

Research article

The emergence of leadership as social triage: understanding the impact of the long shadows of austerity and the Covid-19 pandemic in English schools

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Abstract

In this article, we consider the long-term impact of policies and events which have emerged since the 2010s, and which have had serious consequences on the responsibilities of some school leaders in England. We trace the current issues within the system back to Every Child Matters, which heralded the beginning of a process of service integration, centred on the child and family to create coherent support for young people. However, before this approach to service provision was given the opportunity to mature, the incoming UK coalition government began a process of austerity, which started after their election in 2010. Over the subsequent 10 years many of the services allied to schools which were to form this integrated approach were severely cut back, often leaving schools as the sole remaining provider of essential services. Here we chart the impacts of austerity and the cuts to services meant to support children and families, particularly in the more

deprived areas of England. We then consider the experiences of head teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic and the continued and intensifying difficulties they have faced since the official 'return to normal' in February 2022. We identify that schools are now often the only public service offering regular face-to-face engagement with their communities. This leaves them fulfilling a form of social triage as part of their ever-widening role, absorbing many of the social issues and attempting to find additional help where they can, while continuing to demonstrate educational progress in their core responsibility.

Keywords austerity; pandemic; leadership; social triage; teacher work

Introduction

In this article, we report evidence that some schools, particularly in deprived areas, have become increasingly important local providers of advice and services beyond those for which they have statutory responsibility. In turn, this has led to school leaders diverting resources and developing skills to meet the additional needs of their communities. We became aware of this during a research project we conducted in summer 2022, which focused on capturing the reflections of primary head teachers on their experiences of work during the Covid-19 pandemic. While there was interest in education and its ability to cope early in the pandemic (Johnson and Coleman, 2021; Kim et al., 2021), few studies have attempted to understand the longer view, including experiences, since the official end of the pandemic heralded by the Department for Education (DfE) in February 2022 (Quickfall and Wood, 2024). The reflections of these head teachers showed that they played a central role in keeping their communities safe and helping retain a level of sustainability, both as a community and for mental health.

This article reports on the reflections of the head teachers concerning their role within the wider community. We contextualise their narratives within the wider understanding of long-term impacts of pre-pandemic austerity, as well as emerging evidence since the pandemic that the position of deprived areas continues to worsen, leaving schools and leaders with ever-greater roles as social and community providers. We identify this expanding role as *leadership as social triage*, but stress that this is not seen as a new type of leadership, but as an emerging feature of the wider work of school leaders, one that can only be understood through the long-term policy shifts and events that have led to the current situation, the most recent consequence of processes that continue to shape the English education system.

While our focus is on one country, which can be considered an outlier in terms of the policy and regulation of education, many countries have expressed an interest in following England's education policies, for example, in the Gulf (Mohamed and Morris, 2019). Many countries face similar issues to England in the range of work that school leaders are expected to tackle as part of their role (Quickfall and Wood, 2024). For example, in Poland, one head teacher commented: 'We know everything: we are experts not only in education law, but also in construction law, the Penal Code for Minors, and special funds' (Slowik and Zubik, 2023: n.p.).

This reflects perhaps a wider movement to expand the roles of head teachers, seeing their work as not just leading the educational development of children, but also as fulfilling more complex responsibilities. This work may appeal to those working in the education sector in other countries, and those interested in school systems generally, given the impact of Covid-19 globally and a shared problem with the expansion of head teacher work into leadership as social triage.

The impact of austerity on social provision for children and communities

The introduction of Every Child Matters (Children Act, 2004) by the New Labour government of Tony Blair brought with it a sea change in the way schools and other child services were meant to develop integrated services (Reid, 2005). Purcell (2020: 73) charts the development of Every Child Matters and highlights the intention to bring various children's services together to create a coherent whole: 'the

wide remit of the Green Paper meant that it covered large areas of policy, including health, education, crime and anti-social behaviour, and employability’.

One indication of this integration was the change in emphasis in local government, with directors of education being superseded by directors of children’s services. This led to a greater spectrum of services being located in schools, including breakfast clubs and after-school support as an extended schools concept (King, 2005). While not everyone saw this integration of services as a universally positive move (Parton, 2006), due to wider ranging surveillance, the intention of Every Child Matters was to create coherent services for all children, dependent on a range of social providers working together to ensure coherence and support.

