

Crisis leadership in English secondary schools: its effects on school leaders' long-term visions of education

Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Baxter, J. and Floyd, A. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2008-7831> (2023) Crisis leadership in English secondary schools: its effects on school leaders' long-term visions of education. In: Outhwaite, D. and Simon, C. A. (eds.) Leadership and Management for Education Studies. The Routledge Education Studies Series. Routledge. ISBN 9781032343020 doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003321439-9> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/110787/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003321439-9>

Publisher: Routledge

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Chapter 9

Crisis leadership in English secondary schools: Its effects on school leaders' long-term visions of education

Jacqueline Baxter and Alan Floyd

Introduction

Compulsory education in England is rarely free of policy initiatives, societal challenges and 'wicked' issues, such as the achievement gap between socially and economically deprived pupils and their peers. In addition, since the Education Reform act of 1988 and subsequent policy initiatives, it has become one of the most marketised systems in the world. When the country was hit by the Covid-19 global pandemic with the ensuing restrictions on face-to-face education provision, the stresses and cracks in a system suffering from innovation overload were brought to light as never before. Pupils from more affluent backgrounds transferred adeptly to online learning, while their less advantaged peers were held back by a lack of parental support, a lack of connectivity and hardware, and low skills in manipulating the digital environment. However, in common with other world-changing events, there have been some positive elements to emerge, particularly in relation to digital innovation. These key issues form the focus of this chapter.

Background to digital learning

Whilst integrating digital learning into classroom practice has been on the policy agenda in the UK since the early 1980s, it was not until the mid-1990s, with the emergence of the concept of a global information society, that it gained momentum (Younie, 2006). The first national assessment of the impact of ICT was conducted in 1993. This report highlighted a need for in-service training in ICT, as well as other recommendations, which were reiterated by the Stevenson report of 1997 (Stevenson, 1997). This independent inquiry into the 'issues and opportunities' with ICT concluded that, 'the state of ICT in UK schools was primitive and it was a public priority to increase its use'. However, since then, adoption of digital practices has not been as consistent or widespread as early advocates hoped.

Eickelmann (2011: 93) identifies eight characteristics of schools that have succeeded in sustainable digital integration:

1. Their leaders possess strong leadership skills and a sound understanding of the potential of ICT to enhance learning.
2. They have established cooperation with external partners to raise funding.

3. They realise intra-school cooperation which is integrated into school concepts and culture. This way, digital and pedagogical knowledge of staff is improved.
4. Leaders developed strategies to cope with new digital trends, for example, the implementation of new staff development schemes.
5. They use their internal processes to deal with problems and challenges regarding digital integration and do not externalise problems.
6. They disseminate the idea of digital learning to improve learning outcomes throughout the school.
7. They link digital learning to existing and prospective pedagogical aims, and design an infrastructure with these in mind.
8. They integrate digital learning by embedding it into core curricula.

In other words, there needs to be an effective digital strategy in place in order for digital integration to occur.

However, a recent Department for Education report undertaken by Cooper Gibson Consultancy in 2021 (Department for Education, 2021) revealed that just 54 per cent of secondary schools have a digital strategy in place and that academies were more likely to have one than local authority (LA) maintained schools. In addition, there were clear geographical disparities: ‘Schools in London (52 per cent) and the North East (54 per cent) were most likely to have a strategy in place, whilst schools in the South East (34 per cent), South West (36 per cent) and East Midlands (38 per cent) were least likely’ (p.76). The same report indicated that 84 per cent of secondary schools indicated that their school had increased or upgraded technology in the previous 12 months and that 64 per cent of these headteachers indicated that the upgrade was due to the pandemic. A minority of just seven per cent stated that they had already planned such changes before the pandemic.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of these headline findings in more detail by drawing on a UKRI funded research project which involved 50 narrative interviews with school leaders undertaken during the Covid-19 restrictions to explore whether there is evidence that their digital strategic planning reflects a ‘strategy as learning’ approach, and if so, what the implications are for digital learning in schools going forward. There follows a description of our theoretical framework before moving on to describe our methods and sample, discussion and conclusions.

