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School leaders' experiences of high-stakes assessments during the Covid-19 pandemic in England

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ABSTRACT

Although various aspects of school leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic have been addressed in the emerging literature, there is a dearth of studies focusing on the effects of the major assessment changes that took place during this period. This article reports on a study of three case-study schools in England, analysing leaders' experiences of leading high-stakes assessments. The data suggested that assessment changes during the pandemic impacted several aspects of leadership, especially professional autonomy, moral leadership, the purposes of assessment, managing motivation, and the relationship between assessment and other leadership priorities. None of the leaders wished to retain that approach to assessment, and each argued that these assessment practices had a negative impact on themselves and/or other school leaders they knew. The authors suggest the context of neoliberal and structural reform created a unique political and educational crisis in England. This small-scale study is indicative of the major impact of these revised assessment practices, and the paper suggests that further research is needed to explore the longer-term impact on leaders and their schools.

KEYWORDS

School leadership; Covid-19; assessment; MATs; neoliberal education

Introduction

This paper examines school leaders' accounts of high-stakes assessments in England during the Covid-19 pandemic to understand how they conceptualise their roles. Through exploration of three case-study institutions, listening to how the person responsible for assessment in each managed leadership of GCSEs in 2020 and 2021, the paper raises questions about the longer-term impact of the pandemic on school leadership.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on schools globally, with many countries moving learning online for large periods of time, some offering hybrid delivery, and others keeping children in school but with high levels of

absence. It has had an enormous impact on the way that students were taught (if at all) and consequently on the way schools are led. School leaders have been required to adapt their work and the ways in which they lead during the crisis, often at short notice. One of the significant changes that has occurred is a major adaptation of assessment practices in these exceptional circumstances. In England, high-stakes public examinations were cancelled in both 2020 and 2021, and replaced with different forms of teacher assessment. In each year, school leaders had to pivot at short notice to managing these new forms of assessment in their schools.

Various aspects of school leadership during the Covid pandemic have been addressed in the literature, and we shall give an overview of this below. However, there is a gap in the literature in relation to the leadership of student external examinations during the pandemic. Given their importance for leaders, parents and students alike, this is concerning and may point to a disconnect between researchers and school communities. It is a theme that Harris and Jones (2021) address in an editorial referring to the stresses for teachers and students resulting from the temporary change in assessment procedures, noting that the 'lives and life chances of so many young people rely on sound, reliable school/teacher/centre assessments' (172). This article addresses this gap through exploration of three school leaders' experiences in England, recognising that assessment challenges during the pandemic will have varied considerably in other national contexts. The focus is on GCSE assessment at age 16, rather than A level assessments, as during the pandemic these were complicated by changes in university course delivery and admissions, whereas our focus is solely on the school level. This study is not simply of historical importance, charting educational experiences through a turbulent time, but also, as we shall see below, reveals how assessment leaders in schools conceptualise their roles, and the impact of the pandemic upon that. We suggest that this topic merits further investigation to explore the relationship between assessment practices and school leadership, as well as the leadership of schools during a crisis.

External examinations in England are high-stakes for school leaders, their schools and their students (Ingram et al. 2018; West 2010). Aggregates of examination results are used to rank schools in the government's School Performance Tables and as part of the school inspection process, with teachers and leaders being judged on student examination performance. These examinations are also high-stakes for the students themselves, as individual student grades are used as entry requirements for further study beyond the age of 16.

The context for this research is the two significant changes that have occurred in schooling in England over the last 40 years, the growth of neoliberal reforms starting with the 1980 Education Act and moving onwards from the reforming 1988 Education Act that have resulted in assessment being high-stakes (Exley and Ball 2014) and the structural reform of schooling that has occurred in the last 20 years, producing academy schools or academies

(Author 2022). In this paper, we make a distinction between the larger effects of the pandemic (a global crisis) and the specific effects to change student assessment in England (a political crisis).

Across Europe there were two common interventions by national governments, the first was the (partial or complete) closure of state funded schools and subsequent move to online learning, and the cancellation, postponement or reconfiguration of national large-scale assessments (Milner, Mattei, and Ydesen 2021). Although both of these occurred in England, we suggest that unique features of the English context, specifically the high stakes that such assessments have held in this country and the structural reforms mentioned above, resulted in a political and educational crisis as a result of these interventions.

This article begins by explaining the examination system in England and the context of neoliberal and structural reform, and reviewing the existing literature about leadership during the pandemic. Thereafter, we explain the research methods that we employed in the current study. We report on five key themes that emerged from our data, as well as noting our participants' overall views on the impact of the assessment changes on school leaders and their future role in assessment.