Being a major shift in children’s services, it took several years for the network of services involved to collaborate, and for integration to begin to show positive impact. However, as the changes were beginning to mature, there was a change in government with the coalition (Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) coming to power in 2010. Due to the global financial crash of 2008, a pivotal aspect of the coalition’s policy offer was the introduction of austerity, leading to cuts in public spending. This ultimately had a devastating impact on the integrated services developed under New Labour.

Arrieta (2022) lays out the impact of the austerity programme which began in 2010 by characterising four processes by which the policy worked, which she identifies as the ‘4-Ds’. First, there was *disinvestment*, cutting the funding of local government:

Local authorities faced their budgetary pressures by protecting the expenditure of statutory services over the expenditure of non-statutory services. But even in those relatively protected services, such as adult and children social care sectors, there is evidence that authorities struggled to address increased demand with reduced funding and adopted strategies that may have compromised the quality of care. (Arrieta, 2022: 244)

At the same time as local government was seeing cuts to its budget, the process of *decentralisation* took place, a shifting of responsibility from central to local government. Gray and Barford (2018) argue that this led to greater inequality between local authorities; some became overwhelmed by statutory need from local populations in deprived areas. Others (for example, Bruch and White, 2018, cited in Arrieta, 2022) have argued that this shift was positive, given the greater opportunity for local decision-making in budgeting, although this assumes that budgets had discretionary leeway, when for some poorer authorities, it was a struggle to meet their statutory obligations.

As the cuts took effect, the impacts of austerity led to *disintegration*, as previously state-led services were taken over by the third sector and private companies, which can be variously seen as an opportunity for entrepreneurship, or the emergence of disjointed and poorer services due to profit extraction. This fragmentation is identified by Crossley (2020: 284), who argues that ‘Austerity has led to an increasingly fragmented and disparate economy and geography of welfare. These changes have affected people’s ability to access services, leaving some of them isolated and excluded from activities that they previously enjoyed.’

Finally, the disintegration of services can also be linked to *decollectivisation*, as workers’ rights became eroded, and Fanelli and Brogan (2014) have argued that this impacted living standards, while further concentrating wealth within a small group. Interestingly, the depressed income of workers is presented as a positive by Konzelmann (2014), who argues that depressed wages would lead to more jobs and growth.

Arrieta (2022: 251) stresses that regardless of the arguments there is no doubt that austerity had a negative impact on service provision, and that this was worsened by the pandemic: ‘some of the expenditure decisions taken by the government in 2020–2021 could further deepen social class divisions and regional inequalities. More is needed from the government to tackle social inequalities, to protect some of the most vulnerable groups in society, and to ensure fair employment conditions.’ While the coalition and subsequent Conservative governments have claimed that spending in education has been maintained, this is not the case. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (Drayton et al., 2023) identify a squeeze on school funding in the 2010s, with a rise in primary school budgets of 6 per cent across the decade, but a loss of 8 per cent in secondary schools. And while the school budget has risen since 2020, sector-specific inflation and teacher pay awards mean that between 2020/1 and 2024/5, primary schools saw a rise of 2 per cent, while secondary schools saw a further fall of 1 per cent. Importantly, while schools overall have seen no growth in their funding, school leaders have been asked to do considerably more. However, it is the other services, which were originally seen as important elements of the integrated services for children, that have seen greater loss of capacity.

The impact of austerity during the early years of the coalition government was stark. With child benefit frozen, the ‘bedroom tax’ – a system that cut housing benefit if families had spare bedrooms – and cuts such as a two-child cap on child benefit, together with the cutting back of local government budgets, put services for children under strain. This is evidenced by the children’s social care budget being cut by £1.85 billion from 2010 to 2012, which Ridge (2013: 414) characterises as ‘child poverty ... being privatised as children’s needs are repositioned back into the family; a family setting that is under siege, bearing the heaviest burden in relation to welfare and financial insecurity and systematically undermined through political rhetoric and media hyperbole’.

Sure Start centres were developed in the 2000s to offer community support for children and families. Their development was argued to be a major success of the New Labour government, and recent evidence from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Carneiro et al., 2024) has reiterated this. Longer-term impacts include increased educational achievement for those up to age 16, especially for those from poor and ethnic minority backgrounds, as well as greater early identification of special educational needs and disabilities. However, this provision was cut from 2010 onwards, with funding decreasing by over two-thirds and 1,340 centres closing between 2010 and 2022.

