlighted performance management as a barrier to support the development of teachers	They reframed the idea of performance management into a teacher-led professional growth strategy that provided teachers voice and professional identity

Although accountability pressures were on hold during the pandemic, a single year or two-year release from these pressures is not sufficient, as the pandemic will have long-lasting impacts that go beyond even the next academic year. Suggesting these disruptions need to be accounted for in future assessments might prompt an opportunity to revisit the goals and aims of schooling and how policy makers should assess progress towards those goals. However, unfortunately, the majority of the participating community school leaders were not optimistic that the pandemic will change the accountability system in England.

Recommendation 2: Ensuring Teachers Thrive

The data collected from participant schools suggest that not all teachers and school leaders currently have access to good CPD. Whilst high-quality professional development can significantly improve pupils' learning outcomes and improve teacher and pupil wellbeing (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018). The early career framework proposed by government in 2019 is a step in the right direction (DfE, 2019). Meaning that all new teachers should have an entitlement to evidence-based professional development in the first few years of teaching. However, this should carry on further and work towards an entitlement to CPD for all teachers and school leaders regardless of their experience. Hence, there needs to be a fundamental shift in policy, culture, and practice so that high-quality CPD becomes the norm for all teachers, at every stage of their career. The evidence I provided by this thesis, indicated that some of the community schools regarded effective CPD in terms of engagement with research and collaborative activities. Suggesting a key role for the CPD lead in any school to engage with the evidence and research, and to ensure that professional learning programmes and activities are built around the best available evidence. Furthermore, these schools empowered teachers through the idea of teacher leadership, where teachers'

responsibilities, same as with their leaders, extended beyond classrooms, as well as having a teacher-centred professional learning provision so teachers could lead their own and school learning. As a result, I identified features of effective professional development that are also consistent across recent evidence reviews. These are:

1. Professional learning should be ongoing, with opportunities to apply learning in practice, and reflect and improve over time
2. Professional learners should be able to lead their own learning and see the relevance of the training to their job requirements and their professional goals and aspirations.
3. Headteachers and CPD facilitators should be experts in the ways adult learn, as well as the content and process of the CPD
4. Headteachers should act as facilitators to create and protect the conditions for learning, for example, time and space, while identifying and removing barriers such as workload.
5. Professional learners should engage in structured collaborative learning, focused on reflection, problem solving and enquiry such as action research
6. Professional learning should be facilitated through coaching and mentoring, with opportunities for explicit modelling of skills (including live video), giving feedback on efforts development is more effective when teachers are leading the process rather than being passive learners.

In parallel, I observed that the Covid-19 crisis also promoted quite similar patterns of professional development for teachers in the forms of learning by doing and coaching and mentoring through learning by getting ideas from others, which demands for a greater agency, autonomy, and leadership. But whether schools will continue following this provision, is an open question for now. Also, it is worth noting that, after the pandemic teachers may be more likely to leave the profession, which is particularly alarming given that the schools under study serve large populations of disadvantaged

and vulnerable students. As such, it is wise to recommend that the DfE will need to provide significant incentives, not only for early career teachers but also for those with experience to stay. In addition, teacher retention policies should also include non-pecuniary incentives like more flexible work schedules, more freedom, and more support staff for teachers to work.

Recommendation 3: Policies and Structures to Encourage School Collaboration

Notably, during the Covid-19 crisis, the government turned to local authorities to work with schools to coordinate the community-level response. Regardless of school types, whether a school was local authority maintained or part of a multi-academy trust. What mattered was that schools worked together in the interest of all children and their community, irrespective of governance. Equally, through working together, the majority of the participating school leaders took seriously their responsibility to the pupils in their schools and every child in their locality. Encouraging that school improvement should be a collaborative and collective endeavour. Instead, the current system encourages and incentivises competition over collaboration. While it is important for schools to be able to identify what is going to have the greatest impact and stop doing things that do not- external support and challenge can help to achieve this and it links to accountability. Ofsted inspection does not provide detailed diagnostic insights but as an outcome of this global pandemic, it becomes clear that all schools should collaborate with each other and take a holistic approach to student success. For greater success, of course, support should be reinforced through system structures and policy settings rather than to expect this support to be constructed within each school (Teacher Development Trust, 2020). This explains why the DfE (2010) created a compelling proposition to encourage the most successful leaders to become national leaders of education (NLEs). Emphasising the importance of moral purpose and

professional agency, so they can use their expertise in a flexible way to provide appropriate support to those schools in need of help (NAHT, 2017). However, for the NLE role to succeed, NLEs need the freedom and trust from the government to go beyond recommending a relatively narrow set of DfE approved programmes (Groves and West-Burnham, 2020). Developing a recommendation that there should be a genuine professional partnership among school leaders, same as happened during the pandemic, to work with and to help other leaders in the need to identify strengths that can be built on, issues that need resolving, and bespoke solutions. Although for these solutions to be effective, they need to be tailored to the specific needs of the school. Rather than a one-size-fits-all process promoted by NPM policies, schools need to own their improvement and not have it dictated to them. This indeed would represent a fundamental shift in the role of NLEs, from the external expert imposing pre-approved solutions, to a professional partner who is prepared to engage in the detail of school improvement. Therefore, the following suggestion can be made:

- The government should invest in collaborative partnerships– bringing together multi-academy trusts, local authorities and maintained schools, to develop more coherent improvement approaches.