Questions for discussion

Why have schools been so reluctant to embrace digital learning?

What do you think are the real sticking points for them?

Theoretical overview

Strategy as learning

Amongst the many conceptualisations of strategy, there is a considerable literature that views strategy as practice and, as part of this, strategy as a learning activity. In so doing, the work of researchers such as Goldman and Casey (2010) and Chia and Holt (2009) explores the micro processes and activities that are activated during strategising processes. Chia and Holt's work is particularly relevant in the research presented here as they view strategy as, 'a practical coping mechanism' and a sensemaking activity in which, 'events, entities and meaning help compose one another' (Chia and Holt, 2006: 640). Thus, it is perceived as an activity during which individuals constantly modify their behaviour and actions in relation to shared practices and understandings.

Our previous research into strategy making in multi-academy trusts (Baxter and Floyd, 2019) supported the idea of strategy as an emergent phenomenon, whilst also emphasising the sense-making, practical coping actions that appear as a recurring theme in Chia and Holt's (2006) work. It challenges Bourgeois' distinction between what strategy *is* (success and failure of various strategies) and *how* a particular strategy emerges (Bourgeois III, 1980) arguing that, as a learning activity, the two are inextricably interwoven. Casey and Goldman's (2010) work looked to resolve what they viewed as the dichotomous nature of the ways in which strategy-making and strategic planning is conceptualised, arguing that the term 'strategic thinking' is often used interchangeably with strategy (p. 168). They reconciled this by conceptualising strategic thinking, together with strategy formulation, as 'strategic thinking in action' (STA) (p.168). As this view brings together three literatures of strategy, learning and cognition, in our previous work on strategy making in education we successfully developed and tested a model that brings together these facets, (Baxter and John, 2021; Baxter and Floyd, 2019). This model is discussed later in the chapter (see figure 1). Our conceptual model also incorporates Casey and Goldman's strategy as learning approach in acknowledging that it is:

- conceptual – develops concepts that can then be applied to different situations;
- systems orientated – involves not just the organisation but the system in which it is situated;
- directional – aims for a desired future state;

- and finally, is opportunistic and a learning activity (*ibid*: 172).

Our previous empirical work adds to this by identifying a strong requirement for leader metacognition when crafting strategy (Baxer and Floyd, 2019; Baxter and John, 2021).

Questions for discussion

Think about how you developed your strategy for coming to university. What did you do, and how much did you learn in the process?

Imagine you are advising a friend on how to go about choosing and applying for university, what steps would you include in your advice?

Strategic thinking in crisis situations

In relation to strategy-making in crisis situations, the work of Weick has been highly influential on the field (Weick, 1988; Weick, 1993). His work describes how sensemaking – the integration of stimuli (information) into sensemaking frameworks or schema – aids individuals and organisations in making sense of an unfolding crisis in relation to their work. This approach connects with constructivist and social theories of learning. Constructivism is based on the idea that knowledge and learning are socially constructed, and that learning depends on individual and collective agency to critically question environmental cues and reflect on these in relation to their own knowledge (Amineh and Asl, 2015). The term ‘constructivism’ derives from Piaget (1947) as well as from Bruner’s work on discovery learning (Bruner, 1996). In this sense the learning is deep and transformative in relation to the individual, as it changes the perspective of the learner in such a way that it also infuses and develops their identity. Mezirow (1991: 14) explains the integration of new learning as: ‘the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these, ...’. This thinking in essence is the basis of the metacognitive element of strategy that we identify elsewhere (Baxter and John, 2021).

Other work on strategic thinking in times of crisis, also drawing on Weick, empirically investigates the ways in which effective leaders use strategising as a sensemaking activity in which schema are constantly adapted to integrate new information (Thürmer *et al.*, 2020; Boin and Renaud, 2013). Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), in their work on sensemaking in crisis and change, draw on the work of Balogun to emphasise the key role of middle management in the sensemaking activities of senior management (Balogun, 2007: in Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010: 559; Balogun and Johnson, 2004). They point out that, whilst senior management normally initiate change, middle managers are key to the process as they are the individuals who interpret and enact this change. They also point out that, during a crisis situation, sensemaking becomes a shared identity, ‘which provides a vital anchor

around which collectives construct meaning and understand their experiences...’ (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010: 563). Additionally, they highlight the need to consider power and politics alongside ‘visceral feelings as cues and frames’, to the sensemaking process (ibid: 571).

