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Vox Poetica: bringing an arts-based research method to school leaders' lockdown experiences

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ABSTRACT

The work of school leaders during lockdown has been emotionally charged and emotionally draining, affecting immediate well-being and longer term career plans. To communicate the emotions that we were told about and which were obvious during interviews with serving headteachers, we turned to arts-informed methods. We used poems made from transcripts to complement and supplement the analysis of 58 interviews and survey responses (n = 1491). This paper introduces the use of transcript poetry and explains our choice of method. The poems foreground the diversity that existed among the leaders, and different kinds of interventions that might make a difference. Our example suggests that the educational leadership, management and administration field might benefit from further experimentation with arts-based methods.

The field of educational leadership management and administration has historically used a restricted number of methodologies and methods (Thomson 2017). This narrow methods repertoire sits oddly with the range of methodologies and methods elaborated in leadership methods texts (Brundrett and Rhodes 2013; Briggs, Coleman, and Morrison 2012) where there are discussions of the benefits of using action and practitioner research as well as narrative, life history, autoethnographic and storied approaches (often associated with feminist and decolonising approaches, e.g. Ah Nee-Benham and Cooper 1998; Arar 2017; Fuller et al. 2021).

This paper focuses on poetic inquiry – Vox Poetica as it is sometimes called (Faulkner 2009; Faulkner and Cloud 2019). Rather than being concerned with the balance of qualitative to quantitative methods or use of mixed methods as indicators of quality (Hallinger and Chen 2015; Walker and Hallinger 2015; Hallinger 2018; Hammad and Hallinger 2017; Bellibas and Gumus 2019) our interest here is in the potential use of arts-based methods as a vehicle for developing insights about the lived experiences of school leaders. The paper is a contribution to discussions within the Educational Leadership, Management and Administration (ELMA) field about methodological traditions and methods. We also contribute to discussions about emotional, or affective, dimensions

of leadership practice, focusing not on why they are important or how they are theorised (e.g. Zembylas 2015; James, Crawford, and Oplatka 2019; Blackmore 2020), but how they might be researched and represented.

The paper begins with a description of the Leading in Lockdown research project. The research investigated how leaders coped during the first year of the pandemic. We then discuss poetic inquiry in general and how we used a particular 'found poetry' approach to analysing transcripts. We discuss two examples of the transcript poems that we produced. We argue in conclusion that this example shows the potential benefits of using arts based methodologies and methods in ELMA research.

The Leading in Lockdown research

Our research was conducted in England, where a highly datafied education system uses external inspections, tests and school audit measures (Lawn and Ozga 2014; Williamson and Pattioeva 2015), combined with a national curriculum to regulate a marketised mix of local authority and academy trust schools (Ball 2018; Wilkinson 2017). The system is highly inequitable (Hutchings and Francis 2018), and organisational fragmentation has produced wasteful inefficiencies (Thomson 2020). One outcome of these developments is that school leaders experience intense pressure to perform as well as ethical dilemmas, such as whether to prioritise the needs of the school over the needs of particular groups of children (Greany and Higham 2018).

The Leading in Lockdown research investigated what school leaders did in their schools during the pandemic and the impact on their wellbeing and career intentions. We were particularly concerned to see the effects of rapidly changing and 'just in time' government decisions about, for example, students' examinations, the provision of school lunches and teaching both online and face to face for key workers' children. All of these changes required dramatic shifts in school management practices.

The research was conducted in partnership with the two school leaders' unions, the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) and the Association of Schools and Colleges Leaders (ASCL). The mixed methods research design consisted of a survey and interviews designed to follow up and provide detail and explanation of the patterns in the survey. The online survey was distributed to senior leaders, via the NAHT and ASCL as well as social media accounts, including our own, between 12th April and 10th May 2021. A total of 1491 leaders primarily from England (there was a handful from Wales) completed the survey. The survey asked for demographic data, information about hours of work, perceptions of health and wellbeing (eudaemonic wellbeing), sources of advice and support during the COVID-19 lockdown period, and career plans. The results are briefly reported here, with more in-depth findings and further details on the survey methodology available in a separate report (see http://schoolleadersworkandwellbeing.com)

Online interviews were conducted with headteachers in England ($n = 58$) in July 2021; interviewees were selected from the bank of school leaders who responded to the survey. The interviewees included an even mix of primary and secondary school leaders and, within each group, equal numbers who reported in the survey that they were thinking of leaving (leavers) and those who said they would stay in the profession (stayers). In addition, we selected a broadly representative mix in terms of individual and school

characteristics – school type (maintained/academy, mainstream/special), school inspection grading, interviewee gender and years of experience in headship. This paper is based primarily on interviews; we say more about these and their analysis later in the paper.