From 2010 onwards, there was an attempt by the DfE, and Education Secretary Michael Gove, to disentangle the work of schools and local authorities, and Purcell (2020) argues that one result of this was a disengagement with youth policy, even though it remained a departmental responsibility until 2013, when it was handed back to the Cabinet Office. During this time, the funding of youth services remained the responsibility of local authorities, which could not afford to pay for them. This defunding continued, and Purcell (2020) argues that even as late as 2018, there was still no intention by the government to revive youth services. As such, UNISON (2016) indicated that between 2012 and 2016, 3,652 youth work jobs had been lost, along with 603 youth centres, equating to 138,898 places for young people. In addition, an All Party Parliamentary Group for Children inquiry into Youth Services (APPGC, 2018) reported that local government spending on youth services had declined from £1.028 billion in 2008/9 to £0.338 billion in 2016/17, a loss of 62 per cent.

Finally, there has been a loss of mental health capacity to support children and young people. Garratt et al. (2024) report that, according to the Children and Young People’s Mental Health Survey (NHS, 2023), approximately 20 per cent of children aged 8–16 had a probable mental disorder in 2023. And this is not merely a stress created by the pandemic. The Association of Child Psychotherapists (ACP, 2018: 1) stated that, ‘Many fail to get the treatment and care they need and deserve.’ Across 416 responses from practising members, 33 per cent said that services were mostly or totally inadequate, 72 per cent said that the threshold for access to their services had increased over the previous five years, and that there were clear signs of the failure of the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

This evidence suggests that the emerging integrated services created for children in the New Labour years as a wrap-around approach to child development and support, has been fragmented and degraded due to austerity. However, not only is this a major loss for the health, well-being and educational potential of young people within England, there is also clear evidence that schools have had to take on the responsibility lost elsewhere in the system, with no extra funding or expertise.

Exploring the impact of austerity and the pandemic on school leaders

We have outlined above the impact of austerity on provision for children as a background to understanding the impact of change since 2010 on school leaders. To understand this, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, we explore the impact of the pandemic and its aftermath in two ways:

1. Analysis of data from a small-scale research project, capturing the reflections of head teachers concerning their experiences of the pandemic from its onset in March 2020 to the point of the interviews in summer 2022.
2. Use of secondary data and grey literature to understand some of the processes and experiences of those in education in the post-pandemic period.

By using evidence from these two complementary sources, we present insights into the impacts of the pandemic and its aftermath on the working lives of leaders. This builds on the wider narrative of austerity since 2010 to understand the pressures and issues that school leaders are dealing with.

Leader narrative interviews

Interviews were completed with five primary school head teachers working in a multi-academy trust in the East Midlands of England. All of the head teachers within the multi-academy trust were contacted via a gatekeeper who was already known to us. Head teachers were asked to contact us if they wished to take part in the research. From a population of 27, we received responses from 5 participants, which gave us a convenience sample. The interviews took place in the summer term 2022, after the DfE had effectively signalled the end of the pandemic by removing remaining restrictions in schools in February 2022. All interviews were completed on Microsoft Teams, and were audio recorded and later transcribed. The resultant transcriptions were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009), leading to the emergence of rich narratives. Here we present a selection of data from this analysis, focusing on the wider roles of the schools and leaders in relation to community, parents and other agencies. Four of the five head teachers in this project serve socio-economically deprived communities, while the other serves a catchment with a large proportion of armed services children.

Post-pandemic evidence

We use data reported within four surveys carried out since summer 2022, namely from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2023); Crisis Report (Allard, 2022); Children's Society annual survey (Children's Society, 2023); and NHS Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023 report (NHS, 2023). These were selected from a literature search looking for large-scale research reports, and on the basis that they report social patterns relating to children in the period since the official end of the pandemic as identified by the DfE, that is, February 2022. The reports were analysed for data relating to social impacts on children connected to the pandemic and its aftermath. As such, these reports give some insights into the social pressures on children, and by extension their families, as a continuation of austerity in the post-pandemic period.