Recommendation 4: Rebuilding and Strengthening School-family Relationships

My last recommendation for policy makers would be to allocate funds to shore up school-family relationships. However, a step taken by the DfE (2019) in introducing the ‘*Engaging parents with relationships education policy*’ could be a good start for primary schools to provide parents opportunity to feed in their views, but it is not sufficient. As I perceived from the interviews, the participating teachers were struggling to reach parents and frustrated in addition to their role, which was an additional burden that fell upon them. This might indicate a need to deepen trust and build stronger school-

community ties. Therefore, calling for investment for family outreach and communication, particularly bilingual specialists to help in working with parents and wider families to get students the support they need.

8.4.2 Recommendations for School Leaders at All Levels

The feedback I received from participant schools during post-research suggests that school leaders should focus on fostering a culture of trust, collaboration, and adaptability. For example, School 1 demonstrated the value of teacher autonomy in fostering professional growth and sustaining morale. The headteacher reflected: *“Engaging with this research reinforced the importance of empowering teachers as critical contributors to school improvement.”*

Similarly, School 2 emphasized the role of trust-based leadership, describing their approach as a “high challenge, low threat” model that balanced accountability with support. As their feedback noted: *“Fostering trust and staff well-being through shared responsibility was critical to our success.”*

Finally, School 3 highlighted the need for emotional intelligence in leadership, emphasizing the balance between compassionate communication and assertiveness in decision-making. *“Balancing compassion with authority was essential to leading effectively during the crisis,”* their headteacher noted.

These insights suggest that school leaders can strengthen their leadership by:

- Enhancing emotional intelligence to build strong relationships with staff and students.
- Empowering teacher leadership to encourage autonomy and innovation.

- Building resilience through proactive strategies, including collaborative planning for future crises.

Throughout this study I noted that the fundamental role of any school leader is to create the conditions in which teachers can flourish and pupils can succeed. School leaders play a critical role in creating a culture of professional learning so that every teacher is supported to grow and improve their practice on an ongoing basis. To fulfil this role effectively, the study suggests that school leaders need to have a strong understanding of how teachers learn and improve. Additionally, they need to know what effective CPD looks like and be prepared to prioritise teacher CPD in the face of competing priorities. This means that school leaders require to act as a buffer and a filter to protect teachers from the constant invasion of new initiatives and strategies (Brighouse, 2020). Acknowledging the importance of peer-to-peer learning, the case study chapters identified school leaders as facilitators giving space, time, and support for teachers to collaborate and learn from and together. Further actions of leaders to promote teacher collaboration included: a) design for collaboration (e.g., lesson study); b) promoting peer-to-peer classroom visits; c) disseminating instructional leadership at all levels throughout the school; and d) promoting and creating teacher led professional learning communities. While for leaders to be able to create such learning communities in which teachers and pupils can learn and grow alongside each other, the government needs to support, develop and trust them too. Moreover, they need to establish and implement instructional competencies for headteachers; promote collaboration among headteachers and school leaders within and across schools; and ensure practical professional development opportunities for headteachers and school leaders which I have looked at in the next section.

8.4.3 Recommendations for Leadership Development Programmes

Leadership development programmes must equip leaders to address the complex challenges of modern education effectively. Insights from this research, enriched by post-research feedback from participating schools, highlight several critical areas of focus. One such area is crisis leadership training. The overwhelming volume of government directives during the pandemic, as noted in School 6's feedback, revealed the pressing need for tools to help leaders navigate systemic pressures. Their headteacher reflected, "The sheer volume of constantly updated policies placed significant strain on leaders." Leadership programmes should therefore prioritize preparing leaders to manage such pressures with confidence and strategic adaptability.

Another essential area is collaborative learning. Reflections from Schools 1 and 2 demonstrated how distributed leadership practices foster adaptability and resilience in challenging times. Leadership programmes should encourage peer learning and shared accountability, enabling leaders to develop collaborative skills that enhance institutional flexibility and collective problem-solving.

Emotional intelligence also emerged as a key focus area. School 3's feedback emphasized the importance of empathy and interpersonal skills during crises. Their headteacher observed, "Developing empathy and listening skills was key to maintaining staff morale and achieving institutional goals during the crisis." Leadership development programmes should incorporate emotional intelligence training, empowering leaders to maintain morale, navigate complex relationships, and achieve goals with a human-centred approach.

By addressing these areas—crisis leadership, collaboration, and emotional intelligence—leadership development programmes can prepare leaders to become resilient, adaptable, and effective in sustaining school improvement during periods of uncertainty.