All interviews were held during the second wave of the pandemic in England. Schools were open but also providing distance education, staff and student absences were high. Heads faced ongoing difficulties in managing hygiene and social distancing while also increasingly dealing with health and welfare crises that other public agencies were unable to address. Our partners told us how busy and stressed heads were. We therefore paid particular attention to research ethics. The question of doing no harm was paramount. Because interviews were investigating lived experiences in difficult circumstances, we

(1) frequently checked on interviewees' feelings – were they happy to continue? We were ready to stop the interview if they were too distressed;
(2) had to hand referral information to counselling services contracted by the two unions, and relevant contact details for union officers;
(3) have taken extra care in ensuring that confidentiality and anonymity of participants has been maintained throughout the project, and have omitted key identifying details from quoted materials, including in the transcript poems we discuss later;
(4) decided not to return interview transcripts for member-checking, as we would normally do. Nor did we return pre-publication material, including the transcript poems. We decided that in these exceptional circumstances checking transcripts would take time away from the urgent and pressing learning and safety matters the heads were dealing with, and potentially add unnecessary pressure and another deadline. We did, therefore, frequently check during the interviews if everything said was on the record, and in some instances, there was both recorded and unrecorded material which we have not used because of sensitivity.

Our formal ethics proposal addressed these issues and was approved by the University of Nottingham ethics committee.

Each interview was separately analysed and results were tabulated on two pages in addition to demographics, covering: motivation for headship; pre-pandemic highs and lows; pandemic highs and lows; workload, health, wellbeing impact; what sustained you; advice/support; career plans; and the future. We then returned to transcripts to develop themes in each of these categories. We followed the process of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021) – familiarisation with the data, initial data coding, initial theme generation, theme development and review, theme refining, defining and naming. Our codes were a mix of deductive (drawn from our research questions) and inductive (drawn from the data) and were collaboratively decided by three members of the team. We aggregated coded data to form patterned themes for each group; we grouped themes common to all, by sector and by career decision. The full report of this themed analysis is available elsewhere (see https//schoolleadersworkandwellbeing. com).

In brief, the research (Greany et al. 2021) found that almost three in five leaders (57%) stated that their school or college had been 'sometimes' (36%) or 'mostly' (21%) thriving during the pandemic. Success in meeting ongoing challenges gave most interviewees a

profound sense of satisfaction in providing a worthwhile public service at a time of national crisis. Many explained that in responding to the crisis they and their teams had developed new capabilities and ways of working, for example in relation to online learning, and/or had strengthened relationships, including with children and families and with other schools and local agencies. The government's decision to pause Ofsted inspections and pupil tests was seen by many interviewees as a benefit, enabling them to focus on what they saw as the core purpose of schools – teaching, learning and meeting the needs of children and families.

Leaders reported that the 'lows' of leading in the pandemic largely stemmed from the external environment, in particular the perceived inadequate leadership provided by central government, which was seen as 'clumsy' and 'tone deaf', demonstrating both inflexibility and a lack of trust in local decision-making. In the survey, 'Department for Education (DfE) guidance/changes to policy on school closures' was the most stressful issue for leaders – 85% found this 'very' or 'extremely' stressful. More than nine in 10 (93%) survey respondents disagreed that the advice provided by DfE was 'timely and straightforward'. Two-thirds (65%) disagreed that they trusted the advice provided by DfE.

Other 'lows' for interviewees related to managing staff and parental anxiety and shouldering the weight of responsibility for people's health, often without sufficient expertise or support to take such critical decisions. In the survey, more than half of primary leaders and just under half of secondary leaders found 'parent-related issues' stressful. In the interviews, some leaders highlighted how a small but vocal group of parents tended to sit at either end of a spectrum in terms of their views on Covid (i.e. from 'anti-vaxxers, (to) those who want to keep children off school forever'), with some interviewees facing a 'whole barrage of vitriol'.