In addition, we use the grey literature to exemplify the patterns identified in the survey data and to present secondary evidence of the pressures on schools in the post-pandemic period. This was done by searching the archive of *Schools Week*, an educational newspaper in the UK. Articles referring to 'head teachers' were searched, returning 1,945 articles. This list was then searched for articles published between 1 September 2022 and 30 May 2024. Each article was screened by title and descriptor. This led to an initial list of 28 articles. Each was then read to identify those relating to head teachers, and their roles and responsibilities. This led to a thematic analysis of 6 articles (Table 1).

Table 1. Origin of *Schools Week* articles used in this analysis

Author	Date	Title	Web link
S. Booth	5 May 2023	'How schools are forced to fill the public services void'	https://schoolsweek.co.uk/how-schools-are-forced-to-fill-the-public-services-void/
S. Booth	11 May 2024	'From the frontline: Heads reveal poverty, abuse and funding woes'	https://schoolsweek.co.uk/from-the-frontline-heads-reveal-poverty-abuse-and-funding-woes/
K. Featherstone	26 June 2023	'Schools can't continue to be the fourth emergency service'	https://schoolsweek.co.uk/schools-cant-continue-to-be-the-fourth-emergency-service/
J. Hill	23 June 2023	'Who's supporting school leaders to stop them hitting crisis point?'	https://schoolsweek.co.uk/whos-supporting-school-leaders-to-stop-them-hitting-crisis-point/
<i>Schools Week</i>	4 May 2023	'"We cannot meet needs": The plight of heads, in their own words'	https://schoolsweek.co.uk/we-cannot-meet-needs-the-plight-of-heads-in-their-own-words/
S. Strickland	10 June 2023	'What head teachers mean when they say headship has changed'	https://schoolsweek.co.uk/what-headteachers-mean-when-they-say-headship-has-changed/

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was secured prior to data collection, following institution and British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2018). Informed consent was gained from those acting as participants in our research. We were cognisant of the issues around anonymity of the participants in narrative interviews, given that responses to the questions might include information that would make the participant recognisable to colleagues. The conflict between presenting detailed responses from participants and protecting their anonymity, even where participants were vocal about not requiring anonymity (Gordon, 2019), was reflected on, and careful consideration taken about using direct quotations in the findings. Pseudonyms are used to ensure the maximum opportunity for anonymity.

Limitations of the research

This research, while exposing a succession of processes which allow us to consider the changed work of head teachers, nevertheless has some limitations. The data from the pandemic period are small-scale, and hence do not necessarily reflect experience at national level, although they are reflective of wider discussions with larger numbers of head teachers beyond the bounds of our research. The post-pandemic period is understood through a larger-scale lens, with the use of reports relating to experiences at a national scale in the post-pandemic period and news articles. This means that the data used in the article are drawn from perspectives which might be seen as disparate, but which together allow us to track processes across time.

Head teachers in the Covid-19 pandemic

The interviews we completed with head teachers covered a range of issues, but one strand was present in all five cases: the role of school within community. Four of the five head teachers serve deprived communities, and there was evidence of stressed communities finding it difficult to cope with lockdown. For example, Colin reflected:

a huge impact, I'd say, on the mental well-being of our parents, you know, having to deal with more than usual, sort of verbal, verbally aggressive interactions with our team. Giving more written warnings, just unreasonable behaviour ... Where they're just jumping off the deep end for the very reasons that in pre-Covid could have been quite easily dealt with.

Schools, being on the 'front line', were aware of changes in parents' interactions with them, and were dealing with issues which previously had been less acute. This might have been due to schools and teachers being directly available to parents to interact with. Julie highlights that schools were unusual during the pandemic, as perhaps the only official organisation that families had face-to-face interaction with, while other sectors shifted to online provision. She saw this as a positive, allowing the school to support parents, but while she sees this as a core responsibility of the school, it is interesting to note the expansion of roles beyond education:

[parents] don't engage with any other professional person on a face-to-face basis. So, your doctors would all be Teams meetings, health visitors non-existent really during the pandemic for them face-to-face. So, we were the only ones, we were out on the yard with our face masks on talking to them and supporting them, or telling them to come and get the vouchers and bits and pieces. So, yeah, I suppose we have ... have supported them to quite high level for quite a long time.