Question for discussion

How important are middle-leaders in relation to strategy in your organisation who lead without a leadership title?

This, and our own empirical work, has added to the theory on strategy as learning. It extends Casey and Goldman’s idea of strategic thinking in action and employing schema theory to examine strategy as a learning activity, one in which metacognitive ability is key to the adaptation of existing schemas. Combining this with a socio-cognitive, constructivist view of learning also examines the different communities of practice and socio-material influences upon strategic thinking in action and identifies the need for future research to adopt a critical identity perspective (Black and Warhurst, 2019). Such an approach is necessary in order to examine how the development of capabilities relating to strategic thinking in action affect both individual feelings of capacity and agency. In this chapter we explore whether there is evidence of such strategy as learning and sensemaking in a crisis situation by examining the narratives of school leaders during the period when restrictions were in place due to Covid-19, analysed according to our theoretical framework described in Figure 1.

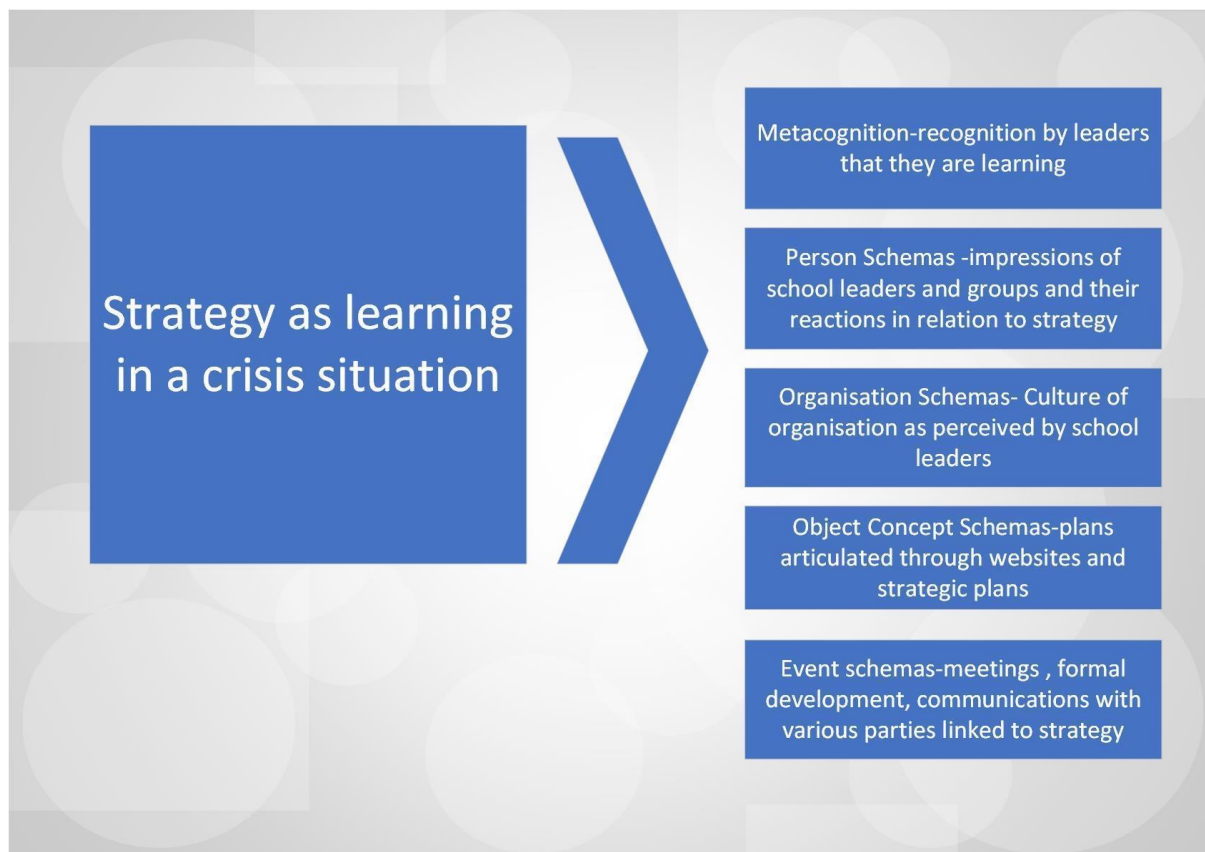


Figure 1 Strategy as learning theoretical framework, adapted from Baxter and John (2021)

