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The potential solutions to the challenges faced by leaders of small schools in the UK: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Small schools often serve an important function in the local community, where their staff can enjoy close relationships with pupils, colleagues, and local community members. As with any leadership role, leaders of small schools can face challenges, some of which are unique to the small school context. To better understand these challenges and identify potential solutions to these challenges, a systematic review of the literature was conducted on the challenges and the potential solutions reported by leaders of small schools in the UK. Seventeen studies published between 2000 and 2023 were included for synthesis, which captured the experiences of headteachers of small primary schools in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. From meta-aggregating the extracted findings, five challenges were identified: (a) nature of the leadership role; (b) finances and resources; (c) relationship and partnership management; (d) teaching and learning; and (e) schools' location and accessibility. Five potential solutions to these challenges were noted: (a) inclusive and focused leadership; (b) enhanced finances and pooled resources; (c) developing relationships and partnerships; (d) providing leaders and staff with effective support and Continuing Professional Development (CPD); and (e) enhanced school provision. Suggestions for policy and practice that can help leaders of small schools are discussed.

1. Introduction

Effective school leaders are integral to schools and the educational system, as they affect the experiences and outcomes of pupils (Grissom et al., 2021) and teachers (Cansoy, 2018). Although leading a school can be rewarding, the challenges faced by school leaders have been noted in research (Tintoré et al., 2022), policy (Pont, 2020), and practice (Earley et al., 2012). Leaders of small schools are not immune to such challenges, though consolidated evidence of such is relatively lacking. However, synthesised evidence on the challenges faced by leaders of small schools is fundamental to identifying the potential solutions to these challenges. Accordingly, this systematic review aims to identify: (a) the challenges faced by leaders of small schools in the UK and, (b) the potential solutions to these challenges.

1.1. Small Schools

Small schools have been studied internationally using various approaches. For example some studies have examined small schools

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within the same country, such as studies conducted in Australia (e.g., Clarke & Stevens, 2009), the Netherlands (e.g., Deunk & Maslowski, 2020), Finland (e.g., Lehtonen, 2021), and Malaysia (e.g., Mansor et al., 2022). Others have studied small schools across multiple countries (e.g., Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022; Raggl, 2015). However, representation of small schools in both research and policy is relatively low. Such gaps need to be filled to ensure that small schools are best positioned to serve their local communities.

Definitions of small schools have varied across these studies, though they have typically been defined by the number of enrolled pupils. For the purpose of this review, and in line with definitions used in the UK, we define small primary schools as those with 101 or less pupils (Department for Education, 2019), and small secondary schools as those with less than 400 pupils (Harber, 1996). We also distinguish small schools from rural schools. Although many small schools are in rural areas (Walker, 2010), not all are. Moreover, not all rural schools are necessarily small schools. As such, we clarify that the current study examines small schools, which may also include rural schools.

Small schools provide both economic and social benefits to their local communities (Lyson, 2002), such that its closures can have a negative impact on pupils and the community (Haynes, 2022). In the economic sense, for example, the proximity of a school has been found to be associated with economic indicators (income and house value) for rural communities (Sipple et al., 2019). In the social sense, staff have noted that in small schools they can enjoy "a family atmosphere" (Robinson, 2011, p. 127) and closer relationships with pupils and that they can attend more closely to pupils' needs (Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2008), though some have experienced divided communities (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019; Fargas-Malet & Bagley 2023; Walker, 2010). For leaders of small schools, they can enjoy a diverse role, where they can demonstrate their adaptability and flexibility in being both a team member and leader (Wilson & McPake, 2000).