Literature review

This literature review has three sections. First, we begin with an overview of how external examinations have been delivered in England before, and during, the pandemic; this section provides contextual background to the current study. Second, we address the neoliberal and structural reform of schooling in England, which provides a context and lens for the analysis. Finally, we examine existing empirical studies on school leadership during Covid-19, arguing that insufficient attention has hitherto been given to the issue of assessment leadership, particularly in England.

(a) External Examinations in England Before and During the Pandemic

England has a semi-autonomous qualification system. The government, via a regulatory body Ofqual, sets the content for public examinations which are administrated by quasi public/private examination boards and schools choose the qualifications in which to enter their students (West 2010). There are two key sets of secondary school qualifications, GCSE at age 16 and A level at 18. During the 1990s and early 2000s school-based coursework components, assessment of students' work by their teachers, were eroded until in 2013 the qualifications became accepted by nationally administered examinations only. So immediately prior to the pandemic, teachers were rarely involved in the assessment of their students' performance in high-stakes public qualifications in England (Adams 2013). This differs from other parts of the UK.

In March 2020, the government ordered an indefinite closure of all schools to most children, accepting only key worker and vulnerable children, and announced the cancellation of all public examinations due to take place that summer (Adams and Stewart 2020). In consequence, an alternative system for assessment in England was designed at short notice. Teachers were asked to submit the grades they believed that students would receive in their subject, but also to place all students in rank order; these were known as the Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs). These grades were then standardised, externally to the school, by use of an algorithm that adjusted them based on the historical performance of students at the school, in order to prevent grade inflation (Ofqual 2020). When the A level results were released in August 2020, nearly 36% were lower than the CAG, 3% were two grades lower, and the algorithm appeared to disproportionally penalise students at state-funded schools (Kelly 2021); there was a media outcry, leading within four days to the withdrawal of these grades and their replacement by CAGs. When GCSE results were released three days later, the government agreed that students should be given the higher of the algorithmic or CAG grade. This created a scenario where the proportion of the highest GCSE grades awarded in England in 2020 jumped by 26% from 2019 (Adams 2020), this may be due to performative pressures on teachers and leaders to gain an advantage in the competitive marketplace.

All children returned to school in September 2020 and public examinations were to be reinstated for summer 2021 (DfE 2020a). Despite a rise in Covid cases, at the beginning of December 2020, the Secretary of State gave a 'cast iron guarantee' that public examinations would not be cancelled again in 2021 (Halliday and Weale 2020). With a continued rise in Covid infections, on Jan 4th, 2021 the government returned to school closure for most children and announced that examinations were to be cancelled again (Prime Minister's Office 2021). Following a consultation, it was decided that teachers should assess their students and criteria were established for the supporting evidence that should be provided. These grades were known as Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs). This time, no algorithm was applied to adjust the grades, but some schools' grades were altered on the basis of insufficient evidence (Ofqual 2021). The overwhelming majority of students were awarded the same final grade as their TAG in August 2021.

The significant changes in how these assessments were undertaken in 2020 and 2021 provides the context to the data analysed below.

(b) Neoliberalism and school structural reform in England

Following the Education Reform Act of 1988, England's educational reforms were built around neoliberalism (Exley and Ball 2014). Parents were perceived as consumers buying a service in a competitive market place, while schools, now with open enrolment, would seek a larger piece of the market by improving their service; fundamentally this meant examination results. Individual schools

were to be inspected by a new service, Ofsted, and school results were to be publically available.

The GCSE results are frequently used as performance metrics for headteachers and classroom teachers alike in annual reviews. These high stakes assessment are a form of performativity,

> a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements … and displays as means of incentive, [and] control … based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality' … [which] encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization. (Ball 2003, 216)

This terror of performativity, for Ball, strikes at the very soul of a teacher.

In the earlier part of the twenty-first Century, a new type of educational institution was created in England, termed an academy school. These schools were originally conceived as replacing failing ones and were funded directly by central government, severing their ties with the Local Authority (LA). Academies greatly increased following the 2010 Academies Act to the point whereby a third of schools are now academies, including 80% of the secondary sector, with over half of children attending them (Author 2022). Academies are directly funded by the national government (as opposed to a Local Authority) and are operated by non-profit making Trusts. The government-preferred governance model for all schools is to be within a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). These are groups of academies under one set of governance, they can be geographically close or spread throughout England. The rapid expansion of such schools has created some 1200 MATs (Author 2022).