This role of offering human contact in support of the wider community is also recognised by Tony, who identifies the wider role that schools served during the pandemic of being the main contact point for parents, almost regardless of the issue involved. In addition, he hints at this being a situation which existed before the pandemic, but which was made more intense due to lockdown and further disruption to services:

[parents] send something out into the ether, and they may or may not get the response they want. And when it comes back, it'll be so faceless that they can say what they want to them, and

it won't really make any difference. Schools are still that face, that human face. And, boy, do we get some negativity chucked our way. And I think sometimes born out of the frustration of people who think, 'Well, you're the only person that I can moan to, you're the only person that I can hold to account, everybody else seems to have disappeared behind a laptop.' So, we are very much still front line. And I think the pandemic has made that worse. Also, expectations were raised in terms of our availability to speak to parents about their own feelings, about how things are with their children, and even their own parenting, we seem to be giving a lot of parenting advice and stuff. But we're not funded to do that and, ultimately, the strain is going to go somewhere.

As a result of being a community resource, rather than just an educational establishment, there is evidence that schools played a role in the emotional support of their communities. Here David reflects on the extra work done by his school in supporting their parents, and the potential impact this had on his own staff:

The first few weeks ended up being therapy sessions with parents. We rarely got to speak to the children, but there was lots and lots of tears, lots of scaredness about their family, about the fact they couldn't help with them with school learning, about all their challenges. And, you know, the staff are ending up in, in really, sort of being dragged into really sad conversations.

Neelam indicates that such emotional support for communities was already a feature of the work of her school, made apparent by her employment of a support worker, but that she was determined that this would continue, even though this was severely curtailed by the pandemic:

Parents came to our school, and they would have a coffee, they would offload. They [support worker] would chat to parents in the playground, and she was the one that would be fielding questions and things like that, just generally. Now if they're not even allowed to come out of the house, and they're stuck in a small place where they're struggling anyway for lots of different reasons, you can imagine the pressure, there's just no outlet for these families.

This emotional function of school support is also emphasised by Tony, although, while happy to support, he does ask why it has become the responsibility of schools:

We also found ourselves becoming almost emotional support for some parents who are like, 'I can't really cope with this. I'm falling apart', and, 'Well, I'll phone you again tomorrow', and, 'Thank you. It's just good to have somebody chatting.' So, hang on a minute. We're all suddenly, we're fulfilling this function. I'm sure there must be a tonne of people out there working from home who could be fulfilling this function. But when you suggested these things, it was all, 'Yeah, but the schools are the people with the relationship, the schools are the ones who know the children best.'

As well as the emotional support offered by the schools in this study, Neelam highlights the wider social support offered by her school. Her comment refers more widely than the pandemic; she is a head teacher supporting with various issues due to a lack of support from elsewhere:

All of that was adding to the stress of preparing and making sure, because actually, in a school like mine, in one of the most disadvantaged communities, where not just the children, but the families, rely on the school, not just the children's education, but their welfare and their support in terms of social things, finance, housing, you know, social health care. We are that hub, and to take that away from them...

She goes on to explore the issues and problems this presented during the pandemic, for which she felt responsible:

We had a massive rise in domestic violence, social care, mental health. You know, all of those kinds of things, which they're obviously there, but they're managed better if the parents are finding some strategies by coming to school and so forth. But when they're not, that's where you saw that massive rise. And, you know, our school community was broken at that time. We always feel as if we're very much a unit, and so it really became fragmented. And that was really sad ... really sad to see the impact that that had on some of our families and parents, and I'm so glad when they could all come back. It's made such a difference.

Finally, David describes unfairness, where schools were expected to continue their responsibilities for child safeguarding, even during a national lockdown, while other depleted services were unable to be involved. He also demonstrates the ways in which his school was helping to support the community, including the delivery of food parcels:

And I don't know whether it's just my perception, but it certainly felt like there was more of a pressure on us in education than there necessarily was on social care. So, we'd be phoning up social workers saying, 'Have you seen this child?' 'Oh no, we're not allowed to do home visits' ... And yet we're expected to, if we haven't seen them for a week, go and knock on the door and see them in the house ... We did some food drop-offs. We started at half eleven in the morning, and out of about fifty house visits between the groups, only two lots of parents and kids were up and dressed. So, when parents were like, 'Oh no, they're asleep'. You know, you need to say you really need to see them. Like, where is our right to say 'no'?