As Figure 1 indicates, we will consider the narratives in relation to five key areas:

1. Evidence of metacognition – do leaders recognise or understand that they are learning?
2. Person schemas – perceptions of how the strategy will be, or is being, received.
3. Organisation schemas – the culture of the organisation in relation to strategy.
4. Object concept schemas – articulated through websites and strategic plans.
5. Event schemas – meetings and communications with stakeholders.

Questions for discussion

How effective are strategy inset days in relation to the overall direction of the organisation? Talk to a teacher in a placement school or a lecturer to gain an understanding.

How influential are school leaders’ perceptions of how staff will relate to certain strategic directives?

What could the effect of these perceptions be on the overall organisational strategy?

In the next section we outline our sample and methods.

Sample and methods

Sample and interview schedule

The sample is illustrated in Table 3. It should be noted that we refer to ‘organisations’ throughout the chapter when we wish to capture results from individual schools and multi-academy trusts (MATs).

Type of organisation	Role	Number	Number of schools	Abbreviation used
Multi-academy Trusts	Headteacher	4	31	CEO
Local Authority Schools	Headteacher	19	19	CS
Stand-alone Academy	Headteacher	20		SAT

Special Schools	Headteacher	2	2	SS
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Table 1 Sample

In order to provide a full picture our interviews drawn from 50 schools, 40 per cent of which are located in areas of high socio-economic deprivation and chosen due to their above average number of students receiving free school meals (FSM). The other 60 per cent of the sample derives from schools with average or below average on the FSM indicator. This allowed us to examine whether there were any differences between schools based on socio economic status. Participants were self-selecting and reached through various channels: through our three school support project partners (Schools North East, Derbyshire Teaching Alliance and The Key for school leaders), and direct approaches via social media. The interview schedule was developed using themes that emanated from an initial literature review. These were then peer reviewed by our project partners (all senior educational leaders or researchers) and piloted. It was a very difficult time to carry out interviews, and we are grateful to those who gave up their time during this most challenging of times for schools.

Data collection

Ethics permissions were obtained from all participating universities, in line with BERA protocols, which included a consent form and information about the project. Online interviews, carried out via Microsoft Teams, were semi-structured, lasted between one and 1.5 hours and took place between March and October 2021. The school leaders interviewed included both heads of single schools and CEOs of MATs (groups of schools with one executive headteacher along with individual school heads). In total there were four CEOs interviewed, representing a total of 31 schools in total, 21 of these in areas of high SED. A pilot was carried out in January 2021 and a code book derived from the researchers, each coding a sample of three scripts within the pilot. This involved all researchers reading and coding each transcript individually, then discussing, merging, and reflecting on the codes to form larger categories and emerging conceptual themes, then further analysing the themes by comparing and contrasting them across data sets and to the study’s conceptual framework.

Narrative analysis

Narrative approaches are widely used as a method to study organisations and educational establishments (Clough, 2002). This is largely due to the links between a narrative and sensemaking approach (Elliot, 2005). In relation to strategy as learning they are useful in revealing the cognitive structures – the schema – that help individuals and groups to cope with the complexities of their worlds (Patterson, 2002). They are not only useful in identifying strategic thinking, but often become the basis of a written strategy, telling the future story of the organisation (Baxter and Floyd, 2019), as

communication, as repositories of knowledge to be transmitted and re-enacted (Boudes and Laroche, 2009) as well as the foundation of meanings that become guidance for subsequent action and interpretation (May and Fleming, 1997). In line with our previous research, we adopt a narrative approach to data analysis. In what follows, we outline our findings and discuss them.