1.2. Challenges Faced by School Leaders

Regardless of how large a school may be, school leaders can face challenges. According to a review on the challenges faced by school leaders around the world across different school sizes, Tamadoni and colleagues (2021) reported that the challenges related to the context, the nature of the leadership role, features of the organisation, and student development. They identified that the three most common challenges were: (a) poor professional development, (b) workload pressures, and (c) lack of adequate facilities. Similarly, Tintoré and colleagues (2022) reviewed international studies across different school sizes and found that the challenges were related to the nature of the role, and in interacting with stakeholders. They identified that the three most common challenges were: (a) managing the increased numbers and complexities of responsibilities; (b) predominantly needing to manage as opposed to leading; and (c) the highly complex nature of the job, requiring pervasiveness and multitasking. Other reviews of school leaders, including those who were new to the role in the UK and in other English-speaking countries (Hobson et al., 2003) and in rural schools around the world (Preston et al., 2013), reported similar challenges, such as managing multiple tasks, priorities and time; and poor professional development. There can also be context-related challenges, as exemplified by Preston and colleagues who reported that rural school leaders faced challenges, such as limited opportunities to delegate and share managerial tasks given fewer numbers of staff being employed in these schools.

Similarly, although many leaders of small schools value and relish the role (Wilson & McPake, 2000), they also face both general and context-related challenges at the day-to-day level to the national systemic level (Tuck, 2009). Surprisingly, however, there are no systematic reviews on the challenges faced by leaders of small schools. These challenges may be similar to those faced by rural school leaders, as many rural schools are also small schools (Walker, 2010). However, there may also be unique challenges faced by leaders of small schools, which bolsters the need for the current study.

1.3. Potential Solutions to the Challenges Faced by School Leaders

While there are no systematic studies examining the solutions to address the challenges faced by leaders of small schools, previous studies have summarised the challenges faced by leaders of schools in general. Namely, Tamadoni and colleagues (2021) listed coping solutions that were paired with the challenges identified in their international review. As noted previously, poor professional development was the most commonly identified challenge in their review, marked by low perceived levels of preparedness, and lack of support and trust. Coping solutions such as providing contextualised preparations and induction, and regular training and development programmes were suggested. Lack of adequate facilities was another common challenge, for which improving infrastructure and using new technologies were suggested as coping solutions. Financial constraints may be a relevant challenge to consider with this challenge, for which acquiring grants and allocating sufficient budgets were suggested as coping solutions.

In light of these previous findings the challenges faced by leaders of small schools in the UK needs to be consolidated before identifying the solutions that could help with the challenges. That is, understanding the small school context is not only relevant in understanding the challenges of leaders of small schools in the UK, but also in identifying the solutions that may be effective in addressing these challenges.

1.4. The UK Small School Context

Given that the experiences of school leaders can be related to country-specific factors, such as the national educational context and its associated policies and reforms (Hallinger, 2018), we approach the systematic review as a country-focused study to best identify the potential solutions that are appropriate for the UK context. Like in many countries, leaders of small schools in the UK have needed to respond to the changes in various national educational reforms and policies. For example, the introduction of academies in 2000