Therefore, I realised that it is school leaders and their governing boards, who create the conditions in which everyone can develop and thrive. Nevertheless, the pandemic highlighted inconsistent support for school leaders. In some of the participant schools, there were well-established training programmes, coaching and mentoring schemes, and emotional wellbeing support for school leaders during the pandemic. Whilst in others, the leaders were largely left to fend for themselves. Governing bodies have an important role to play when it comes to ensuring headteachers are accessing their entitlement to mentoring and professional development (Education Policy Institute, 2020). School leaders need to be confident in their leadership of learning (NAHT, 2020), skilled at improving teaching and have a secure understanding of how to lead change (Fullan, 2019; 2020). Yet, the challenges of school leadership have never been greater and the demands of the role never higher. Over the last decade, school leaders have found themselves dealing with extraordinary challenges, ranging from the effects of economic austerity and public sector spending cuts to the unprecedented impact of Covid-19. Leading to a new definition of the school leadership role, hence, extended responsibilities to focus on key areas for improved student learning such as:

- supporting and developing teacher quality
- goal setting, assessment, and accountability
- strategic financial and human resource management
- collaborating with other schools

However, as I explored throughout this study, some headteachers struggled to manage their ever-shifting roles, and their expanded responsibilities. As a result, when the pandemic is over, much rebuilding work will be on their shoulders: they will have the task of rebuilding relationships, modifying curriculum and instruction, and ensuring adequate student supports. Alongside these challenges, has sat the ever-present spectre of a high-stakes accountability regime. Rather, the system needs to be rebalanced by holding schools to account and at the same time helping them to improve. Just like teachers in which they need the right conditions to thrive, school leaders do too. This is to recommend that leaders will need additional support—whether in terms of additional administrative staff, emotional and wellbeing support, or technical support—to help them fulfil these roles.

8.5 Recommendations for Theoretical Development and Future Research

The recommendations for theoretical development and future research are rooted in part, from the findings and discussion of the findings, and from the limitations of this study. As I mentioned earlier, any recommendations are offered with a degree of humility. However, given the limited empirical research conducted into leadership theories in relation to the role and responsibilities of headteachers in the context of NPM and crisis in schools, it is that hoped some insights are worthy of sharing. In that spirit, recommendations are made for theoretical development before discussing the significance of the results for future research, the methodological challenges, shortcomings in the research design and their implications for future research. The limitations of the study affecting the validity or transferable analytic generalisation of the findings are recognised.

8.5.1 *The Significance of the Results for Theoretical Development*

The main recommendations for theoretical development concur with educators including (Bush and Glover, 2003; Day *et al.*, 2016; Harris, 2004; Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; Huber and Helm, 2020; Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009; Pashiardis and Brauckmann, 2018; and Urick *et al.*, 2021) with respect to various confusions and their root causes within the theories of leadership. Those confusions surfaced at various points of the study, requiring continuous negotiation by headteachers and school leaders. Identifying how they did so will contribute to the limited empirically based theory available.

Recommendation 5: The Development of New Conventions for Leadership and Organisational Change

Leadership is often conceptualised in terms of a division between leadership and management. However, in agreement with those of Connell *et al.* (2019) no firm distinction between these terms. But I insist that they have an intimate connection, a great deal of overlap, and both aspects are equally important and necessary for successful schools. The tested leadership theories for school improvement in this study indicate that new conventions of leadership and school improvement are underway. Although there has been a consistency with the instructional role of school leadership but there is a need for collaboration and a focus on improving teaching and learning, which supports the adaptive and equity aspects of enhancing instructional quality. Influencing the engagement of teachers and promoting teacher leadership (Wenner and Campbell, 2017) through fostering a collaborative culture and shared accountability in which a fundamental role of headteacher is to facilitate and create the conditions for learning. Though the shocking wave of the Covid-19 as a disaster of 21st century, has made the situation even more complex. Based on these circumstances

there is a demand for scholars and practitioners to engage with new conventions for leadership such as a dispersed, collaborative, collective and multimodal endeavour. This new understanding of leadership requires school leaders to be adaptable, addressing the dynamic and evolving challenges of today's environment.

Three specific areas are suggested for theoretical development:

1. More empirically based theorising is required in relation to the extent of teacher autonomy among state-maintained schools and School Trusts in England (Worth and Van den Brande, 2020). In this study, I identified that autonomy is lower in academy schools, part of MATs. Although it is likely that teacher autonomy can be varied between School Trusts with different operating models.
2. More empirically based theorising is required in relation to professional development for school leaders. While many school leadership programmes exist (e.g., formal professional development opportunities like NPQs), but they are not equipping participants with all the skills they need. Furthermore, very few target the leaders of tomorrow (Elliot and Hollingsworth, 2020). This involves the need for self-care theory examining how school leaders attend to self-care practices amidst the array of job-embedded demands of today's school leader (Urick *et al.*, 2021). As well as the need in learning new skills to deal with the change and complexities of the world we live in (Harris and Jones, 2020). This study identified how school leaders and the surrounding stakeholders dealt with the physical, professional, relational, emotional, and psychological aspects of self-care to avoid burnout and promote wellbeing for their school community and themselves.
3. More empirically based theorising is required in relation to which model or models of professional collaboration are most effective in the success of schools (Darling-Hammond, 2016). While acknowledging the effectiveness of professional learning programmes in terms of being self-directed, ongoing, and evidence-based, this study identified two models of professional learning within the practice of participant schools such as learning by doing and coaching and mentoring- a purposeful and regular collaboration among teachers and school

leaders to learn together. While face-to-face professional learning had to move to online virtual communities of practice (VCoPs), it would be interesting to see the conditions needed for VCoPs to succeed in the long term. As well as, whether VCoPs can provide the same depth of engagement as face-to-face alternatives (Yang *et al.*, 2020).

8.5.2 The Significance of the Results for Future Research

The main recommendations for future research relate to the conduct of other empirical studies to further explain, confirm, or challenge the findings of the research in this thesis.