Questions for discussion

Think about a school or workplace you know. How effective are stories and overall ‘narratives’ within the organisation?

Do you think they help or hinder strategic planning? Why?

Findings and discussion

In common with previous approaches to this topic we combine our findings with our discussion under several broad headings. Overall, we found evidence for all five categories within the study and discuss these in what follows.

Category 1: Metacognition

The narratives revealed considerable evidence of leader metacognition both during and after the period following restrictions (July 2021). Thirty eight out of fifty reflected on all three lockdown periods as progressive learning events, describing, for example, how:

...it was a bit like ready, fire, aim. We had to adjust it in flight. In the second lockdown we were really well prepped and that was more about getting the chasing up better. (CEO-6)

There was also evidence that the pandemic had considerably changed leaders’ attitudes and thinking with regard to digital education, and this in turn was affecting the way that they conceptualised the future of their schools or, in the case of CEOs, their organisations. One of the most interesting aspects of this metacognition was their growing awareness that practices which occurred during lockdown had opened up new understandings of how best to reach pupils who had generally not been thought of as participative in lessons. In 20 organisations leaders mentioned how introvert pupils had benefitted from online teaching:

Online learning isn’t for everyone, but we’ve certainly seen quieter pupils see the benefits from working in a quieter environment and have time to provide a considered response to questions. (Head-22)

In all 50 interviews, leaders acknowledged that their thinking around digital learning had advanced. Their awareness of its potential had increased, and their own learning advanced. In some cases, all

schools in areas of multiple deprivation, leaders admitted that they had hardly embraced online education at all before the pandemic. This was largely due to constraints such as lack of pupil learning space at home, lack of parental support, and funding constraints. But during the pandemic, they explained how the crisis had broken down barriers, creating new levels of trust between staff and pupils/staff and leaders, as this head in an area of high SED explains:

We've learned a lot about the importance of student voice. One student said to me that they felt great respect that teachers had thought to ask and involve them and then acted upon their suggestions. (Head-45)

Heads and CEOs from organisations that had already been considering digital learning in their strategies for some time had advanced their strategies, some of them bringing forward digital plans that had *'not been expected to be operationalised until 2025'* (CEO-15).

In the case of one large multi-academy trust, the CEO explained, *'We are bringing our whole curriculum online.'* CEO-15 (18 schools). A detailed breakdown of where schools were in their digital strategic planning before, during and post lockdown period, is discussed in a further paper from this project (Baxter *et al.*, under review).

Category 2: person schemas and category 3: organisation schemas

These two aspects are considered together in our findings, as the two are so closely interlinked. Although ample evidence relating to this category emerged, the evidence presented a mixed picture. Some school leaders felt that because teachers and leaders had learned so much in relation to digital learning during Covid, that their schools would never go back to *'business as usual.'* However, although this was articulated within the narratives, it was far from clear how this realisation would change the culture of the organisation, or how strategic plans would address this, as this head reports:

And I think while we started the system, this process, with this awful sense of a deficit and gaps in learning and knowledge, we're now thinking, actually, what it's shown us is that education and schooling is about far more than gaps in knowledge. (Head-35)

This raises the question of how much of the learning would actually be implemented in the future, and how the major culture change that clearly occurred in 70 per cent of the schools in the sample, during Covid, would become the new normal. However, a number of leaders did explain how their new thinking would inform strategic change, in very practical terms, as this head reports:

So I want to have the situation where our children have... There's an expression in local primary school users, a computer is part of their pencil case, and I think that's a really great concept. (Head-3).

Another head talked at some length about new tracking and monitoring and how it would change the way that teachers monitor learning:

The introduction of data analytics has supported staff supporting pupils. Clear information has led to targeted interventions and we've been supporting learners at risk of under-achieving. Tracking information has also been used to report to parents. Teachers and support staff have worked together to analyse attainment information to evaluate and revise accordingly. Pupils benefit from tracking discussions with staff which places the pupil at the centre. (Head-9)

This shift would clearly make a big impact on the culture of the school and its modus operandi.