Our research focusing on head teacher experiences of the pandemic was wide-ranging, and the head teachers discussed many different issues, but their wider role in supporting their community was an explicit strand in their reflections. It is perhaps important to reflect on why they were responsible for these activities, when there should be allied services ready to step in. As we outline below, it is also important to consider what has happened since the end of the pandemic, as schools have continued to play a vital role in supporting their communities.

The post-pandemic environment and leadership

Since the end of the pandemic in February 2022, evidence is available to demonstrate the worsening impact of austerity and the pandemic as they transformed into the cost-of-living crisis (Quickfall and Wood, 2024). The ONS (2023) stated that between March 2022 and March 2023 there was a 19.1 per cent rise in the prices of food, and an even greater rise of 40.5 per cent in the cost of energy. In a report for Crisis, Allard (2022) carried out research focusing on 2,000 households with the lowest incomes in the country. The rises in the cost of living left families desperate to retain their housing, with 23 per cent of respondents identifying the need to skip meals within the previous 12 months, a statistic which hides an even worse situation where there are children present, where this rises to 43 per cent (Allard, 2022: x).

The issue of food shortages is exemplified by Booth (2023: n.p.), who reports that: 'Just 17 per cent of children were eligible for free school meals in 2010. That now sits at 22.5 per cent – 1.8 million children. Nearly 1 million food bank packages were given to children last year by the Trussell Trust charity, a 145 per cent rise from 386,000 in 2017.' A similar research report from the Children's Society (2023), again capturing the experiences of 2,000 parents and carers, together with the children (between the ages of 10 and 17) who live with them, found that 23 per cent of households were under financial strain between January and March 2023, and that 24 per cent ran out of money before the end of the month. As a result, 52 per cent of the children who replied to the survey said that they were at least sometimes worried about running out of money, while 20 per cent said that it was a constant worry for them. Such a crisis in living standards may be expected to be a responsibility of local authorities, but, as outlined in the introduction, many of these services have been cut or undermined by austerity since 2010.

Booth (2024: n.p.) reports on schools stepping in to support families in poverty, and also those made homeless by domestic violence. She reports on the experiences of one head teacher:

He told how a child and her mother, both victims of domestic violence, phoned the school from a bus shelter[,] carrying all their belongings. They had moved from a refuge to hostels 'with neither local authority involved taking responsibility ... We are expected to make significant provision out of our own school budgets and often staff pockets for pupils who are living in bed and breakfast hotels but arriving at school with no breakfast.' (Booth, 2024: n.p.)

This is an example of schools needing to ensure the safety of children because other services do not have the capacity. It is important to stress that the lack of involvement from services outside schools is not a deliberate decision; it is a simple lack of capacity. As Featherstone (2023: n.p.), an executive head teacher, comments:

The services required to fully support all children to flourish have been wholly insufficient since COVID and the cost-of-living crisis. But to be frank, they were not even enabling most children to be safe, fed, warm and happy before then. Now, they are woefully over-stretched, disconnected, under-funded, demoralised and completely overwhelmed.

And when the services required to meet the needs of children are shocking, you can absolutely guarantee those in place to support their parents and carers are just as bad, or worse. As a result, families in need have fewer and fewer resources and places of help, exacerbating already appalling situations.

A similar picture is reported by Booth (2023), who states that child social worker vacancies have increased, with the need for 5,400 agency staff to cover the gaps, and a worsening situation, with 5,422 social workers leaving their roles in 2022, and only 4,826 starting. As a consequence, she reports that:

Amy Lassman, the head of Nelson Mandela Primary School in Birmingham, said councils were expecting 'more and more to be done by schools'.

She hired a family support worker for one-day-a-week, costing £10,000, but budget pressure will force her to cut the role next year.

Instead, a senior leader will become pastoral lead – but that means they will no longer teach for two days in the classroom. (Booth, 2023: n.p.)

And this leaves schools in impossible positions, as they attempt to retain a level of education for students that they are unable to resource. As one head teacher reports:

We're a two-form entry nursery to year six – 450 Children – 17 EHCPs [education, health and care plans], two in the pipeline.