Most leaders reported coping with the pandemic – in the survey, on a five-item scale from mostly thriving to sinking, fewer than one in 20 (4%) reported that they had been 'mostly sinking'. Just over a third (35%) said they had thrived to some extent. However, two in five (42%) were 'mostly surviving', while almost a quarter (23%) were 'sometimes' or 'mostly sinking'. However, the vast majority of interviewees experienced a negative impact on their workload. It was hard for leaders to switch off, including at weekends and holiday periods, so that, over time, they became ground down.

In the survey, leaders rated their levels of optimism about life in general, their ability to relax and switch off from work, their ability to think clearly and to solve work-related problems as worse during the pandemic than in 'normal' times. Interviewees described a range of negative impacts on their well-being and health, from lack of sleep, putting on weight and drinking too much, to being hospitalised or put on medication for depression. These impacts were more common among respondents who planned to leave the profession than those who intend to remain.

A key finding from the survey was that two in five school leaders said they planned to leave the profession (for reasons other than full retirement) in the next five years. The vast majority (nine in ten) of these early 'leavers' stated that the pandemic had been either the main or a contributing factor in their career decision. The interviews – undertaken two months after the survey – indicated that the situation was fluid; since completing the survey several leaders had changed their mind about whether to leave or stay. Equally, others said they might still change their mind, for example if the situation did

not improve or got any worse. Younger interviewees (e.g. 45 and under) faced similar challenges to their older peers but also highlighted: loneliness; being unable to imagine continuing like this for another 30 years; wanting to start a family, but seeing headship as incompatible with this; and a view that a job outside education could offer genuine work-life balance.

The survey also asked respondents what might persuade them to stay for longer. Greater trust in the profession – by government – was seen as making the greatest difference, followed by action to reduce pressure and workload, while enhancing funding and support for schools and school leaders. These priorities were reinforced by the interviewees(Thomson, Greany, and Martindale 2021).

Our detailed analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data drew out our main findings, but we were not satisfied that it did justice to the emotional nature of the interviews, most of which were highly charged. Everyone talked of their weariness and exhaustion, their frustration with the inadequacies of government advice, their anger at how they and their schools had been portrayed by media and politicians. Almost all experienced a conflict between work and home life. Some participants cried during the interview. Several spoke or wrote to us afterwards to explain that they had found the experience of talking to us cathartic. We recognised that grief and fear were mingled with a sense of pride in having kept their school running and that emotional responses were intimately tied to career decisions (Heffernan, MacDonald, and Longmuir 2022). But our thematising approach appeared to lose sight of the 'whole person' we had seen in the interviews and had recorded in our initial analytic charts. Tolman and Head (2021, 153) elegantly capture our concerns, saying that thematising 'can wrangle, condense, and organise qualitative data, but on the other, can flatten, laminate, and circumscribe the more dynamic aspects of people's narratives and narration'. We wanted to avoid flattening and circumscribing and find a way to recognise and communicate the emotional intensity of the heads' diverse lived experiences and its connections with their career planning.

The question of how to best communicate lived experience is complex and central to all qualitative research (Creswell 1998; Weis and Fine 2000; Silverman 1997; Savin-Baden and Major 2013). The responsibility of interpreting other people's words and actions has long compelled researchers to think beyond questions of confidentiality and anonymity to ethical questions related to researcher cultural and social positioning which might blind them to other ways of knowing and alternative interpretations (Rosaldo 1989; Luke et al. 1993). Crucially, researchers need to consciously make choices about how their textual presentation of people, events and places might be read, positively and negatively, by participants and by others (Brettell 1996). As Clifford Geertz puts it,

> The trick (for researchers) is not to achieve some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants; preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to. (Geertz 1974, 29)

Our concerns were not only with understanding and interpretation but also with the challenge of verisimilitude (Schwandt 2007), that is, we wanted to report experiences and feelings that were close to the person and in a way that rang true. Our union partners had also expressed an interest in a text which went beyond the usual numbers and themes

approach: they too were interested in stories of everyday leaders' lives. They wanted something more than a dispassionate account. We therefore looked for a textual form that would invite readers, in and through the act of reading, to respond emotionally as well as intellectually to the accounts of leading during the pandemic. We searched for a genre that would not replace our graphs and thematised reporting but would complement and supplement our analysis, adding to its trustworthiness and catalytic potential (Lather 1995).