However, although there was much positivity within the narratives, there was also a concerning trend, particularly amongst struggling schools (either due to high SED or due to low Ofsted ratings), for heads to take a negative view of the culture of the school and how it could be changed. Whilst they acknowledged that they had learned during lockdown, and that some of the digital learning had been very effective, the practical and perceptual constraints on their organisations, since then, had been such that they anticipated a full return to the way they operated before Covid, as this head explains:

We don't want to script the children for failure, but inevitably some children have come back and we... They've gone away with a positive mindset, they've come back with an, I can't, it's not my fault I've missed it, you didn't teach me, and that's been a challenge. Again, having spoken to a number of my head teacher colleagues with a similar school, so a school with a similar demographic, it's mirrored. (Head-16)

Since the end of restrictions in 2021 schools have continued to suffer in relation to pupil and staff mental health issues, lack of funding, and staff absence due to subsequent waves of the omicron variant of the virus. In some cases, although the vision is there and it has clearly changed due to Covid, the appetite for change has been blunted by these issues, as this CEO pointed out:

During Covid it's been used significantly as a way for collaborative agency and to support children at risk during lockdown. Looking forward it requires innovation and transformation, but there's been a big emotional impact from 2020, all my staff have been personally impacted. Their wellbeing has been affected and they are exhausted. There's an element of trauma in my workforce and in the community. For all I'd like to develop online learning and not lose the momentum, there's a fine line because staff when they return will look for comfort, they'll want things to go back to how they were because it's a safety net and reassuring. I'm not sure they have the energy for transformation. Everyone is shattered. I question also if I am I a good enough leader when the appetite for risk taking is low. Do I

have the right skills to inspire staff to continue with online learning? Some worry about online and how it could take their jobs. There's definitely been incubating of different types of provision such as differentiating learning (CEO-4).

From a strategy as learning perspective, the learning that takes place during a crisis is very often tempered within the post crisis period, as the literature supports (Boudes and Laroche, 2009; Watkins and Walker, 2021). This is particularly true in relation to post-crisis inquiry reports that very often re-framed narratives in order to retrospectively justify particular policies and practices, and re-establish old patterns of sensemaking. As Boudes and Laroche report, in the case of the heatwave in the summer of 2003 in France, the health system was unable to anticipate the event in time, or to react appropriately. They analyse, through seven official reports how narrative choices which, 'transform the chaotic events of a crisis into an ordered and official story made for reports' (Boudes and Laroche, 2009: 378). These narratives subsequently inform action. How leaders narrate their actions and thoughts in post-crisis reflection is key to their future actions. It appears in this sample that, if they perceive that the climate is not right for change, then no matter what learning has taken place, future digital strategy will be constrained by that thinking and post-action narrative. This is an important finding in relation to the strategy as learning approach.

Category 4: Event schemas and category 5: External schemas

Again, there is ample evidence of strategy as learning in relation to our theme 4, Event Schemas. The evidence in relation to this reveals that a variety of events, impromptu and planned, have helped to colour strategic thinking for digital education in the future.

This head teacher explains how they will take their learning forward:

So we have a working party set up that's actually meeting at lunchtime today around, what were the key things that really benefitted the children during lockdown and how can we build that into school, so we've got some tools and techniques that have been developed through that. Our digital strategy is ongoing and I need to pay attention back to that because what I want it to become more of is, what the research said was schools that had a clear digital usage in school were more successful during lockdown. So it was just a mirrored thing, you do this in school, you do exactly the same at home. (Head-12)

Whilst another head explains how their planning is being prompted by the opportunity to feed into policy for the whole area:

We've actually got a meeting with Nick Gibb coming week after next to talk about what we are trying to achieve here in the county and how collaboration between schools can bring about real change. So that's a really exciting time for us. (Head-17)

Trust and collaborative working again feature in the narratives, with leaders reporting new collaborations between staff and leaders due to the removal of norms of practice. This removal of norms of practice and relationships between staff features in much of the literature on crisis, for example, the positive relationships that emerged as a result of Hurricane Katrina (Beabout, 2007). This head describes how this worked in their own organisation:

I think trust has increased between staff because we were all inexperienced, a bit naïve when it came to online learning, but we trusted staff anyway because that's what they do. They will work things out, they work together and we together we found solutions and a way forward. (Head-45)

However, some heads did comment on the ways in which corporate interests had been allowed to run unchecked through the education system, winning contracts and gaining influence in schools, that would have been impossible in a normal situation.

