LEADING IN A NEW ERA:

COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP FOR PLACE & BELONGING

Telford & Wrekin
COUNCIL

HACKNEY
SCHOOLS
GROUP BOARD

ISLINGTON

The Art of Possibilities

The Art of Possibilities

INTRODUCTION

In this booklet we report on the leadership journeys of sixteen headteachers during the lockdown phase of Covid-19, between May – July 2020. Our findings are based on a collaborative research inquiry, jointly commissioned by Telford and Wrekin Council and the London Boroughs of Hackney and Islington in which we tracked the experience of those school leaders:

• Mapping their responses to the lockdown;

• Exploring aspects of their leadership approach; and

• Reflecting on the implications for the future of school leadership.

Covid-19 has exposed our vulnerabilities; the divisions within and across societies; and the ways in which those facing the greatest disadvantages have found themselves most exposed to its impact. If the Pandemic has taught us anything, it is that that wisdom and compassion help build connections and communities - and that leadership matters.

The sixteen headteachers (11 female and 5 male) lead a range of schools - primary, secondary, and special needs - and have a wide range of experience. Some are headteachers of long standing - executive heads or on their second headship. Others were, at the time, 'fledgling' leaders in their first year of headship.

Contextual factors inevitably have shaped the impact of Covid-19 on schools, with communities in Hackney being the hardest hit by the force of the Pandemic.

We worked with the headteachers on a locality basis, organising our time together as a personal and professional space for deep thinking and reflection. The climate of mutual support and trust which grew from this led to shared learning and provided fertile territory for collecting the research data presented here.

While each of these headteachers has her or his own distinctive story to tell, a shared view has emerged of leadership as a profoundly moral endeavour. Our inquiry has revealed much about the pressures and demands on them, as well as signalling new possibilities. A fresh articulation of what schools are about, and how leaders can lead is emerging which has led us to ask the question:

> *To what extent does the experience and impact of Covid-19 reshape what it means to be a school leader?*

We would like to thank Telford and Wrekin, Hackney, and Islington, and the sixteen headteachers for the trust they placed in us. We look forward to further discussions in actual, and not just virtual environments. We have been touched by the headteachers' devotion to the young people in their charge; by their resilience and ingenuity in finding new ways to connect to families; and by the many steps they have taken to create community and collegiality. As as a group, they have worked to be responsive, to communicate effectively and to listen to the many voices in their school community.

We have divided the booklet into five parts:

[1]See Part V for further details of the research brief and process.

I: TRACKING THE LEADERSHIP LOCKDOWN JOURNEY

We begin our account of the leadership journey by exploring the headteachers' perceptions of the challenges of the crisis, and identifying the opportunities they took to work in new ways. This leads on to a discussion about the support and information which helped them along the way, or detracted from the job in hand.

i. The challenges of the crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic has created significant challenges and pressures for schools. Anxiety, fear, and uncertainty have been in the air. As pressure mounted and social distancing reduced schools' capacity to create a sense of belonging across school communities, the sixteen headteachers in this study, as their colleagues elsewhere, have found themselves holding the ring. Diagram I summarises the challenges they have faced.