Arts-informed research – poetic inquiry

We were drawn to the use of arts-informed research, whose hallmarks are a commitment to aesthetics, inquiry, meaning-making and capacious and invitational interpretations (Sinner et al. 2006; Cahmann-Taylor and Siegesmund 2018). Arts-informed researchers use creative approaches to not only generate and analyse data but also to communicate results (Leavy 2009; Cole 2004; Barone and Eisner 2011). Creative arts methods used to 'report' results offer multiple layers of meaning (Macleod, Holdridge, and Beardon 2009; Springgay, Irwin, and Leggo 2008), affording simultaneous levels of reader response – aesthetic, cognitive and emotional (McNiff 2009). When arts-informed research uses data produced through conventional social science methods that data is creatively re-analysed to develop new texts (Jones 2022; Kara 2015).

We did find a little discussion about the use of arts-informed methods in the ELMA field. For example, Farrell (2019) brings together psychoanalysis and arts-informed methods to explore the affective dimensions of leadership. However, there appears to be more discussion of the pedagogical benefits of using story (Danzig 1997; e.g. Damiani, Rolling, and Wieczorek 2017) and arts-informed approaches (Cranston and Kusanovich 2013; Katz-Buoncontrino, Philips, and Witherspoon 2015) than their use in empirical research. Notable contributions to questions of textual forms and genre include Hackmann's (2002) discussion of portraiture, Mifsud's (2017) use of fictionalised representations of leaders and the special issue of JEAH on metaphor (2019, Vol 51(2)).

We were particularly interested in the use of poetic inquiry. According to Prendergast (2009), poetic inquiry dates back to the 1980s and is used in the social sciences and humanities, including in anthropology, education, English, health (nursing and social work), women's studies, psychology, sociology, counselling and planning.

There is no precise definition of poetry (Faulkner 2009) but used as methodology poetry is often explained by reference to its textual characteristics – a distinct form of writing defined by alliteration, form, image, language use, line, metaphor, metre, rhythm, simile, structure, and syntax – and/or as a genre – a poem is an idea condensed into an aesthetic, lyric literary form (Faulkner 2019). Research poetry is also understood in similar ways (Prendergast, Leggo, and Samashima 2009), and imagery, rhythms and musicality are seen as crucial (Carroll and Webb 2017). As Leggo (2008, 168) puts it, poetry is a way of knowing that is different from, but complementary to, conventional research approaches.

> Poetry calls attention to itself as text, as rhetorical device and stratagem. Poetry does not invite readers to consume the text as if it were a husk that contains a pithy truth. Poetry is not a window on the world. Poetry invites us to listen. Poetry is a site for dwelling, for holding up, for stopping. Poetry prevails against hermeneutic exhaustion, hermeneutic

consumption, hermeneutic closure, hermeneutic certainty. Poetry is not hermetic. A poem is a textual event, an 'act of literature', an experience of spelling and spells.

Poetic inquiry undermines the science/art binary common to Western epistemologies (Leavy 2010) and can serve as a decolonial method to better connect researchers with communities (van Rooyen and D'Abdon 2020) by deconstructing hierarchies of experience and knowledge (Byrne 2015; Brown, Kelly, and Finn 2021). The polyvocality of poetry (Pithouse-Morgan et al. 2014) makes it amenable to pedagogical applications (Vinette and Holyoake 2017), reflexive research writing (Thomas 2022), therapy (Furman 2022) and advocacy for urgent questions of social justice (Faulkner and Cloud 2019).

Poetic inquiry encompasses interpretive poetry written by the researcher as a form of autoethnography or self-study (Shapiro 2004; Edge and Olan 2020), poetry written with participants (Brown, Kelly, and Finn 2021) and poetry constructed from the words of participants (Glesne 1997; Patrick 2016). We decided to adopt this latter form which is sometimes called 'found poetry' (Butler-Kisber 2002) to connect it with the lyric practice of constructing a poem from pre-existing text. No new words are introduced by the researcher, and the pre-existing text is most often an interview transcript but can be other, for example, conference proceedings (Penwarden and Schoone 2021), theory or literature (Prendergast 2006).

To produce a poem from a transcript, the researcher must become very familiar with the text, so that they can find a core narrative (Richardson 1997). Constructing a transcript poem is an artistic and creative process that is oriented to being 'truthful' in intent (Amos 2019). The researcher does not want to find an 'essence of truth' (Van Manen 1990) but rather is consciously selecting and interpreting. The researcher does not pretend to be 'objective' but relies on an ethical and reflexive selection and curation process, as well as their knowledge and commitment to the craft of writing (Kamler and Thomson 2014; Sword 2017). The transcript poem process is similar to that used in the construction of verbatim theatre, where scripts are developed from recorded words and experiences.