Recommendation 6: The Development of Other Empirical Studies

Five specific studies are suggested:

1. The current research was initially designed to focus its attention on outstanding primary schools. However, with the advent of Covid-19, this purposeful sampling had to change into a convenience approach. Therefore, a future study on successful practices in Ofsted 'outstanding' rated schools could help schools learn from what works and draw attention to the characteristics of outstanding provision.
2. This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of primary headteachers, school leaders and classroom teachers, believing the leadership styles of headteachers to be integral to the success of schools. Future studies could explore at greater depth the experiences and perceptions of school governance and key members of school effectiveness teams from local authorities regarding their own role in developing the leadership capacity of headteachers.
3. The current research provided a cross-sectional snapshot of six individual school histories. A longitudinal study could follow to detect developments or changes in the perspectives of the target population in post-Covid time. In doing so, a deeper understanding of the school leaders and teachers' roles through key transition points could be garnered.
4. With a growing number of schools, particularly secondary schools, converting into academies, there would seem to be potential in developing a study to carry out a comparison between academies and state-maintained schools in terms of their characteristics and performances.

5. Also worthy of further study is that schools need research to guide the recovery from Covid-19 disruption. Noting schools want to minimise the losses gained through school closures but returning schools to business as usual would be a mistake. Often, such research is overlooked by educators and policy makers who mistakenly think they know what works best. But putting evidence-based insights to work in classrooms nationally would help children to recover from the educational damage inflicted by the pandemic. Of course, one challenge is the huge variation in classrooms and schools around the United Kingdom. It is not a guarantee that something that works for a particular classroom or child can work for others. A better way to get research insights into the classroom is to encourage teachers to get fully involved with research and support students to try evidence-backed approaches for themselves. Rather, than a top-down approach that forces new methods on educators.

8.5.3 Methodological Challenges

To identify the most popular methodological patterns used in researching leadership in education, I conducted a small-scale systematic review (from 2016 to 2019). As a result, case studies were the second most popular methodology for researchers investigating similar phenomena over the same time period in the field. In 29 studies included in the systematic review however, only a few studies provided an accurate description and justification for using this approach. Acknowledging the confusion, I attempted to demonstrate rigour through providing adequate descriptions of methodological foundations, which lead to research being interpreted as high-quality or credible (Hallberg, 2013; Morse, 2011). However, several methodological challenges need to be acknowledged and addressed.

Shortcomings in the Research Design and Implications for Future Research

There were strengths to the design of this study, enabling a depth of understanding to be reached, arguably not possible using different approaches. Nevertheless, due to the crisis, I was unable to undertake any direct observation of leadership and management practice of schools. Equally, I did not take any interviewing of

governance and members of school effectiveness from local authorities. Some would argue that would have given the study a more well-rounded perspective. However, that would have been a different study and difficult to achieve during the pandemic.

Limitations of the Study Affecting the Validity or Generalisability of the Findings

As I discussed in detail within the methodology chapter, this study comprised empirical research using constructivist approach to reach a depth of understanding, with a focus on six case study schools. As such, taking an interpretivist stance, a subjectivist rather than an objectivist approach was adopted. The focus for the research conducted was on the experiences and perceptions of primary headteachers, school leaders, and classroom teachers, articulating a commitment to taking forward their perspectives on effective leadership styles and behaviours both before and during the Covid-19 crisis.

The sample was carefully constructed (Cohen *et al.*, 2006) using purposive sampling methods alongside elements of convenience sampling (Burton *et al.*, 2008). Consistent with a life history approach, headteacher and school leader selection was based on respondents who have the best knowledge and experience of the research topic (Elo *et al.*, 2014), enabling them to talk for extended periods of time, rather than seeking generalisability through quantitative surveying methods (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Given the constructivist approach adopted in this research and the nature of the research questions, the case study methodology was considered the most appropriate approach to provide rich data or in other words thick descriptions (Yin, 2003) of the phenomena under study. Such thick descriptions gave me access to the subtleties of changing and multiple interpretations (Walsham, 1995b). Above these strengths and values, case studies do not claim to be representative, but the emphasis is on what can be learned from a single case. In this multiple case study research, the

aim is to draw conclusions that can be applied more widely than the cases themselves and enhance the transferability of results (Tierney and Lanford, 2019) in developing a framework for best practice in primary schools. Two different types of primary schools were selected within the same local authority in London: an academy school as (part of a MAT) and a maintained type of community school. All schools were located in deprived districts of the borough with a high percentage of free school meals and English as an additional language. Unfortunately, I could not overcome an insufficient sample size of academy schools due to the conditions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the study's reliance on convenience sampling, while pragmatic given the constraints of the pandemic, limits the broader applicability of findings. Additionally, the absence of school observations, due to pandemic restrictions, constrained the study's ability to triangulate findings through direct practice observation. These limitations underscore the importance of contextualising the study's conclusions within its methodological boundaries. Also, represent a limitation which may have impacted the research findings and predictions on the leadership practice of academy schools. However, the diversity of case studies including schools with various educational performance (such as outstanding, good, and inadequate), as well as their occurrence in two different time points before the crisis and during it, indeed allowed me to collect extra data on the impact of change and crisis on the phenomenon under study and enhance the depth and breadth of the cases and their response to the pandemic. Each case was studied for interest in itself, and it was hoped that each would provide insight into specific leadership theory or theories, and then the insights gathered across the six cases would help to understand the phenomenon in general.