Academies were originally conceived as autonomous from the Local Authority and such rhetoric is frequently used by government, however as Woods et al. (2021) indicate MATs are not homogenous, some foster a collaborative culture, others respond to accountability measures by being more competitive. Author (2016) describes variation in the autonomy given to individual school principals between MATs, along a continuum from autocratic to laissez-faire, and teachers themselves have been found to have less autonomy in academies (Worth and Van den Brande 2020). The school inspection service Ofsted (2019) feels that this loss of autonomy of school leaders is a necessary trade-off for the potential benefits of being in a MAT. Day et al.'s (2021) work argues that MATs were supportive of their schools during the first Covid-19 lockdown, addressing the needs of individual schools by providing robust centralised approaches to the rapid changes necessitated by the pandemic.

(c) School Leadership During Covid-19

There has been a wave of studies reporting on the disruptive impact of the pandemic on school leaders (Harris and Jones 2020), both in the UK and

internationally. Various aspects of school leadership during the pandemic have been addressed in this literature, such as leaders' health and well-being (Greany et al. 2021), crisis management (Bush 2021) and virtual leadership (Westberry, Hornor, and Murray 2021). Finally, the literature has also addressed leadership itself being in crisis (Harris 2020) and from that reimagining school leadership (Hesbol 2021). However, there has hitherto been little reference in such studies to the leadership of assessment.

The importance of effective school leadership to learning during the pandemic has been established. From the United States, Kraft, Simon, and Lyon (2020) have found that supportive school leaders who maintained a collaborative environment, reasonable expectations and recognition of teachers' efforts were important to teachers' sense of success. In one New Zealand study of secondary school principals, whilst the leaders saw many challenges such as uncertainty about the duration of online learning, staff and student well-being, and effective communication, they also saw opportunities. They saw this as a time when school leaders could make a difference, with the pandemic offering an opportunity to reset education, to improve their use of distributed leadership and to develop skills in digital teaching and learning in their schools (Thornton 2021).

International studies have offered some insights into the changes Covid has wrought on school leadership, both in terms of challenges and priorities. For example, one study of school leaders in Azerbaijan found that Covid-19 exacerbated the ethical challenges that they faced (Ghasemzadeh, Mohammadi, and Minaei 2021). An Australian study of school leaders' work roles, responsibilities, health and well-being used longitudinal survey data from the last ten years to suggest that the pandemic has had negative and positive effects, increasing both workload and depressive symptoms, as well as a sense of connectedness with colleagues and commitment to their work (Arnold, Rahimi, and Riley 2021). The literature suggests that the pandemic has altered leadership priorities; school leaders from around the world have reported that the pandemic led to increased attention on vision and values; communication and family community engagement; support for staff, collaboration and capacity-building; and prioritisation of issues of equity (McLeod and Dulsky 2021). Equally, priorities have shifted at different stages of the pandemic (McLeod and Dulsky 2021), suggesting we should be wary of over-generalising from particular moments. Several articles refer to teachers taking the opportunity to use different assessment types such as formative assessment and call for nations to undertake a rethink of high-stakes external assessment, including accountability measures (Hauseman, Darazsi, and Kent 2020; Hung, Huang, and Tan 2020; Caldwell 2020; Zhao 2020).

Studies from England have suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on several aspects of school leadership. Evidence is emerging that the pandemic has negatively impacted school leaders. A large-scale quantitative

study has evidenced the impact on their well-being, with many reporting high levels of stress and plans to leave the profession early, and stating that the pandemic was a main or contributing factor (Thomson, Greany, and Martindale 2021). This has been complemented by smaller-scale, qualitative work, which has charted the mental effects on school leaders, including a heightened sense of isolation, and the pressure of responding to continually changing central directives. One headteacher reported their sense of autonomy during the pandemic as being 'enough rope to hang myself' (Hulme et al. 2021, 12); in other words, this leader felt that the government was using the language of autonomy to distance itself from the most difficult decisions.

Research has also evidenced some positive impacts on school leaders. Hulme et al. (2021) found that the pandemic affirmed more welfarist, rather than corporatised, conceptions of headteachers' roles, such as distributing food to low-income families (DfE 2020b). The school leaders in the study from all four nations of the UK conducted by Beauchamp et al. (2021) also saw some positive changes. They welcomed the fact that Ofsted inspections were suspended, enabling them to focus on their core roles. Some headteachers felt they were spending less time on management and more on leadership, engaging more with social justice issues and emotional leadership. In response to their increased workloads, several principals needed to adapt their leadership style, for example flattening their leadership structure.