The researcher selects lines of text, first of all putting them in the order they are in the interview, then rearranging them to convey the most salient points. The researcher looks to capture the rhythm and texture of the interviewee's speech patterns. Literary devices such as line breaks and stops are used to emphasise the researcher's interpretations. Dealing with participant's meaning-making processes means including their key metaphors, pauses and speech idiosyncrasies (Faulkner 2009; Schrauben and Rebecca Leigh 2019; Faulkner 2019).

There are variations in this approach. Researchers following the method known as the Listening Guide (Gilligan et al. 2006; Gilligan 2015) read through a transcript, looking for and highlighting relational pronouns in the first instance and then searching for contrapuntal voices (Tolman and Head 2021; Woodcock 2016), all the while keeping an eye on the overall narrative and their emancipatory intent (Edwards and Weller 2012).

We developed our own on the general transcript analytic process. We first of all read through each transcript looking for words that signified an emotion, then looked for cause and consequence. We quickly found that heads in our interviews told us about a critical incident related to a very strong emotion and to a career related decision.

Transcript poems to communicate leading through lockdown

We produced ten transcript poems from our data, eight ended up in our final report (Greany et al. 2021). Here we discuss two poems that represent two different forms of emotional labour, everyday working lives and career decision-making. Both are constructed from transcripts of interviews with primary heads who were considering leaving the profession at the time of filling in our survey. However, by the time of the interview, the first was changing their mind about leaving.

Custard and lifeboats

I've had a pandemic policy for years because it was on the list of things we had to have. But, actually, who knew that I was going to need it?

The relentlessness of it. The fact that we had no experience. We had no idea. Such a learning curve.

Protect your staff, protect your children, protect your key workers, but at the same time insist on maintaining those high expectations.

I had staff that didn't want to come in because they thought that they would die if they came into school. We had colleagues that were hospitalised.

We were on the phones every day, we were out delivering food parcels It was a difficult time.

We could have been in a lot worse position had we not evolved our provision as we went through. But it was the speed with which we had to change. We were literally getting information through the night before.

The pressure that we've been under, the frightening feeling of if we get this wrong, it could cost lives … that's the thing that keeps you up at night. And we felt that pressure.

When you're feeling shattered at the end of the year, you just think, you need some space.

That's what's missing. It's that headspace to be strategic. I felt I'd lost the headspace to be strategic and I was just responding to managing day-to-day.

My headspace was full of timetables, organisation, bubbles, moving. How do you feed 400 kids and not use the hall? Paper plates and can you move custard? We had a 25-minutes discussion about how the hell you can get hot custard from one end of the school to the other without any health and safety. When did my life come to that? That's when you're at the lowest. And you're like 25 minutes on custard. Dear God, we're just not going to do custard. So we haven't had custard for a year. Job done.

People have left the profession. This has been for many that line in the sand – I can't go on. In the next two or three years, we will see quite a lot of very experienced school leaders who have just hit burnout, absolute burnout.

But I think the reason why I'm not going now and I want to give it a few more years now is that I'm slowly clawing that headspace back.

We were just literally lifeboats. Let's just stay afloat. Let's just stay afloat. Now I can see a lighthouse and I'm heading towards it, that's the difference

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This poem centres the head's emotional labour of remaining optimistic and resilient in the face of apparently never-ending demands to reorganise the school. The pandemic and long periods of lockdown meant leaders had to continuously re-invent the school infrastructure; operational aspects of the school became obtrusive, requiring ongoing risk calculations and risky decisions. This was not work as usual. School leaders depend on having stable management systems which ensure that the distribution and use of space, time and equipment and regular routines support the crucial but sometimes more volatile practices of learning and teaching. However, while management is always an important aspect of school administration, heads generally see leadership as the most critical aspect of their job (Day et al. 2011). But during the pandemic, heads had no time to spend on school improvement but had to devote extended hours to

issues that would normally require little attention. They were focused on organisational basics amid a school and societal climate in which fear, anger and grief were dominant.