As a form of case study research, the research offers trustworthiness as a pragmatic alternative to validity and generalisability. Transparency was key in terms of making methodological decisions clear, describing the production of interpretations and making available the primary data. I collected a large quantity of case study data to enable the exploration of significant features, create plausible interpretations, test for the trustworthiness of interpretations, and construct an argument or story related to relevant research conveyed convincingly. Triangulation of data was built into the design of this study. However, instead of methodological triangulation, multi respondent triangulation (Bush, 2003b) complemented the study's constructivist approach. This type of triangulation added validity to the research findings by generating and comparing different respondents' perspectives, on the topic under investigation. Validation rather than validity was felt important (Mishler, 1990). Instead of reliability and internal/external validity, I paid attention to "*the stability, trustworthiness, and scope*" of the findings (Elliott, 2005, pp. 22-25).

Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable directions for future research. Longitudinal studies could explore the sustained impact of leadership practices identified here, particularly the ALEI model, on school improvement post-pandemic. Additionally, research examining leadership practices across broader geographical or institutional contexts, including rural schools or international settings, would provide a more comprehensive understanding. Finally, investigating the role of digital technologies in enabling leadership and collaboration during crises could yield actionable insights for future educational policies and practices.

The findings of this study directly address the stated research objectives as follows:

1. **Strategies for Change and Improvement:** The analysis highlights adaptive leadership strategies and collaborative approaches that drove sustainable

school improvement. For instance, School 2's adoption of distributed leadership, coupled with a focus on teacher-led initiatives like lesson study, created an inclusive environment where staff were empowered to contribute to systemic improvement. This strategy demonstrated the importance of fostering trust and professional autonomy to sustain progress, even in challenging contexts.

2. **Teacher Development and Professional Learning:** Findings demonstrate that ongoing professional development significantly enhanced school improvement efforts and resilience. For example, the CPD programmes in School 1 emphasized structured coaching sessions and performance monitoring, which, while hierarchical, provided targeted skill enhancement for staff. In contrast, School 3 utilised collaborative practices like peer observation and reflective dialogue, fostering a culture of continuous professional learning and adaptability.
3. **Impact of Covid-19:** The study underscores the critical role of leadership adaptability in crisis management, revealing new leadership behaviours during the pandemic. For instance, School 4's headteacher adapted by implementing a "high challenge, low threat" leadership style, combining empathy with clear communication to support staff and maintain morale. Similarly, School 6 introduced weekly pastoral calls to check on staff well-being, highlighting the importance of emotional intelligence and flexibility in navigating crisis conditions.

By synthesising these findings, the research offers actionable insights into leadership models that address change and crisis contexts, fulfilling the original research aim.

8.6 Final Summary and Conclusion

In this thesis, grounded in the theories of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership, I explored how school improvement is fundamentally about people improvement (Boyer, 1995). These leadership theories emphasise the crucial role of school leaders in enhancing teacher effectiveness and student success through various leadership practices. The conceptual model developed in this research demonstrates how these leadership theories indirectly impact student and school improvement by influencing teacher practice and development, highlighting the interconnectedness between leadership behaviours, teacher actions, and student outcomes.

This study was guided by one overarching research question and four sub-questions, each addressing a key dimension of school leadership and improvement. Below, I summarise how the findings have answered each of these research questions and how they align with the theoretical contributions of this thesis, particularly the Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI) model and the Holistic Approach to Student Success (HASS) framework.

1. Overall Research Question: Which forms of educational leadership are more likely to contribute to school improvement? The findings reveal that no single leadership model is sufficient to drive sustainable school improvement. Instead, the study demonstrates that a hybrid and context-sensitive approach—integrating instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership—was most effective. The ALEI model emerged from these findings, emphasizing resilience, adaptability, and stakeholder collaboration as critical elements of leadership in both routine and crisis contexts.
2. How do educational leaders contribute to school improvement? The research identified that school leaders play a pivotal role in creating a culture of collaboration, professional trust, and teacher empowerment. Leaders who adopted distributed leadership structures allowed teachers to take ownership of school improvement initiatives. The ALEI model encapsulates these insights, providing a structured approach for school leaders to navigate uncertainty and foster sustainable change.
3. What is the role of teachers in school improvement? The findings highlight that teacher leadership was a critical factor in school improvement, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, when traditional hierarchical leadership models proved insufficient. Teachers took on expanded roles in decision-making, curriculum adaptation, and student support. The HASS framework incorporates this by positioning teacher autonomy and collaborative professional learning as foundational pillars of school success.
4. What is the contribution of staff professional development to school improvement? The study found that effective professional development—characterised by collaborative, inquiry-based, and teacher-led learning—was essential for school improvement. Schools that embraced coaching, mentoring, and research-informed CPD demonstrated greater resilience and adaptability. These insights were integrated into both the ALEI model (leadership adaptability) and the HASS framework (continuous teacher development).
5. What was the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on school leadership? The research revealed that the pandemic fundamentally reshaped leadership priorities, shifting focus towards well-being, adaptability, and distributed decision-making. Schools that prioritised emotional intelligence, shared leadership, and flexible strategies were better able to sustain progress. The ALEI model encapsulates these crisis-driven shifts, while the HASS framework

ensures that well-being and social-emotional support remain central to school improvement.