There is emerging evidence of the salience of assessment issues to school leaders during the pandemic. Researchers from Ireland have found that most middle and senior leaders studied reported that they had found managing calculated grades stressful, with reasons for this including uncertainty, lack of clear direction and poor communication from the department of education (Burke and Dempsey 2021). A study of English school leaders' well-being, work and future career intentions similarly found that assessment had been a significant challenge (over 60% of respondents stating that this issue was either very or extremely stressful), with CAGs and the refusal of the government to listen to concerns over use of an algorithm emerging as major concerns for leaders (Greany et al. 2021). A different English study, encompassing both primary and secondary leaders, evidences a decrease in some senior leaders' working hours during lockdown, but highlights how assessment exerted new pressures. For secondary school leaders, estimating grades was reported as the fourth greatest pressure, after preparing for reopening, maintaining the health and well-being of their staff, and concerns about directives from government (Walker, Sharp, and Sims 2020). Finally, data comparing leaders in Italy, Denmark and England has affirmed the frustration that English headteachers felt with their role in assessment during the pandemic, arguing that government had left a void into which school leaders had been forced to step (Milner, Mattei, and Ydesen 2021).

One notable point in reviewing the available literature on school leadership in the pandemic is that it primarily focuses on school principals; our sample were senior staff who are not principals and therefore adds to the field. This research is also an example of both the leadership of mandated change, change that is frequently emanated from governments with teachers required to implement it (Clement 2014) and the leadership of emotionally intense or 'hot' climates (Leithwood and Beatty 2009).

In summary, whilst the evidence suggests that assessment has been an important dimension of leadership during the pandemic, but one that needs to be balanced against other challenges, research focusing on assessment during this crisis is lacking. This article is a response to this gap in the literature; it is an indicative study that suggests the fertility of further research on this topic.

Research methods

The analysis based below is based on semi-structured interviews with leaders in three case-study schools in the summer of 2021; each interview was online and lasted for approximately 45 min. Each participant was the most senior staff member responsible for assessment within their school; they were all Deputy Headteachers. These three participants were recruited by snowball sampling emanating from email calls to several school leader organisations in May 2021, each participant volunteered following these calls. The research had ethical approval from a UK university, and key ethical issues included the protection of anonymity so that leaders could discuss the area openly. Nevertheless, gaining participants was problematic; in addition to experiencing excessive workload, many schools leaders felt that this was too sensitive to discuss; indeed, several potential participants contacted to say that they were not permitted by their Multi-Academy Trust to discuss school assessments.

We sought participants who were the school leader responsible for assessment, rather than the headteacher, as they were likely to be leading and managing responses to governmental directives and experiencing resulting staff issues firsthand. The emphasis was on leadership so we did not seek teacher views. There are of course limitations with such a small-scale study, such as difficulties with generalisation, however the resulting depth is worthwhile to create a unique rich snapshot that allows for a greater appreciation of the leadership context.

Contextual information about the three participants' schools is provided in Table 1, derived from Department for Education publicly available statistics (Department for Education 2021). We used the 2019 data in order to capture the nature of each case-study school prior to the start of the pandemic. Further details about the three leaders are provided in Table 2. Although small scale, case studies' strength is that they can 'explain, describe, illustrate and enlighten' (Yin 2009, 72).

Table 1. Case-study schools.

Pseudonym	School	Number on roll	Ofsted (inspection) Rating (1,2,3,4)	Grade 5 or above in English & Maths GCSEs	Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN)	Pupils whose first language is not English	Pupils eligible for Free School Meals at any time during the past 6 years
Jane	A	533	2 Good	43%	4.2%	4.5%	13.8%
Stacey	B	957	2 Good	41%	0.9%	6%	18.6%
Nick	C	1428	2 Good	37%	3.6%	41.7%	48.2%
National average		965		43%	1.7%	16.9%	27.7%

School contextual information is important to capture different pressures upon these school leaders. Academically, these three schools have similar pupil attainment in GCSE examinations, each being approximately the national average, although school C is below the other two. However, aspects of their location and social composition are contrasting.

School A is located in a small town in the South East of England. Its roll number is significantly below the national average, it has more than the national average of SEN children and below national average of children whose first language is not English. It has a low proportion, significantly below national average, of social deprivation, as measured by the proxy of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM).

School B is located in a small town in the South East of England. Its roll number is the national average, it has significantly below the national average of SEN children and significantly below national average of children whose first language is not English. It is below the national average on social deprivation, using FSM.

School C is in a large urban city and its size is significantly above the national average. It has more than the national average of SEN children. It has significantly above the national average of children whose first language is not English and has a high proportion, significantly above national average, of social deprivation using FSM.

The interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions analysed using a constant comparison method to identify recurrent themes and develop codes

Table 2. Interviewee details.

Pseudonym	Date of interview	Position in school	School management structure
Jane	27th May 2021	Deputy Headteacher at school A at time of interview. Employed at start-up academy without examination students at start of pandemic.	Multi-Academy Trust
Stacey	17th June 2021	Deputy Head	Multi-Academy Trust
Nick	7th July 2021	Vice Principal at school C at time of interview. Vice Principal/GCSE Coordinator at another school at start of pandemic.	Both schools are Multi-Academy Trusts

(Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2018). This detailed qualitative analysis ensured that, although the study is small in scale, the data offer rich insight into leaders' practices during that time. In the following section, we highlight five key themes that arose from this analysis: professional autonomy; moral leadership; managing motivation; purposes of assessment; and competing leadership priorities. We finally consider the leaders' views about their future assessment role in the light of their pandemic experiences, and the impact that these assessment changes had on both their teachers and themselves.

Findings and discussion

1. Professional Autonomy

One salient recurrent theme from all three interviews was the importance of professional autonomy over assessment to the leaders. Each school was part of a MAT which, echoing the work of Day, Taneva, and Smith (2021), enabled cross school meetings of assessment leaders to help create new procedures. The changes required in schools were mandated (Clement 2014) and as such became easier to lead in that convincing staff was not required. However, this was talked about in different ways at the three schools.

For Jane, the grading process in 2020 had been extremely difficult, but the system adopted in 2021 gave her more autonomy. She was glad that teachers had been able to take personal circumstances into account when giving grades, whereas in 2020 an algorithm had taken away that discretion:

> a positive *[in 2021]* has been that it does feel that we as professionals have a little bit more flexibility to be able to decide upon grades on an individual basis. (Jane)

Stacey, however, saw a tension between the autonomy given to teachers to predict grades in 2020 with the need to give students ownership of results. She explained that the results day was less stressful than usual because of the loss of student ownership:

> With results day wasn't too bad, but it was a bit of an anti-climax because kids didn't have that sense of responsibility for it, it was just a 'well that's what my teacher gave me never mind'. (Stacey)

Nick was very concerned about the impact of the loss of control in both years. In 2020, he said that at his school teachers had not been given autonomy over their predictions, in line with other work on autonomy of school leaders in academies (Author 2016; Woods et al. 2021)

> we had a lot of pressure, and I don't really understand where the pressure on the Trust came from, but the Trust I was working for that time were very awkward in that we weren't allowed to just give the grade that we wanted to give. (Nick)

Nick's school suffered badly from the 2020 grading algorithm, and aspects of the school's demographic composition compounded this:

> So it was a really difficult day, it was really difficult conversations. And they were difficult, not because of our own fault; they were difficult because of what the government had done with their grades. And they were difficult because of the way that the school has been shut down without notice and without guidance, that it meant that kids like *[a student with a difficult home life]* really missed out. (Nick)

Nick's school was within a more disadvantaged community and such schools experienced a greater negative impact (Adams 2020). Although lack of control had been frustrating to these three leaders, they all believed that there should be limits to professional autonomy. For Nick, the 2021 process gave teachers too much control over the assessment process, which led to inconsistencies between schools:

> The guidance this year felt a little bit like, because we got it wrong last year, we're very much going to let you guys do what you want to do. But then when you do what you want to do, there's dramatic inconsistencies in accuracy and the reliability of the grade given. I think. (Nick)

Similarly, Stacey argued that teacher control was important, but that there needed to be some check on consistency between schools:

> We believe that teacher assessment was correct. And it is the right thing to do to let teachers make those decisions. And that that there needed to be something in place for overinflated grades, that wasn't an algorithm. (Stacey)

Jane also argued that a laissez-faire approach was not the kind of autonomy that she desired:

> the freedom we've been given is actually a little bit … stifling which you wouldn't think that freedom would give. (Jane)

This ambivalence about school leader freedom is similar to the concerns expressed by the leaders studied by Hulme et al. (2021), who felt that it was used strategically by politicians to evade government responsibility for difficult decisions. In this study, although there was a nuanced variation, nonetheless each of three participants appeared to not want the amount of autonomy they were given, as performative and accountability measures subsequently become raised. The literature refers to some MATs restricting autonomy of given school leaders (Author 2016; Woods et al. 2021) and clearly here our participants were not used to leading such important policy decisions, and this may explain Jane's comment that it was 'stifling'. They could also see the consequence of their decisions being perceived as potentially unfavourable for them and their school, and were concerned that the government was simply passing on potential blame.