In the early stages of lockdown, awareness of the unequal learning opportunities available to children and the trauma facing some communities, contributed to high levels of stress and emotional overload for them and colleagues. As one headteacher reflected:
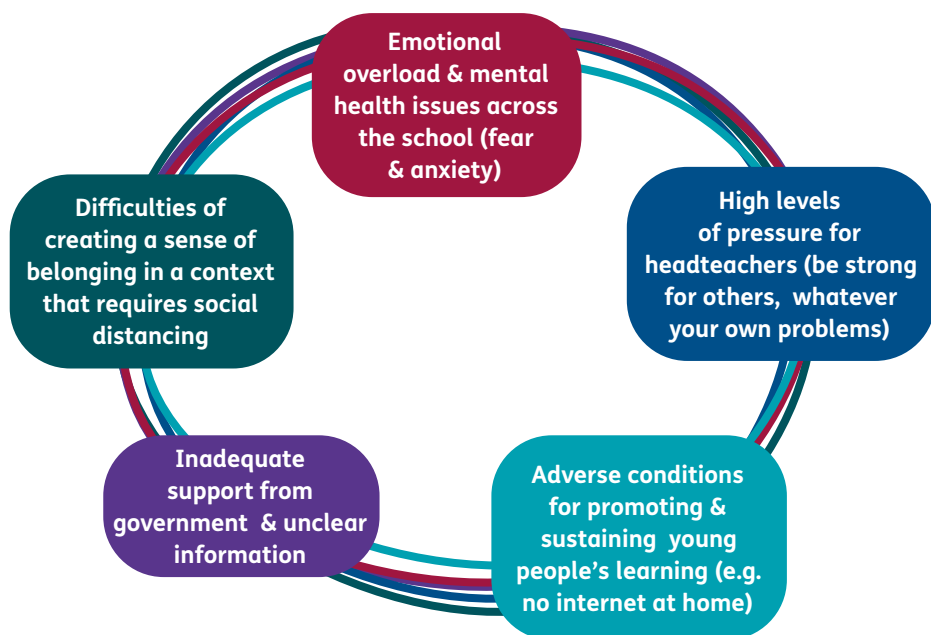
"For the next year, we will be dealing with the children's feeling of death, because they had someone who died or because they feel they could die. We are going to be dealing with the effects of lockdown."

The pressure on these headteachers was intensified by their responsibility as the ultimate 'leader' of the school, and by the multiplicity of roles they were expected to take. Whatever was happening, they still had to manage their own personal lives and feelings. Government responses to the pandemic contributed to the challenges.

Headteachers spoke of the frustration they felt about an implicit deficit model about young people, expressed in the language of 'remedial action', and the lack of appreciation or recognition of them as highly trained professionals.

ii. The potential to work in different ways

"I really feel that lockdown has drawn the community together."

Despite these many challenges, they also identified the opportunities that the crisis had offered to work in different ways. Diagram 2 summarises these.
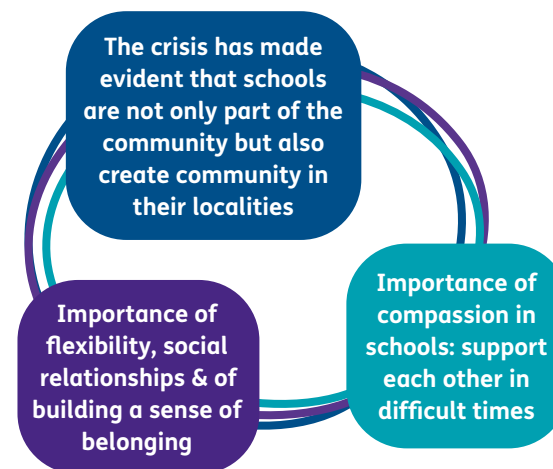

Diagram 1: The challenges

Diagram 2: The potential to work in different ways

Networks with colleagues who worked in similar contexts provided them with the support they needed, or strengthened their confidence to look at things afresh. The crisis also led them to revisit taken for granted assumptions about relationships, policies, and practices. Flexibility and adaptability came into their own – as did compassion.

Across the three localities, these headteachers recognised the importance of school as a place of compassion: a space in which members of the community could support each other. They recognised that to be compassionate to students, parents, and teachers, they had first to be compassionate to themselves. This implied acknowledging their own limitations and accepting that things could not necessarily be done as in the past.

Hackney:

One of the things that has been really useful with my staff is saying that I don't have all the answers, I am not a superwoman, because this is all new. I am not god. That is about being compassionate. This is not about being the expert.

Islington:

I have never done this before, so I have had to say "it is ok to not know what to do", to take care of my mental health, because this is so hard.