By addressing these research questions, this thesis makes a significant theoretical and practical contribution to the field of educational leadership. The ALEI model provides a leadership blueprint for navigating challenges, while the HASS framework offers a comprehensive school improvement strategy that prioritises equity, teacher agency, and holistic student success. These models serve as practical tools for policymakers, school leaders, and researchers seeking to develop more resilient and adaptive educational institutions. Together, the ALEI leadership model and HASS framework provide a comprehensive response to these research questions, integrating leadership adaptability, teacher agency, and holistic student success. These models are not only theoretical contributions but also offer practical frameworks that address the core challenges identified in this study.

In the pre-Covid observations, I noted that the academy school heavily relied on principal instructional leadership and rigorous performance monitoring, reflecting New Public Management (NPM) standards. This top-down approach prioritised accountability and efficiency through standardised practices. In contrast, the community school adopted more collaborative leadership and professional development approaches, operating as a professional learning community that fostered teacher agency and collaboration. This decentralised approach challenged traditional NPM standards by prioritising teacher autonomy and collective learning. This distinction highlights the necessity of context-sensitive leadership approaches, as addressed in Research Question 1. The findings further demonstrate that crisis-responsive leadership, as conceptualised in the ALEI model, was critical for sustaining school improvement in challenging times.

The second phase of the research, during the Covid-19 crisis, highlighted contrasts in leadership approaches between the two schools. School 1's hierarchical structures and performance monitoring faced challenges in adapting to rapidly changing circumstances. Meanwhile, School 2's collaborative culture and teacher agency facilitated more agile responses, emphasising the importance of adaptive leadership. Findings from the other four schools participating in this study during the Covid-19 period were consistent with the practices observed at School 2. These schools also adopted collaborative cultures and emphasised teacher agency, which facilitated their ability to respond more effectively to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Professional development remained crucial, evolving to address new challenges such as remote teaching, hybrid learning models, and student well-being. In other words, the relevance of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership features during the Covid-19 pandemic was underscored. The adaptive curriculum and instructional decision-making illustrated the instructional leadership, focusing on meeting students' educational needs during the crisis. Transformational leadership was highlighted by leaders inspiring and motivating their staff, fostering resilience and maintaining a shared vision. The distributed leadership approach was evident through shared responsibilities and coordination, ensuring collective efforts in navigating the challenges of the pandemic. These aspects demonstrate how different elements of leadership were essential in responding to the crisis, bringing together instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership in a unified approach.

Therefore, emphasising the necessity for leadership models that are flexible, inclusive, and resilient. As schools transition to a post-pandemic landscape, leaders must prioritise stakeholder well-being, leverage technology, and foster collaborative partnerships. This calls for a departure from traditional top-down approaches towards

distributed leadership models that empower stakeholders and foster a culture of shared responsibility and innovation. I propose a leadership model known as ‘*Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI)*’, consisting of five principles as follows (Figure 8.3):

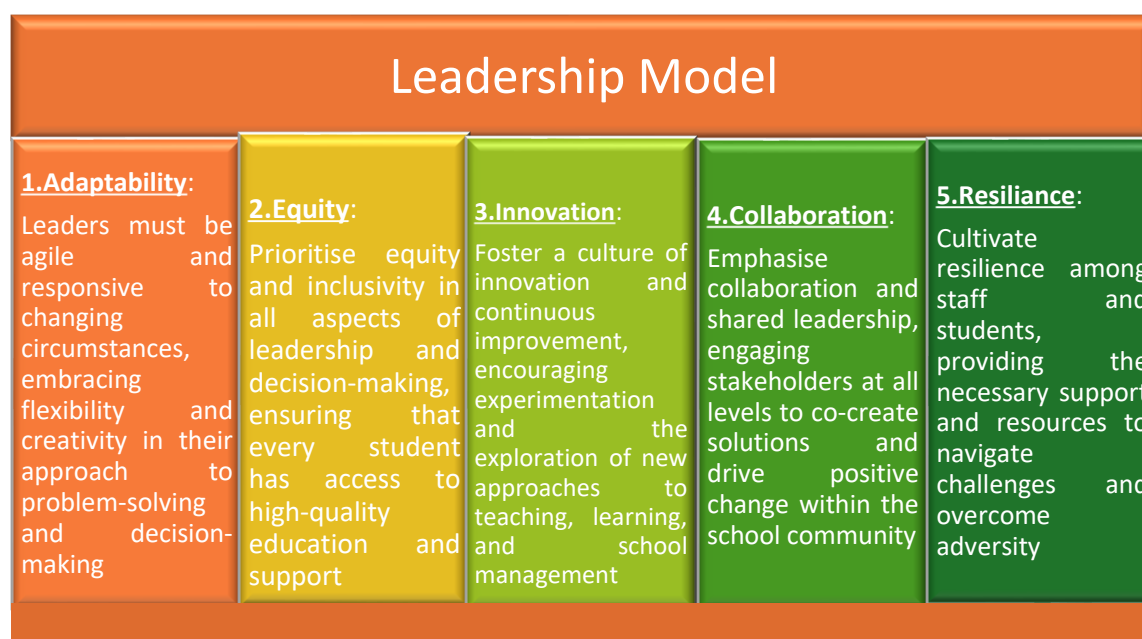


Figure 8.3: Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI)