In summary, enabling teacher autonomy was an important aspect of leadership for all three leaders, but this was not equated with unfettered freedom to do anything any individual teacher wished.

2. Moral leadership

Moral aspects of leadership were integral to how all three leaders talked about their assessment decisions, seeing it as their responsibility to give the students a 'fair' chance in assessments. Both Nick and Stacey felt that estimated grades were unfair because some schools overestimated their grades and because of the use of historical performance in 2020. Fairness in assessment was implicitly defined as helping all students to get a consistent and accurate measure of their performance.

Jane argued that involving teachers in the grading process could improve fairness, as teachers had the flexibility to consider personal circumstances when predicting grades. She emphasised the moral responsibility that she felt towards her students:

> Now, as much as we are needing to be rigorous and robust and we're making sure that we're not assigning grades based on who deserves well, who's nicer or whenever, it does mean that … by being able to look at, and things like special considerations and mitigating circumstances and review those by being able to look at whole bodies of evidence and make that selection, that's been a really good opportunity. (Jane)

However, the other two leaders were extremely angry about what they perceived to be unfairness in the assessment process. Stacey felt that the process was unfair because the 'moral' predictions given in her school contrasted with the inflated grades she believed were awarded to others. She explained that unclear guidance from government had led to some schools finishing the syllabus and assessing the full picture, whereas other schools didn't:

> Some schools stopped teaching. On March 23rd they stopped teaching new content, and our moral ground on that was: absolutely not, you will teach until the day they leave.

She explained how she tried to be honest and accurate in the grades that teachers assessed in 2020, with the consequence that:

> I disadvantaged my students, I couldn't cheat and that's my moral standing but it's hard to have that weight on your shoulders. (Stacey)

Similar to the leaders studied by Greany et al. (2021), Nick was angry that his students had been disadvantaged by the process of applying an algorithm in 2020:

> the whole premise of GCSEs is you prepare your kid to go into the exam and put the very best version of themselves on that piece of paper. And if you're going to do things

> like that, and not give teachers the information they need, the guidance they need. If you're going to allow thousands of institutions to go down one merry path and then turn it around and go the other way, you're just not giving the kids the chance to do their best. And then it does undermine the value and the merit of what they've achieved. (Nick)

Nick talked about fairness again when he discussed the curriculum guidance given the second time exams were cancelled in 2021:

> If we'd known that, then we could have steered our locked down learning towards those things. It just annoys me when the kids aren't given a chance to put their best foot forward. I'm not saying the grades should be inflated or anything, but I've really been angry about how the kids have not been given a chance to put their very best. (Nick)

In summary, all three leaders felt a moral responsibility to enable their students to get 'fair' grades, but this had been compromised by the assessment decisions they had been forced to make during the pandemic. They were acutely aware of the competitive nature of the results and felt a moral indignation, believing that other schools had inflated results in order to gain higher rankings. Our participants felt they had resisted the temptation to artificially increase student grades in order to provide their school into higher-ranked positions in performance tables in the competitive marketplace. This may also explain, in part, our difficulty in recruiting participants, clearly some schools produced higher grades than you would normally expect from their school cohorts and may not have wished for any subsequent scrutiny. There were performative pressures on leaders and teachers at Trust level, as noted in the methods section we were contacted by potential participants to explain that their non-participation was on the grounds that they were prohibited by their Trust.

Although each of these leaders worked in a multi-academy trust, and was therefore located within the neoliberal decentralisation and marketisation of English education (Milner, Mattei, and Ydesen 2021), welfarist rather than corporatised interpretations of their role persisted. In fact, the pandemic had perhaps re-emphasised moral dimensions of school leadership (Ghasemzadeh, Mohammadi, and Minaei 2021).

3. Managing motivation

Sustaining the motivation of teachers during the pandemic was a third aspect of leadership that recurred across the interviews (Walker, Sharp, and Sims 2020). All three interviewees felt that the motivation of staff needed to be maintained through difficult assessment processes, but had been impacted by the lack of timely decisions from government (Greany et al. 2021) and consequent uncertainty (Burke and Dempsey 2021). Stacey summarised the situation in 2021:

> How they didn't have a Plan B before that date. Literally broke my heart and just unbelievable that they had a year and hadn't thought it through.