Telford and Wrekin:

I keep reminding myself that it is ok to be in the moment. As a leader, make sure that I tell my staff that but also to tell myself to do it myself. Reminding myself that I am not superhuman and that it is ok to stop.

The need for social distancing which had become paramount as Covid-19 spread, reaffirmed the importance of building community. Helping create a sense of belonging was about the wellbeing of staff and students, as well as academic success. These headteachers encouraged and supported practical actions to connect with students and their families and build community: messaging, phoning, visiting at a distance to drop off books, creating an interactive video loop.

iii. Support and Information along the way

"Our philosophy is changing; it is a cultural change: how can we support each other? A community of headteachers and of teachers."

As lockdown proceeded a new philosophy and culture began to emerge. The headteachers looked for support and information to help them deal with the complexities of Covid-19, drawing on a range of networks and information loops, as is shown in Diagram 3. Some information sources proved to be more useful than others.
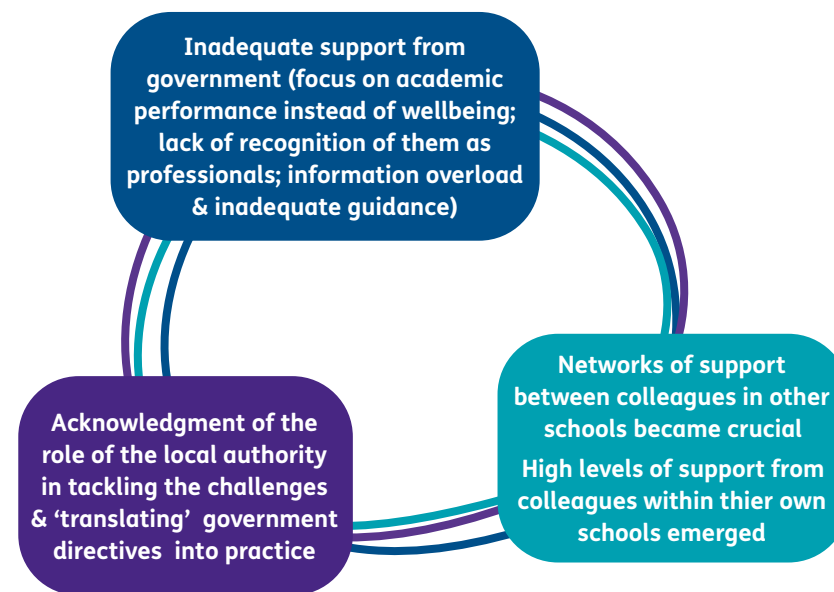

Inadequate support from government (focus on academic performance instead of wellbeing; lack of recognition of them as professionals; information overload & inadequate guidance)

Networks of support between colleagues in other schools became crucial

High levels of support from colleagues within thier own schools emerged

Acknowledgment of the role of the local authority in tackling the challenges & 'translating' government directives into practice

Diagram 3: Support and Information

I: TRACKING THE LEADERSHIP LOCKDOWN JOURNEY

II: BACK TO BUSINESS?

In searching for data and analysis from government, the headteachers experienced information overload and lack of clarity. Last-minute and constantly changing communications compounded the challenges they faced. They reported examples of key Department for Education documents being emailed to them late at night; long and detailed guidance notes being amended, with the (headteacher) reader being left to trawl through to find the changes. For them, there was a misalignment between the challenges they faced in the crisis (particularly the immediacy of community-related matters) and the policy strategies adopted by government.

Opportunities to share their leadership lockdown journey were considered invaluable. Participation in this inquiry, for example, was experienced as an important networking opportunity, as illustrated here.

"Just to hear other voices of really experienced heads and how they have mitigated has been incredibly useful, instrumental in my mental health to survive this. I am feeling confident because I am listening to these voices and thinking about strategizing, and I have legitimacy. ...These connections have been really helpful to feel competent."