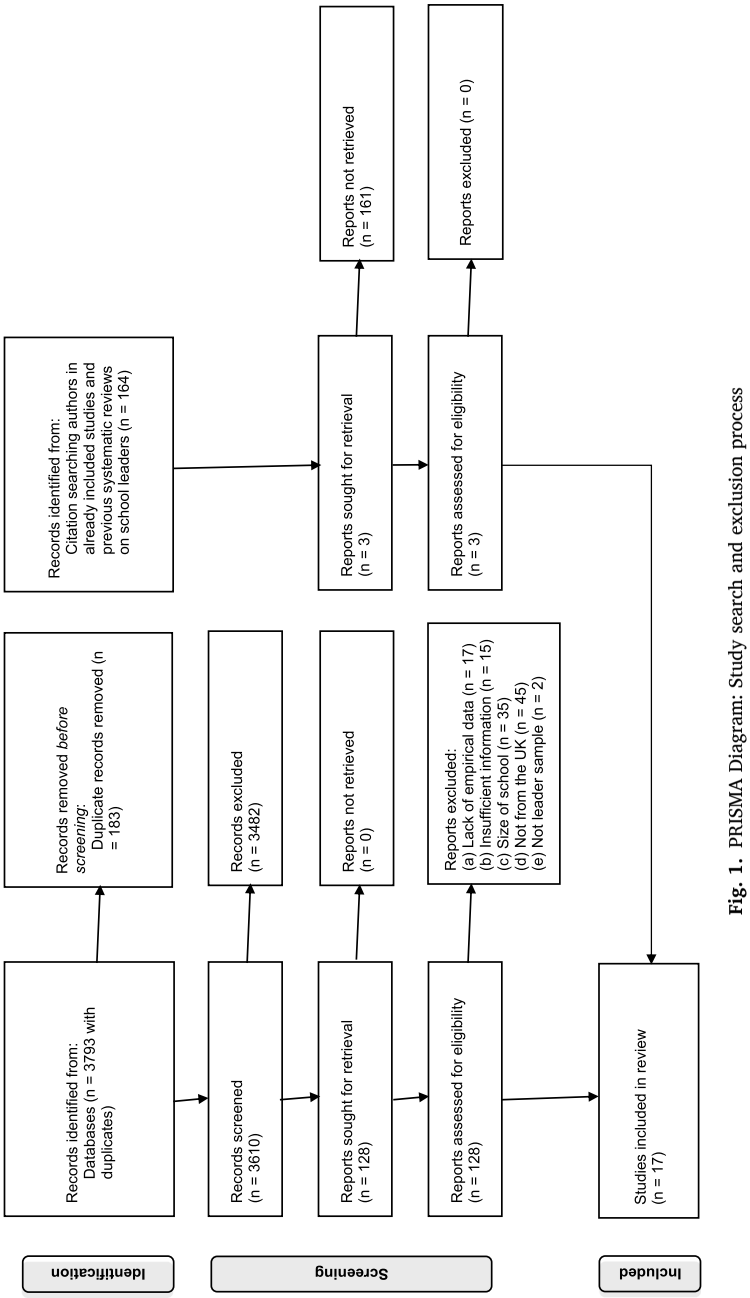

Fig. 1. PRISMA Diagram: Study search and exclusion process

through the *Learning and Skills Act 2000* encouraged schools in England to be run by an academy trust (a not-for-profit company) rather than a Local Authority (House of Commons, 2015). Since then, some small schools in England have adapted to operate under formal partnership models, including federations (two or more small schools with one governing body) or Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs; two or more academies with one governing body). Additionally, leaders of small schools have been needing to manage their funds particularly carefully, as the current funding model in England is more suitable for large urban schools than small schools (Ovenden-Hope & Luke, 2020). In fact, a survey of leaders of small primary schools reported that 47% of its members were concerned or very concerned about the possibility of school closure in the next five years, mostly due to lack of funding (National Association of Headteachers, 2023). Given this context, this systematic review aims to provide researchers, policymakers and practitioners a clearer understanding of the challenges faced by small schools and suggestions of how these challenges could be addressed in the UK.

1.5. Research Questions

The systematic review examined the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by leaders of small primary and secondary schools in the UK?
2. What approaches have been suggested or implemented to address these challenges?

2. Methods

This systematic review is reported in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) framework (Page et al., 2021). The protocol for this review was pre-registered on OSF prior to conducting the search (Kim, Crellin, & Glandorf, 2023).

2.1. Literature Search

Three strategies were used to conduct the literature search: electronic literature search, previous systematic review examination, and citation search. An electronic search for relevant articles was conducted using PsycINFO, ERIC, Web of Science, British Educational Index, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. The search-string used was: (lead* OR head OR principal*) AND ("small school*" OR "rural school*"). As aforementioned, given changes in the educational landscape in the UK since 2000, the search date was set between January 2000 and March 2023, returning 3,793 studies.

The authors also searched empirical studies from four previous systematic reviews on (small) schools and/or its leaders (Hobson et al., 2003; Kılınç & Gümüş, 2021; Preston et al., 2013; Tamadoni et al., 2021), which added 164 studies to the number of studies to be screened (see Fig. 1 for a PRISMA diagram).

To increase the thoroughness of the search, the authors then searched the citations of the authors of the included studies to search for potential other studies using the same sample, which was an additional step to that outlined in the pre-registration.