In Jane and Stacey's views, teacher motivation had been impacted by the increase in teacher workload as a result of the new assessment practices. Jane explained that the leadership team in her school had tried to centralise much of the paperwork to take the additional pressure off teachers. Stacey was angry that government decisions had been so last-minute, making it hard for school leadership to distribute teachers' assessment workload across the year. She explained:

> The biggest issue that we had … was workload and stress that comes with that … It's the same stress that we're all under right now; you want it to be right to the students, right to the school policy, you don't want to make any mistakes. So it was constant check ins. (Stacey)

Nick captured the difficulty of managing motivation at the start of the pandemic, during a time of great uncertainty:

> A lot of staff, and I speak very personally here in that I personally, mentally, emotionally, really struggled with it to start off with. I felt like my whole sort of purpose, reason for being, the point of my chosen career, the point of the late nights and everything, had been taken. And that was a feeling that was disseminated across the most of the staff and most of the people. There was a lot of feeling of, what was it all for, what was the point? And there was a lot of staff a bit lost, and a lot of staff that were looking for answers or guidance that the leadership couldn't provide, because we didn't know ourselves. (Nick)

As we saw above, Nick's school (school C) was the one which had the highest measure of social deprivation, and it is interesting to note that in his school student motivation was a significant challenge alongside staff motivation. Nick felt that teacher-assessed grades removed the connection that students should feel exists between their own efforts and the grade they receive:

> Obviously, when you're a kid that's had the rug pulled from them in March, their instinct, a kid who wants to do well, their instinct is what can I do? What can I do to improve my grade? What can I do to improve my grade? And instead the message was nothing … And you've just completely disempowered a generation of kids then. (Nick)

The normal techniques of communicating and motivating students, using large group assemblies and going to speak to them in smaller groups were not available, but had to be undertaken from a distance, via a screen (Westberry, Hornor, and Murray 2021).

4. Purposes of Assessment

The many purposes of assessment, and their responsibility as leaders for ensuring that they were achieved, featured across the three interviews. The

children attending Nick's school were from a more socially disadvantaged background than the other two schools and so, for Nick, educational attainment was seen as a route to social mobility and greater life chances. Nick also saw assessment as being partly about empowerment, and he described the emotional impact on himself of feeling that he could no longer enable his students to gain that sense of empowerment:

> I walked out of my office on my way down to briefing, and I burst into tears, because I just felt so tragically so sorry for them that they had missed out on what is, for a lot of them, their first opportunity to take reward from sacrifice. (Nick)

However, he also believed that assessment was a way of ensuring that students had the requisite skills for whatever they did next; he worried that the drive to assess had led to 'a dramatic narrowing of the curriculum' (Nick), and that results no longer gave the wider community an accurate measure of a young person's skills and abilities.

The other two leaders remained school-focused in how they discussed the purposes of assessment. Stacey was frustrated because she felt that the changes had moved the focus away from learning to assessment; she wanted the children to remember that 'the important thing is to learn'. For Jane, getting a grade with which to continue education was paramount; she described extensive communication with both parents and students, 'reassuring students that they were going to be assessed, that we look after them, they still get their grades'.

These different ways of talking about the purposes of assessment may be reflective of the different pressures upon leaders in these different institutions. Neoliberal reform of the English school system has led to marketised pressures upon schools to meet 'consumer' (parent) demand (Milner, Mattei, and Ydesen 2021); expectations in Nick's school will have differed from those in the other two institutions because of their contrasting demographic composition. This is an issue that merits further research.

5. Competing Leadership Priorities

All three leaders discussed other priorities aside from leading assessment. In each case, they suggested that leading through Covid had shifted their priorities, and echoed the suggestion from Smith and Riley (2012) that different school leadership skills are needed during times of crisis.

For Jane, the pivot to remote learning had been an immense challenge, which made it hard to manage assessment changes as well. She explained that the assessment pressures on staff had been in conflict with her need to be mindful of staff well-being:

> We spend so much time, these days, talking about managing staff well-being and workload, and this has been an absolute spanner in all of that, because suddenly I'm

> there in meetings with staff saying, 'I'm so sorry, I have nothing I can do other than say to you, you're going to have to mark these 200 exam papers'. (Jane)

For Stacey, the pandemic circumstances conflicted with her priority of student welfare, particularly anxiety around the assessments themselves:

> We couldn't alleviate those concerns in the way that you traditionally would. You couldn't calm them down by doing an assembly, you couldn't go and speak to them in tutor groups, you were just stuck behind this screen, saying to them it's going to be OK. (Stacey)

Stacey argued that one of her main challenges had been balancing assessment against other priorities. For Stacey and Nick, assessment pressures had come into direct conflict with other duties toward both staff and student welfare:

> I honestly can tell you this is the biggest stress that I've had … really challenging in the sense of my leadership, because how do I balance what I feel I need off people to make sure this is for best, versus their workload that says everything, really, versus what the students' experience. (Stacey)

School C had many families who were struggling financially during the pandemic; as noted earlier, schools became distributors of food, and for Nick this resulted in assessment losing its normal importance:

> We had mums turn up in tears begging for food. They did not have food for their family and I remember breaking into the kitchen, finding the poor mom a loaf of bread and some cheese, just something to go and feed the family at home. And when you're dealing with that level of concern and fear and worry, the assessments do become compartmentalised, a little bit. And so it wasn't the number one thing; it wasn't. And in a normal, that time of year – April, May, June – yeah, your outcomes, your GCSEs are the number one thing and that goes first. (Nick)

Leadership for Nick was a different experience than the other participants, as his school in a highly socially deprived community developed an additional function compared to the two other schools – catering for basic needs such as food – and he was particularly aware of the demotivating effect of lockdown on his students. He became more conscious of the home poverty of his students and corresponding social injustice; for him, the links between poverty and educational attainment were highlighted by his pandemic experience. This was a point of contrast with Schools A and B.

Echoing the English school leaders interviewed by Milner, Mattei, and Ydesen (2021), all three leaders were adamant that they would not want to retain this role in assessment after the pandemic. All three felt that externally assessed work was fairer to students. Jane argued that internal assessment required teachers to distance themselves from their students' work in a way that was unhelpful. Nick and Stacey wanted to return to an examinations system that they felt best-avoided bias against students from certain backgrounds.

None of the leaders argued for a return to exams on the basis of their own or their teachers' workload; they conceptualised it in terms of fairness to students. However, all of them acknowledged that it had been extremely difficult to lead assessment during this time (Walker, Sharp, and Sims 2020; Greany et al. 2021; Thomson, Greany, and Martindale 2021). Jane said that it had been 'really tough' and that 'there's only so much we're able to do'. Stacey said that she 'nearly broke myself' in trying to ensure that everything was correct. In resonance with Leithwood and Beatty's (2009) idea of emotional hot climates, Nick wept when he remembered what had happened and then said:

> This has broken some leaders, in terms of looking after their community and their school, in terms of being fair by the kids, in terms of defending things you can't defend, like why my grade has suddenly gone down because I'm from a poorer community. I know of four different principals that are no longer principals because they can't carry on after this. … I don't think people have ever truly grasped the sacrifice made by teachers … Because it's not been about teaching kids, it's been about keeping kids alive and making sure they are safe, and protecting them. (Nick)

Conclusion

These three case studies of the leadership of assessment in England during the pandemic offer insights into leadership through crisis (Smith and Riley 2012). The leaders reported on in this study described positive aspects of leading through crisis (Beauchamp et al. 2021), but these had come at a huge personal toll for themselves and their teaching staff (Greany et al. 2021; Walker, Sharp, and Sims 2020). They reported that assessment changes in 2020 and 2021 had impacted several aspects of their leadership, especially professional autonomy, moral leadership, the purposes of assessment, managing motivation, and the relationship between assessment and other leadership priorities. Further research is needed to explore the longer-term impact of these changes on leaders. The research that this article reports upon was very small scale and as such the findings may not be generalisable; however this paper illuminates a pivotal moment and provides a depth of insight otherwise unavailable. The picture painted here is one where leaders found the change of national assessments problematic with a lack of government guidance but one in a context of neoliberal pressures and recent structural reforms.

We have seen above that a lack of guidance and last-minute changes meant that leaders had ambivalent feelings about the control they had been given at various points (Hulme et al. 2021), with a realisation that freedom from constraint and professional autonomy cannot be simplistically equated.

This study has explored the relationship between high-stakes assessment and conceptualisations of leadership (Walker, Sharp, and Sims 2020). However, this is a small-scale indicative study, and further studies are needed both to explore the extent to which assessment changes impact effective

leadership, and the longer-term effects of leadership during crisis. The data reported here have demonstrated that these are both fertile areas for future research.

During the Covid-19 pandemic many countries closed their schools partially or fully and either cancelled, postponed or reconfigured their national large-scale assessments (Milner, Mattei, and Ydesen 2021), this was an international crisis. Like many countries, England reconfigured national large-scale assessments. However, the consequent crisis in England was connected to the high-stakes competitive nature of these assessments and the direction of successive governmental policy directions over the last 30 years. It is notable that none of our participants wished to return to any form of teacher assessment as part of the GCSE grading in future. This was not simply a workload issue but one of accountability; the performative nature of the TAGs appeared to be one step too far.

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