In constructing the 'Custards and lifeboats' poem, we had in mind the tension between what appear to be mundane everyday decisions and possible life and death consequences. We selected sentences that contained emotive words – *relentless, difficult, speed, shattered, just responding, lowest, absolute burnout*. As these words appear sequentially through the poem, they help to build up a sense of heightened emotion. The shift between description – *We were on the phones everyday. We were out delivering food parcels* – to commentary – *It was a difficult time* – conveys the mix of activity and reflection on action that is characteristic of leaders' work. The custard critical incident encapsulates the daily mix of prosaic and risky and we used the wording as it was recorded in interview, complete with idiosyncrasies of expression – *We had no idea, When did my life come to that? Dear God, we're just not going to* – to create a point in the poem where a reader might identify with the head's experiences. We highlighted the main metaphor used by the interviewee – the life boat which had to stay afloat - a particularly potent contemporary image as European media often reports on the perils of refugees crossing treacherous seas in overcrowded life boats. There is also a sense of relief provided at the end of the poem with the appearance of the light on the far horizon.

The transcript poem is meant to be read aloud. We hope that readers will mentally speak the words as they read this section of the paper. We have presented this particular poem as a reading. In both instances, being read to and silently reading aloud, create an opportunity for the reader to imagine themselves in the headteacher's position. The transcript poem opens a temporal space for response which is more than intellectual, it is also sympathetic and empathetic. The poem becomes ' … an unfolding movement of a block of sensations in conjunction with a reader who is also, for the time of the performance, the actualisation of the poem' (Clay 2010, 63). Reader emotional responses potentially resonate with the emotions being conveyed in the poem.

A second transcript poem, 'Thank you for that Gavin' focuses on the political environment and the frustration and anger that heads conveyed in interview and survey responses. (The Gavin in the poem is Gavin Williamson, who was Secretary of State for Education from mid-2019 to September 2021; Ofsted is the inspection agency and HMI, Her Majesty's Inspector; NHS is the National Health Service. School staff in England are – supposedly – on holiday during August).

Thank you for that Gavin

The guidance for what we should do in September came out in August.
Marvellous.
Heads were already on their knees.
We were expected to reinvent the school. Again. Get that message out to parents ready for September.

Alongside all this, we've got Gavin Williamson telling parents that if they weren't happy they could complain to Ofsted.
Great. Thank you for that Gavin.
And that's what parents did.
The day after he told them to do that, one parent from this school complained to Ofsted about the remote learning we'd put in place the day before.
That resulted in HMI phoning.
Waste of everyone's time.
There was nothing wrong with the remote offer other than the parent not liking it. Our remote offer met the criteria.
But then I never got anything back from that HMI. I never got a letter. I never got anything as a closure.

Clap for NHS. Of course, we're going to do that. It's a wonderful service doing brilliant things.
But schools were open all the way through. Nobody thought to include schools in that. Nothing about teachers. No, we just won't mention teachers. Let's not let's not even think about that.
Teachers weren't even prioritised for vaccinations despite being front-facing.

We were vilified in the press.
Summer of 2020, the government wanted schools to reopen. And reopen.
Why use that language? We were open all the way through.

The working hours have been incredible.
I think about some of those announcements and the times that we've had to reinvent the school.
There's been this announcement at 8:30 at night.
Don't worry about it. I'm on it. I'm dealing with it.
Often messaging parents at 9:00 o'clock the same night.
Because otherwise I would have been fielding 20–30 emails saying 'What are you doing about this'?

We're all exhausted. These last two academic years have really blended into one.
It's just ploughing on. Just ploughing on. Knowing that I've done the best I can.

My work-life balance has disappeared.
I'm 54. I hadn't ever intended to leave this early.
But the way that we've been treated as school leaders over these two years … it'd push anyone over the edge.
If I think back I was probably going to go at around 59. Now it's looking like 55–56.

Here is the pension. I've got an appointment with the pension person.
Maybe it stacks up.
And if it doesn't, then Tesco is looking quite attractive … At least there's no work to take home with you.

This transcript poem focuses on frustrating dealings with the ongoing churn of guidelines, often issued serially on one day, and frequently at the last minute, late at night or right before the weekend or public holiday (Fotheringham et al. 2021). Heads had no choice but to assume a positive approach to these changes. Their job is to ensure that policy is implemented and they achieve this end by 'talking up' whatever is required, reassuring staff, the parent community and students that what is about to happen is sensible and warranted. During lockdown, heads found it very demanding and difficult to perform public positivity and energy and maintain morale in the face of government decisions that they privately worried about or disagreed with.