We have a lack of services, lack of access to them. We've ended up as a school having to resort to suspensions and permanent exclusions for SEND [special educational needs and disability] children because we just cannot meet their needs.

I've had a parent actually begging me to permanently exclude that child so they can get the services that they need.

That is a travesty. Like you, I weep over every suspension and every permanent exclusion. SEND funding is an absolute mess. It's got to be sorted. (Schools Week, 2023: n.p.)

These are only some of the many reflections of head teachers which can be found in the grey literature since the end of the pandemic, but they give a stark indication of the impacts on schools and head teachers of this crisis. There is clear evidence of schools finding ways of supporting children, families and their communities beyond the educational responsibilities which should be at the core of their work. However, as Strickland (2023: n.p.), a head teacher, explains:

However anyone wants to strip it, there simply isn't sufficient funding in place to address all these issues, which are compounded by a lack of external support and alternative provision places.

However, he also highlights another devastating impact on schools at present:

pupils present with challenges of a magnitude I have never known in my career. Attendance figures may mirror those of the early 2000s, but it will take even longer now than it did back then to remedy the situation. And I am yet to speak to a school leader who is not frankly alarmed by the growing number of mental health problems in our young people, which directly link to and/or stem from safeguarding issues. (Strickland, 2023: n.p.)

Perhaps because of the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and also the longer-term impact of austerity, there is a mental health crisis among young people. The NHS Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023 report (NHS, 2023) is the fourth update of a survey running since 2017. Over this period, the same children and young people have submitted periodic returns to build a longitudinal sense of the quality of mental health in the population. Over time, identification of probable mental disorder has risen from 12.5 per cent to 17.1 per cent between 2017 and 2020 for 8–16 year olds, rising again to 20.3 per cent in 2023, while for 17–19 year olds, the figure has risen even faster, from 10.1 per cent in 2017 to 17.7 per cent in 2020, and 25.7 per cent in 2022. In addition, the report highlights the increasing role of schools in combating mental health problems. Parents of the children and young people completing the survey were asked who they access for advice and support about mental health problems, with 31.9 per cent identifying schools, while only 15.9 per cent identified health services. For those with probable mental disorders, only 48.9 per cent identified health services, while 73.6 per cent said schools.

Once again, these national-level statistics are reflected in individual experiences. Booth (2023: n.p.) reports that:

Sharon White, the chief executive of the School and Public Health Nurses Association (Saphna), said nurses now dealt with safeguarding, child protection and mental health issues – rather than prevention.

‘We are picking kids out of the fire instead of stopping them falling in in the first place.’

Schools are ‘buying in’ private nurses to fill the gap, she said.

Booth (2023) also reports that there is a shortage of educational psychologists, a highly specialised role, with 360 fewer local authority-employed practitioners than in 2010. As a result, it is reported that:

Dr Cath Lowther, the general secretary of the Association for Educational Psychologists, said shortages meant children ‘not receiving the early intervention support’ that might prevent an escalation to more costly education, health and care plans (EHCPs). (Booth, 2023: n.p.)

This is at the same time as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are dealing with a 116 per cent rise since 2017/18 in children needing help, from 338,633 to 733,756 children; 238,000 children were turned down for treatment (Booth, 2023).

There is clear evidence of a worsening situation in terms of social and health provision across England. Crucially, this is a disintegrating set of services which schools are now playing a major role in mitigating, using meagre resources, and head teacher and staff energy and time, in an attempt to create positive environments where learning can take place. Indeed, ‘Tunde King, a school social resilience co-ordinator, previously told *Schools Week* it felt like schools were “now part of the welfare state”’ (Booth, 2023: n.p.). The pressures which result are now impacting on the sustainability of the school sector. Hill (2023: n.p.), discussing the pressures now on schools, talks to an executive head teacher, who reflects that: Recruitment and retention difficulties, Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills] pressures, and the dismantling of other public services is leaving heads, as Baker puts it, “exhausted trying to keep all the plates spinning”.’ And Strickland (2023: n.p.) argues that:

If funding doesn’t follow, then we need nothing short of a full recalibration of the role of schools and education. Heads can’t keep being held to account for the same results when they are tackling hunger, helping families who are having to choose between heating or eating, and ensuring children are adequately clothed and in a position to come to school worry-free.