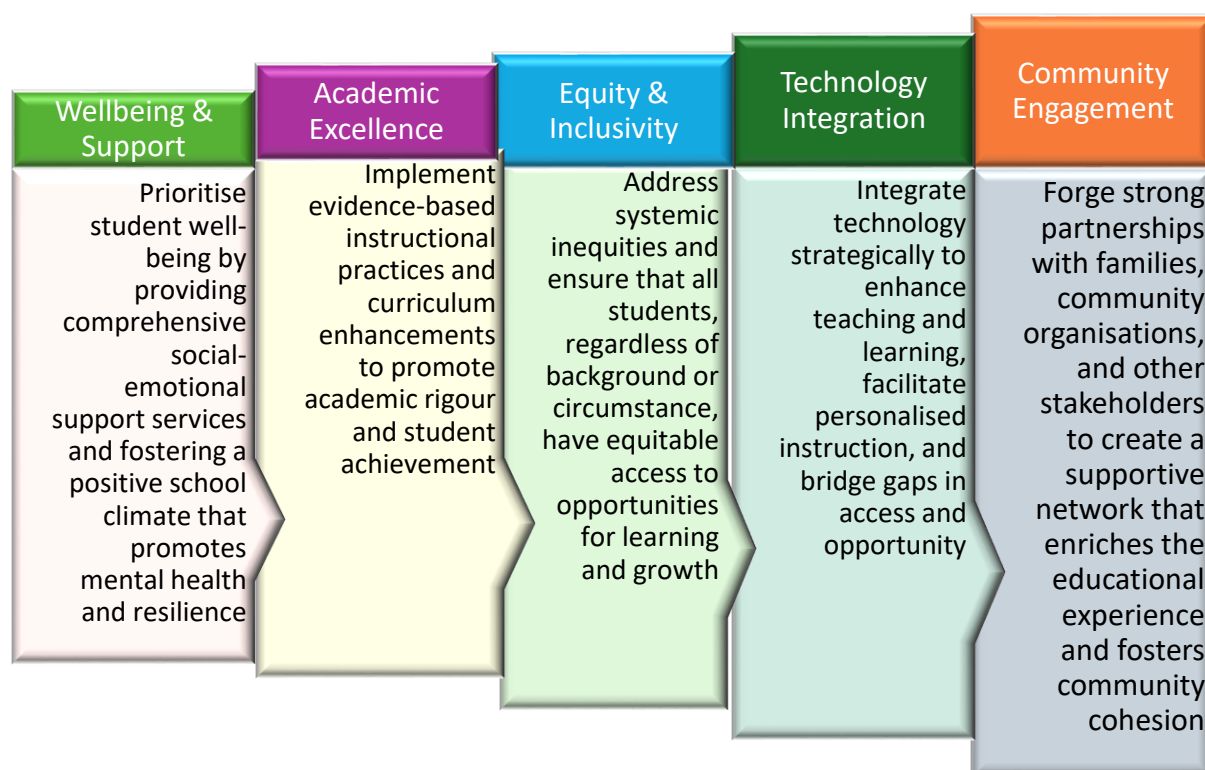
By embracing these principles, schools can not only weather the challenges posed by crises but also emerge stronger and more resilient, better equipped to meet the diverse needs of 21st-century learners. The proposed ALEI leadership model aligns closely with the principles of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership outlined in my theoretical framework. It provides a structured framework for school leaders to enact these leadership practices effectively, emphasising the importance of adaptability, empathy, and resilience in leading schools through crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. This research underscores the need for school leadership to re-frame its central focus, putting people and the quality of relationships first and foremost, with a sense of trust and respect for stakeholders. As this research has shown, this

transformation means the role of school leadership is to remove barriers to learning by creating the nurturing conditions necessary for teachers to flourish and pupils to succeed.

The research further examined two models of school improvement in response to the third and fourth research questions, focusing on the role of teachers and staff professional development. The first model, driven by NPM reform policies and Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) organisations, viewed improvement as a series of externally initiated imperatives. This led to a culture of performativity, where leaders focused on managerial efficiency, and teachers had limited autonomy in their learning and decision-making. While the **ALEI model** provides a **structured framework** for leadership adaptability and crisis management, the **HASS framework** extends this by offering a **systemic approach** to sustainable school improvement. Together, these models ensure that leadership strategies are **both adaptive and transformative**, driving **long-term educational success**.

The second model, implemented by a community school, involved internally initiated reforms. Teachers assumed multiple roles, including role models, leaders of learning, and agents of change. This approach expanded learning beyond the classroom, emphasising well-being and community engagement, which became even more critical during the pandemic. These findings suggest that schools should adopt a holistic approach to student success, requiring greater autonomy to implement their own improvement initiatives with support from the government and policymakers. This led to the proposal of a new strategy for school improvement, '*Holistic Approach to Student Success* (HASS)', encompassing five themes presented below (see Figure 8.4):

Figure 8.4: School Improvement Strategy: Holistic Approach to Student Success (HASS)



Altogether, the ALEI leadership model and HASS school improvement strategy represent a departure from the traditional NPM paradigm, which often prioritises accountability measures and standardised testing over holistic student development and equitable access to education. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become increasingly clear that schools need leadership models and improvement strategies that are adaptable, inclusive, and focused on the whole child. By embracing these principles, schools can not only weather the challenges posed by crises but also emerge stronger and more resilient, better equipped to meet the diverse needs of 21st-century learners.