Local networks and connections were also important and, by and large, experienced as positive. Telford and Wrekin's 'Belonging Strategy' proved to be invaluable, creating a common language and a shared set of expectations between the authority and schools. In Hackney, the availability of key initiatives and approaches to support schools (for example, around trauma) was experienced as a local authority in touch with what was happening on the ground. In Islington, local briefings and communication networks enabled heads to feel part of a local community, to share ideas and to keep up to speed.

Within school support was strong and significant across all the schools. These school leaders were able to draw on the commitment, expertise, and leadership of colleagues. This helped them tackle the range and complexity of the demands on them.

"I want to get away from reading to pass tests, to reading to make sense of their reality. I'm not chasing SATs."

Throughout the lockdown period, the national message was 'business as usual', in education as well as in the economy. The government's 'back to business' approach was interpreted by these headteachers as a return to the status quo. Drawing on their assessment of the challenges and opportunities generated by Covid-19, their 'new' normality was based on caring values and relationships and a recognition that achievement went beyond SATS. Diagram 4 summarises the key components of this 'new' normality for this group.
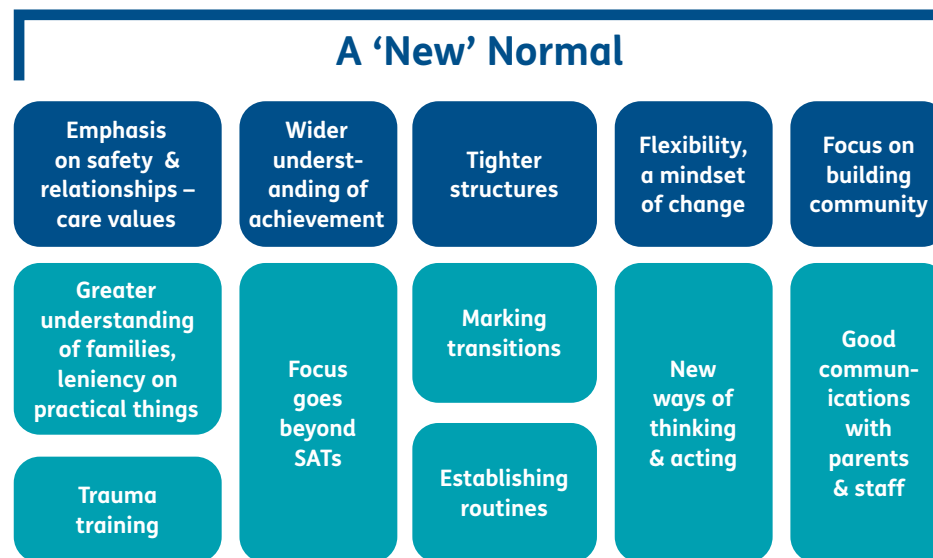
A 'New' Normal

- Emphasis on safety & relationships – care values
- Wider understanding of achievement
- Tighter structures
- Flexibility, a mindset of change
- Focus on building community
- Greater understanding of families, leniency on practical things
- Focus goes beyond SATs
- Marking transitions
- New ways of thinking & acting
- Good communications with parents & staff
- Trauma training
- Establishing routines

Diagram 4: A 'New' Normal

II: BACK TO BUSINESS?

They planned to introduce tighter structures and routines to create a sense of safety and belonging and to mark transitions, for example   a 'Happiness Box' created over the summer which children brought to school to help them feel happy, safe and comfortable. The 'new' normal was about schools as places of compassion and belonging in which communications within school and with families were meaningful.

Such an approach is likely to lead to positive outcomes, as there is a strong weight of evidence linking a sense of school belonging to academic outcomes, student motivation and absenteeism and other positive outcomes, such as health and well-being. The task for them as leaders, as one headteacher argued, was to create a bridge which balanced the demands of a highly regulated system and target orientated system with the needs of young people.