Conclusion – leadership as social triage

The vision of the Every Child Matters Green Paper (HM Government, 2004) was to create integrated service provision for children and families to ensure that the spectrum of services available to them worked together to offer seamless support. This system was never fully realised, but it was beginning to emerge when the New Labour government lost the general election in 2010. With the incoming coalition government came a rapid loss of provision in many of the services outside education. As a consequence,

the integrated nature of support for children began to disintegrate. As outlined above, one example of this is the loss of community services for children and young people. This disintegration continued quietly until the Covid-19 pandemic began. This in many ways was a stress test of public service provision (Lawlor, 2021; Meng, 2020), and it is clear from the narratives of the head teachers above that they were playing a major role in their communities, including offering emotional support, delivering food parcels and checking on children, but also offering wider forms of social support. In their own words, this is partly the result of a loss of provision elsewhere in the system.

The role of schools in the pandemic was not a temporary process to fill the gap due to the pandemic itself; it was a need to fill the gaps left by the loss of other, allied services. And this pattern has continued to emerge and become more acute since the pandemic. As the larger-scale quantitative data show, housing and food insecurity is widespread among those living in economically deprived areas, and this is exemplified by the testimony of head teachers who are spending school budgets on social support in attempts to help their communities, who are facing complex and intense need. In addition, this is happening at a time when there is also a mounting mental health crisis and too few services to cope. It must be stressed that this analysis is not meant as a criticism of those services outside schools. They have been decimated by long-term underfunding, and they continue to work under huge pressure themselves. But schools have been left to cope with a multitude of often interrelated and complex problems that they are not designed or funded to deal with.

The current situation in schools has left head teachers serving a role in social triage. A small literature already exists on the concept of social triage, but it has a generally negative connotation. First defined by Sjöberg and Vaughan (1993, cited in Glumm and Johnson, 2001), Glumm and Johnson (2001: 155), researching psychiatry, describe it thus: 'bureaucratic decision-makers find it efficient to treat or work with certain groups and therefore sacrifice the needs of certain groups in order that others (more beneficial to the organization) can receive services'.

Since this initial work, social triage has been used in both the medical sciences (for example, Andersen, 2016) and sociology (Simmons and Casper, 2012). While this same negative connotation might seem appropriate in the case of school experiences due to austerity, we wish to use it in a more subtle manner. We do not see head teachers as deciding on how to ration help, as the work in a health context above suggests. Instead, we see head teachers genuinely trying to help those in their school communities, but in contexts where they have little resource and training, creating a tension, a pressure where they wish to help as many individuals as possible, but have neither the resource nor at times the expertise to do so.

Head teachers, especially those serving deprived areas, are in a position where they are presented with a wide spectrum of need from children, parents and the community. As such they are in a constant position of assessing which issues they can deal with themselves, and which they will attempt to secure external help with, and, in both cases, how urgently this needs to happen. This is a situation which has arisen, as we have evidenced, due to the continued stripping away of other services, leaving head teachers in an exposed position where they have to offer support, as few other allied services remain. Where once they would have been one part of an extended, integrated support system for children and their families, they are now regularly the sole face-to-face contact that families have with the public sector. Thus, we argue that head teachers are now in a position of having not only to consider the running of their schools for educational purposes, but also having to fulfil a much wider role. They have had to absorb ever-increasing responsibilities which were once the role of local authorities and the government. To use Arrieta's (2022) terminology, there has been both disintegration and decentralisation of activity, leading to schools informally taking on the role of social worker, mental health provider and community support, all with no extra funding or developmental funding for formal expertise. Head teachers have been left to triage these issues, absorbing pressures and issues present in their communities as best they can, while battling for more severe issues to be taken as the responsibility of others within a fragmented system.

This role of social triage, however, is not recognised by official bodies. Ofsted do not include it within their inspection framework, the DfE do not include it in the training of new leaders through their National Professional Qualifications, and there has been no additional funding to support this new responsibility which has emerged since the onset of the pandemic. Consequently, if this is not identified and understood as a major pressure present within the system, it will lead to greater fragility and instability across the sector, as head teachers decide that they no longer want to fulfil the role.

Rather than being educational leaders, they have become leaders responsible for triaging the wider ills of a broken social system, for which they have huge responsibility but almost no recognition.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Bishop Grosseteste University ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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