By integrating the ALEI leadership model and HASS school improvement strategy with my theoretical framework and conceptual model, I offer a comprehensive approach to leadership and school improvement in the post-Covid world. These

frameworks not only reflect the core principles of effective leadership and educational equity but also provide practical guidance for school leaders to navigate complex challenges and foster positive change.

In conclusion, this research highlights how school leadership, when rooted in adaptability, equity, and innovation, can transform educational outcomes, particularly during periods of crisis. The ALEI leadership model and HASS school improvement strategy represent a significant shift from traditional paradigms, emphasizing resilience, collaboration, and holistic development. By bridging theory with practice, these contributions not only address the immediate challenges faced by schools but also pave the way for sustainable and inclusive improvements in the post-Covid educational landscape. The experiences of six schools and their leaders provide broad lessons that can inform the journey of others, helping policymakers make informed decisions about primary school sector reform. The recommendations aim to contribute to policy development, school leadership practice, leadership training programmes, theoretical development, and future research. By bridging theory with practice, these contributions offer not just a response to current challenges but a vision for the future of educational leadership. The ALEI leadership model provides a structured framework for leadership adaptability, while the HASS framework offers a systemic approach to sustainable school improvement. These theoretical and practical contributions highlight the significance of this research in shaping leadership strategies for resilient, inclusive, and responsive schools in an ever-evolving educational landscape.

8.6.1 Reflective Personal Journey

Embarking on this PhD journey has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life, both personally and professionally. I began this path with a strong passion

for understanding the role of school leadership in driving educational improvement, particularly during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. However, my journey was not without its challenges, as my academic background and cultural context initially presented obstacles that I had to overcome.

Coming from a culture where academic approaches often placed less emphasis on critical thinking and more on knowledge retention, I found it initially difficult to engage with the analytical rigour required at the PhD level. The shift from descriptive to critical analysis was a steep learning curve, but it also became a significant area of personal and professional growth. Through persistent hard work, my teacher training course, and continuous engagement with academic reading and writing, I gradually developed critical skills that were essential throughout my research. This transformation was not only the result of external influences but also my dedication to improving my intellectual capabilities.

The PhD process also helped me understand how cultural and academic traditions shape one's approach to knowledge. Initially, I struggled to question established norms and critically evaluate existing theories, as these practices were not strongly emphasized in my earlier education. Over time, however, I learned to adopt a more questioning mindset, challenging assumptions and constructing arguments with clarity and depth. This transition was a turning point in my academic journey, and it has profoundly shaped the way I approach research and problem-solving.

The empirical phase of my research further expanded my critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Conducting fieldwork in six schools during the COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges, particularly in adapting to remote data collection methods and managing logistical constraints. These experiences tested my resilience,

adaptability, and ability to think critically about methodology, ensuring that I could still collect meaningful data and draw robust conclusions despite the obstacles.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this journey was engaging with the headteachers, school leaders, and teachers who participated in the study. Their narratives and experiences brought depth and nuance to my research, emphasizing the human dimension of leadership in education. Analysing these narratives required a critical yet empathetic approach, enabling me to propose innovative models such as the Adaptive Leadership for Equity and Innovation (ALEI) and the Holistic Approach to Student Success (HASS). These contributions reflect the culmination of my efforts to bridge the gap between theory and practice in educational leadership.

Since completing my viva, I have continued to build on the foundations laid during my PhD. I have been actively writing and publishing, contributing articles, book chapters, and blogs to platforms such as British Educational Research Association (BERA) (see Appendix O for the list of my publications and contributions to the field). These publications represent my commitment to advancing research that has practical implications for policymakers, school leaders, and educators. Additionally, I am excited to be joining the PGCE Primary course at University College London (UCL) in September 2025, where I hope to integrate my research insights into teacher development and leadership practices.

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle offers a fitting framework to reflect on my journey. Starting with concrete experiences, I transitioned from my teacher training course to doctoral research, learning through practical engagement and reflective observation. The challenges of adapting to the analytical rigour of a PhD were significant, but they also taught me the value of resilience, adaptability, and critical

thinking. Through abstract conceptualisation, I engaged deeply with theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and the broader literature in my field, enhancing my intellectual horizons. Finally, active experimentation allowed me to apply these insights, not only in my research but also in teaching roles and academic presentations.

As I reflect on this journey, I recognise how it has shaped me as a researcher, educator, and individual. This PhD has equipped me with the skills, perspectives, and aspirations needed to make a meaningful impact in the field of education. Importantly, my positionality as a researcher—both an insider and outsider in the educational systems I studied—prompted critical self-reflection throughout the process. Acknowledging my professional background and cultural influences allowed me to remain conscious of potential biases, ensuring that my research remained both rigorous and inclusive. This reflexive practice became an integral part of my growth, shaping not only the research outcomes but also my approach to scholarship and practice. My background and initial struggles with critical thinking have become integral parts of my story, underscoring the transformative power of perseverance and self-reflection. Looking forward, I am committed to advancing educational leadership research, advocating for equitable and sustainable school improvement practices, and contributing to the professional development of future educators.

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