> *"I am not going to be passing massive pressure over my staff for improving the children's achievement. I am going to understand the students' achievement in a wide way, not in a narrow way. I want September to be gentle. I think it is about finding a balance."*

III: LEADERSHIP & CULTURE

> *"We need to understand that it is not going to be business as usual for a majority of students. It is about being flexible and having a mindset that things are going to change and preparing your staff for that. [...] There could be a lockdown at any point. Change is so scaring, and it is so imminent. We need to keep in mind the emotions of different people...*
>
> *There are things we've been wanting to change for a long time, but we haven't. [...] This period has changed so many things, in a way it has been a positive learning experience. (It's time) to find other ways to make education fit for the 21st century."*

In the previous section we mapped the reflections of the sixteen leaders about their experiences of the lockdown phase of the Pandemic. Here we look at the wider implications for schools and school leadership. Is this now the time, as the headteacher quoted here asks, to 'make' education fit for the 21st century? And if so, what might this mean for leadership?

To structure the discussion, we have set our findings from this research against a framework which emerged from earlier research, commissioned by the National Education Union (NEU) that focused on schools as places of belonging.[2] The framework (Diagram 5) highlights the connections between the three elements needed to create the conditions for belonging for staff and students, and welcome and inclusion for families:

- **Leadership:** Leadership shapes culture.
- **Culture:** Culture shapes learning and behaviour.
- **Culture and leadership:** Culture and leadership shape agency and belonging.

[2] A school-based research inquiry which came to an abrupt halt in March 2020 as the Pandemic brought life as we knew it to a standstill. The study aimed to bring to light school-wide approaches that appear to be having positive outcomes for young people, their families and school communities. It involved 133 young people and staff (including the headteachers), in five schools serving communities facing many challenges, located across England: Cornwall, Coventry, Islington, Lancashire and Leeds (K. Riley, M. Coates & T. Allen (2020, forthcoming). Place & belonging in school: Why it matters today. London: National Education Union.

III: LEADERSHIP & CULTURE

LEADERSHIP: Shapes Culture

CULTURE: Shapes Behaviour & Learning

LEADERSHIP & CULTURE: Shape Agency & Belonging

Diagram 5: Interlocking Elements in Creating the Conditions for Belonging

i. Leadership shapes culture

School leaders are the mediating force responsible for shaping the culture of the school. Covid-19 has led this group of school leaders to think afresh and to see themselves as place-makers who work to create community, by connecting with families and listening to students.

"Where the students have a voice and [...] feel that they are part of the school, that they are not afraid to give their opinion, even if it is something different, [...] they are not afraid of not being like the others."

The leadership values expressed by the headteachers involved in this inquiry are influenced by a sense of compassion and caring, and a commitment to place and belonging. These broad facets of leadership are summarised in Box I.[3]

Facets of leadership

- Compassionate leaders are compassionate to themselves and others; are relational and authentic, and work to create a culture of compassion and the conditions for place and belonging.

- Caring leaders use their skills to cultivate caring communities; are physically and emotionally present in the lives of young people; and apologise for their mistakes. Caring leadership has been shown to have a significant impact on young people's performance in school and on their social and emotional learning.

- Leaders of place and belonging 'walk' their leadership with a strong moral purpose and help make 'belonging' work by recognising the possibilities. They understand their own past and the importance of the heritages and experiences of others. They connect to families and communities in a meaningful way, exerting their own 'agency' and enacting the agency of others.

ii. Culture shapes learning and behaviour

Leadership values and actions shape the culture of the school and set the boundaries of what is possible. When we came to the end of our time with the headteachers in July 2020, they seemed to be walking two realities.

They had their own anxieties and frustrations: about the children; about the possibility of another outbreak; about other events that had yet to emerge; about the need for physical closeness in the school setting and yet the impossibility of achieving this. They also had their joys: their excitement about reopening schools; the opportunity to help the children feel loved and safe. They could not remove the risks but they would do their best to mitigate them and to communicate with the families and members of staff about these with compassion.