And I think there has been a lot of leveraging from a back door as a result of the pandemic of all sorts of nonsense which is going to take years for all of us to firstly see and find... (CEO-15).

Again, this appears as a recurring theme in the literature on crisis, but has not been considered to any great degree in the literature on strategy as learning in crisis situations. As the effects of this and changes in power structures within schools, and with the external environment are likely to affect strategic planning, it is an important finding in relation to strategy as learning. Particularly as, whilst some leaders will be aware of this fact and preoccupied by the further and unchecked incursion of business interests in education, others are likely either not to be aware of it, or be unconcerned by it. An important element to consider in further research on this topic is the reaction of the school governors to this element of practice, planning and policy.

In relation to other external considerations, 50 per cent of school leaders said that they had worked far more closely with other schools and external organisations during the pandemic than they had previously. This had informed their strategy by offering a wider perspective than just their own organisational one, as this head reports:

It's been a real privilege to remotely join together with other schools for support. We've formed a collegiate group that will continue beyond covid. It's great to share aspirations and

learn from each other. We share good practice and inspiration. This duality we have to hold on to. Share insights. The energy from the group fills me with optimism to carry on, build the most digitally enriched place in the universe. (Head -45)

This positive finding also emerged in relation to multi-academy trusts, not a set of organisations where external collaboration has featured a great deal in previous research. Largely due to the marketised climate within English education, and the fact that due to their size and scale, many are now extremely isomorphic in their practices (Baxter and Cornforth, 2021). This element of collaboration will undoubtedly influence strategic practices and digital strategy if this collaboration continues for the foreseeable future. Whilst this head told us, ‘*There’s opportunity to build upon the collaborative working we’ve done with other schools, to co-teach, continue buddy schemes and co-deliver curriculum...*’ (Head-24). They were imprecise as to the way that this may continue and whether operational plans were in place. Concerningly, this aligned with the fact that only 45 per cent of organisations were willing to share their strategic plans for digital learning with us. This situation is perhaps unsurprising given the earlier statistics from the DfE study in section 1.

Questions for discussion

What advantages has viewing strategy as a learning activity, for leaders of education?

How does this approach fit in a world wracked by climate change?

Conclusion

The research outlined in this chapter set out to investigate whether there was evidence of strategy as learning (as conceptualised by our theoretical model in section 2) in a crisis situation. The work has revealed that there is ample evidence to support a ‘strategy as learning approach’ and that this aligns well with a view of strategy as a sensemaking activity. However, it has also revealed that building on learning done during a crisis, learning which would in theory change future digital strategy, is constrained by negative perceptions of staff attitude, practical issues (such as ongoing staff absence) and mental ill health amongst staff and students. It is also coloured and conditioned by the context in which the strategy is taking place; in areas of high deprivation with multiple social problems aspirations are curtailed by real issues of both digital poverty and lack of parental support. Another key finding relates to the policy and political context of the strategy. If school leaders feel that their work is being highjacked by unchecked business interests, allowed to occur with seemingly little accountability during the crisis, then this will undoubtedly influence the extent to which they allow

their schools to develop digital learning. In this respect, the study points out the need to investigate power and policy and the feelings towards these in relation to future research in this area.

Summary points

- Strategy as learning is present during a crisis situation.
- Leaders learn and change their thinking as a result of strategy as learning during a crisis.
- Future strategy is constrained through ethical and practical concerns: for example, unchecked influence of business through digital platforms, staff illness, staff and student mental ill health.
- Future strategy is also constrained by leaders' own appetite for change.
- Strategy as learning is closely linked to narrative and sense making approaches.

Recommended reading

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Baxter, J. and John, A. (2021) Strategy as Learning In Multi-Academy Trusts in England: strategic thinking in action. *School Leadership & Management*, **4** (4-5), pp. 290-310.

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