The primary head in the above transcript poem found it extremely taxing to maintain a positive public headteacher 'face' in the context of political ineptitude, a hostile media and long working hours. They are seriously considering leaving. Thus in the transcript poem, we retained words and phrases that conveyed the emotions attached to weariness – *on their knees, exhausted, vilified, incredible working hours, disappearing work-life balance*. However, the emotional state of this interviewee was largely conveyed by their continued use of sarcasm and black humour. We therefore selected words and phrases where the interviewee described an event and then followed with a caustic comment - *The guidance came out in August … Marvellous.; an announcement at eight at night. Don't' worry about it. I'm on it. I'm dealing with it*. The government requirement is described and then the head comments. This show and tell pattern is repeated throughout the poem and conveys the responsive nature of leading, as well as the head's increasing exasperation.

The key critical incident is a more elaborated case of the same pattern - the Minister's encouragement to parents to complain to the inspection authority, the subsequent unhappy interaction with parents, and the disappointing and annoying lack of follow through from Ofsted. We reported this incident exactly as it had been recorded to

capture the rhythm of demand-action-commentary. The government call and on the ground response asks for a sympathetic response from the reader.

At the end of the poem, rather than the hopeful lifeboat metaphor, we have a possible satirical comment about swapping headship for unskilled manual work in a supermarket. This comment refers back to the 'incredible hours' mentioned earlier in the poem, suggesting that a fixed-hour unprofessional job might be preferable to continuing in headship. The juxtaposition of leader's work and unskilled labour invites the reader to consider at what point they too would consider this kind of work a better prospect.

Putting the two transcript poems side by side is instructive. Both primary heads are considering leaving the profession. Both have issues with workload and work-life balance. However, the head in the first transcript poem is concerned about the loss of space for strategic work. The second is distressed by how political leaders and government administrators have offhandedly dealt with schools. The wholistic nature of these two transcript poems highlights the differences among those who we placed in the same category of potential leavers; they were not homogenous. Whereas we first saw a set of quotations accumulated around themes, including disillusionment with political leadership and an unrelenting focus on managing, through the poems we saw that this mattered differently to different leaders, and more for some than others. And these differences pointed to different interventions that might encourage school leaders to stay in post. The first head concerned with strategic space might, for example, respond well to the kind of support offered by a coach. The second head, by contrast, might decide to stay if they regained trust in political and system leaders – but that would mean a sea change in current political rhetoric and processes of decision-making, regulation and control.

Responses to the transcript poems in workshops with unions and senior leaders have been very positive, affirming our view that they humanise and breathe life into our reporting of research results.

A writing challenge for the educational leadership field?

Our paper is methodological and addresses the challenge of reporting the emotional work and career decision-making of school leaders during lockdown. We drew on interview data from our mixed-methods study to develop transcript poems that communicated the diverse experiences of individual people. While the field has access to methods texts which are inclusive of a wide range of traditions and approaches, the use of arts-based methods is uncommon. Transcript poems offer an arts-based genre which, as far as we can tell, remains relatively unknown.

It is not clear why this is the case. The field is not hostile to artistic innovation: our research partners, the two major leader unions in the UK have welcomed the addition of poetic inquiry to our mixed-methods design. Perhaps it is the case, as Waite (2017) has argued, that the ELMA field is inherently conservative, a state which English puts down to its quest to 'efface the human variable in organisational life' and/or to 'impose patterns of behaviours or standardised tasks which erase situational novelty' to develop 'generalisability laws which are context-free' (English 2006, 141). We suggest that researchers interested in addressing everyday experiences and the affective dimensions of school leaders' work may need to reach beyond this quest and consider alternatives to the standard methodologies and methods used in the field.

Our use of transcript poems not only allowed us to communicate the experiences of leaders that we interviewed: we argue that they got closer to the individual school leaders. The poetic approach afforded a wholistic and humanistic understanding of experience which revealed diversity within our themes and overall categories of leaving and staying. This understanding pointed to different kinds of interventions designed to prevent early leader leaving, some more feasible than others.

We are not arguing for any particular creative methods or forms, but we do suggest that arts-informed methods can support analysis complementary to the more common quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods research designs. We also wonder if the pandemic and the situation in which school leaders found themselves will provide a stimulus to more research that goes well beyond cognitive dimensions. We hope that our paper contributes to the substantive discussion of school leadership during the pandemic as well as to methodological discussions within the ELMA field.

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