III: LEADERSHIP & CULTURE

A compassionate approach encourages ingenuity and flexibility and a 'can do' culture. In the context of the Covid19 lockdown, compassion helped generate the space and confidence to learn from the crisis and to move forward. In two workshops, headteachers initiated conversations about their role in response to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. They saw the possibility of stepping into a new space and tackling significant underlying issues about racism. This was described in the following terms:

"This is a moment in our lifetime when we can have open conversations about race and people can feel safe in expressing their opinions. It is an opportunity that we cannot miss. [...] We have a duty to create that space for conversation and to ensure that this space remains in place in our community."

iii. Culture and leadership shape agency and belonging.

We observed a growing sense of agency in this group of leaders. This was manifested in the many ways they chose to step into the leadership space with added conviction, and to bring others on board. This assertion of their own professional agency was expressed in how they spoke about their communities:

Telford and Wrekin:

I had to have a conversation with myself and say, "I know my children, I know my context, I know my school".

Hackney:

I think about my community… how I can adapt all of this to what they need. I've introduced a new programme on 'Emotional Resilience,' nine hours in the first three weeks.

Islington:

In the context of 'Black Lives matter', it's time to look afresh and decolonise the curriculum.

We know from research elsewhere that whether young people experience a sense of belonging in school is shaped by how their schools think about, and interact with, the communities in which they live. Positive forms of engagement build communication and connections and generate a bedrock of relationships. Mutuality and trust between schools and their communities enable them to weather many storms. For these headteachers, this was the moment to take stock.

They recognised that some of the strategies they had used to reach out to families would not have happened without the Pandemic. Across the three locations, the 'new' normal was about fostering communications with parents and staff.

Islington:

We need to be able to have open conversations with parents and say, "this is very complex, and you probably will be anxious when you come back". We cannot make teachers pretend that everything is alright. That is not reality.

Telford and Wrekin:

We have to make sure that communication with parents works so they completely understand what we are doing [...] Parents have told us that they really value the letters, messages, communications through Facebook… We want to strengthen that and do more communication. Through this we have learned not to judge families… to be more open and understanding of what can be going on with them.

Hackney:

We really need to spend some time acknowledging what happened and try to build a sense of belonging [...]. As a leader I think this is a really good opportunity to show that we care, so the parents know that we care about their children. I want my parents to be involved in school, develop those relationships. The parents make the school.

IV: LEADING OUT OF LOCKDOWN INTO A NEW LEADERSHIP SPACE

"We are operating in this world of incredible, frustrating unclarity. And the context keeps changing. That is very exhausting [...] Collectively creating community is challenging, and it is even more challenging when there is no clear information.

I don't think that the government knows very well how to do this, and how to create community. We need to create certainty, and the question is how to do that, because the government is not doing it."

The road ahead is not easy for these headteachers, nor for their colleagues across the country. They want to create schools which are spaces of belonging and compassion, yet recognise that they face the structural constraints of a strong national accountability system.

The uncertainty which characterises today's world and the world of the classroom is unlikely to disappear soon. The sense of collective uncertainty which is in the air reinforces the importance of schools as places of belonging: places where young people can feel confident that they will fit in and be safe in their identity.[4] It also throws a spotlight on the values of leaders and the actions they take. Two things are clear from this study: that leadership VALUES shape 'Action' and that Leadership ACTIONS shape BELONGING: see Diagram 6.

The picture which has emerged from this study is not one of heroic leadership: a solo endeavour in which our superhero battles his or her way through the storm. (Although we are deeply aware that the physical and emotional commitment which these headteachers demonstrated daily during lockdown is not sustainable in the long term.) The leadership values expressed are about compassion, caring and place-making. The leadership actions taken are about making connections and bringing others on board.

In a world of 'frustrating unclarity,' as the headteacher quoted at the beginning of this section reflected, school leaders are in a position to step into a new leadership space. The study gives a sense of the impact of well-thought out and purposeful actions. It leads us towards the notion of leadership as a moral endeavour, a dynamic ministry, and a profoundly place-making activity aimed at building community and creating a sense of belonging.

Where the direction of travel is towards schools as places of encounter, staff flourish, students find their voices, and parents are listened to. This is a rare moment for school leaders to take stock and decide their direction of travel. The headteachers who worked with us were traveling in the direction of schools which encourage children, young people and staff to work together in a climate of mutual respect.

Diagram 6: Values, Actions and Belonging

[4] K. Riley (2019). Agency and belonging: What transformative actions can schools take to help create a sense of place and belonging? Journal of Educational & Child Psychology; Vol. 36 No. 4, 91-103

Professor Kathryn Riley, Professor of Urban Education, UCL, Institute of Education is an international scholar whose work bridges policy and practice. With DancePoet TioMolina, she is co-founder of the Art of Possibilities, working with schools and communities to develop new forms of collaboration and to help create schools as place of belonging. Kathryn began in education as a volunteer teacher in Eritrea, before teaching in inner-city schools and holding political office - as an elected member of the Inner London Education Authority (the ILEA) - and working as a local authority Chief Officer. Her international experience has included heading up the World Bank's Effective Schools and Teachers Group in Washington and projects with UNICEF and the OECD.

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Dr Manuela Mendoza did her PhD in Sociology of Education at UCL, Institute of Education. In her thesis she explored the views of families, headteachers, and teachers in relation to the potentialities and challenges for socially diverse schools to become places of belonging for all. She is also a researcher at the Centre for the Study of Educational Policies and Practices (CEPPE), in Chile, and has conducted research in schools for more than ten years. She is currently supporting a UCL Innovation Project on inclusion and belonging.

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At the time of lockdown, Professor Riley was working with the three authorities involved in this study on issues related to schools as places of belonging. This jointly commissioned research emerged from discussions about how to take these issues forward at a time of global crisis.

Telford and Wrekin is north-west of Birmingham, Hackney is in the East of London, and Islington in the North. While each area has its distinctive demographic and economic characteristics, the schools these headteachers represent have a strong emphasis on inclusion, social diversity and creative pedagogic approaches.

In carrying out the research we drew on BERA ethical guidelines and conducted nine online workshops between May and July 2020 with the 16 headteachers. With each group, we conducted three on-line workshops which were recorded.

In Workshop 1, we asked the headteachers to reflect on the following questions: a) How has the crisis been for you personally and as a school leader?; b) How has it been for your teachers?; and c) How has it been for the children, young people and their families?

In Workshop 2, we summarised the key themes emerging from the first workshop (perceived challenges and opportunities of the crisis) and asked the participants to reflect: Is something missing? Then we asked them to discuss: a) What support and information do you need from the government / Local authority / Chain or diocese / Within your school (including governors)? And - Are you getting it?

Finally, in Workshop 3, we asked the headteachers to discuss what the future after reopening schools will look like.

The headteachers also had the option of completing a diary exercise: 'A day in my Life as a School Leader'. Information from this exercise is not reported in this booklet.

The headteachers are leaders of the following schools

Hackney:
- Randal Cremer Primary School
- Baden Powell Primary School
- Stoke Newington School
- Stormont House School
- Clapton Girls' Academy
- St Scholastica's Catholic Primary School

Telford and Wrekin
- Newdale Primary School and Nursery
- Old Park Primary School
- Lilleshall Primary School
- Grange Park Primary School
- Burton Borough School
- Hadley Learning Community

Islington:
- Thornhill Primary School
- Prior Weston Primary School
- Samuel Rhodes Primary and Secondary Special School
- Drayton Park and Montem Primary Schools