2.2. Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were: (a) having an empirical design, (b) containing a challenge and/or approach to addressing a challenge, (c) set in a small primary or secondary school, (d) set in the UK, (e) having a sample of school leaders (senior or middle), and (f) written in English. The exclusion criteria were the inverse of the inclusion criteria. Disagreements between the two authors were resolved through discussion and consulting with the first author. Cohen's Kappa between the two raters' independently assessed decisions was adequate for the first ($\kappa = .8$) and second screening ($\kappa = 1$; Landis & Koch, 1977).

During screening, 128 records from the database search and three records from previous systematic reviews were sought for retrieval and assessed for eligibility. Following full-text assessment, records were excluded based on sample characteristics or lack of information (see Fig. 1). In total, 17 studies were identified as meeting the eligibility criteria following this assessment.

2.3. Data Extraction, Quality Assessment, and Meta-aggregation

The included studies were reviewed and the following data were extracted: (a) author and year, (b) participation information, (c) school type, (d) school setting, (e) leadership title, (f) methods, (g) analysis, (h) challenges, and (i) potential solutions. For (h) and (i), original quotes and the authors' analysis were extracted as findings, meta-aggregated, and then summarised. The extracted information was cross-checked by two authors. Where the same sample was used in separate studies, these studies were entered as one study (e.g., Wilson, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Wilson & McPake, 2000). If a record included different samples (e.g., Veater, 2022), only the data specific to small schools was extracted. If a study used multiple research methods, only those that were relevant to the systematic review were reported.

Two authors independently extracted information from the 17 included studies as well as assessing the studies' quality using Hong et al.'s (2018) Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). Each study was appraised against the five questions focused on methodology appropriateness, adequateness of data collection and findings as well as coherence between data, collection, analysis and interpretation. The two authors independently rated the five questions using three options (Yes, No, Unclear) and then discussed the outcomes to agree on final judgements. There were examples where the authors differed in judgements. For example, one author may have

deemed the data collection methods as adequate (e.g., Walker, 2010; Wilson, 2009), while the other determined the criterion as unclear based on the published full-text. However, after discussions and clear evidence was provided, 100% agreement was reached and all 17 studies were included in the meta-aggregation process.

We conducted a meta-aggregation to synthesise the results following Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) guidelines (Aromataris & Munn, 2021). Two separate meta-aggregations were conducted: one focused on the challenges faced by leaders of small schools, and the other focused on the potential solutions to these challenges. As there was a lack of data on the levels of success of the solution implementation, the second research question specified in the pre-registration was modified to identify the approaches that were suggested or implemented to address the challenges.

Each finding was awarded a level of credibility based upon the extent to which the finding was supported by available data. Findings were judged as being unequivocal (U) if there was sufficient data available to support the finding and credible (C) if findings were judged to be worthy of consideration but not substantially supported by data. The two authors independently aggregated and judged the credibility of each category based on the individual study findings. No findings were considered to be unsupported (NS) by appropriate and relevant data. There were also no disagreements on the judgements. Any findings identified as credible were given more weighting (e.g., Johnston, 2019) when reporting the findings and thus were used to support other unequivocal findings.

3. Results

3.1. Description of Included Studies

The review included 17 qualitative studies with 12 independent samples, as some samples were used across multiple studies (see Table 1). The participants came from three UK nations: mostly England (n=12, 10 independent samples), Scotland (n=4, 1 independent sample) and Northern Ireland (n=1). No independent schools were represented. All studies were set in small primary schools, ranging from community schools to academies and church schools. The number of schools considered for data extraction within the same study ranged from 1 to 9. The samples consisted of senior leaders (e.g., headteachers and principals), with no representations from other senior (e.g., deputy headteachers) or middle leaders (e.g., subject leaders). The 17 studies included one organisation report, five PhD theses and 11 published peer-reviewed journal papers. All studies used qualitative research methods, including postal questionnaires, semi-structured/structured interviews, and field-notes (see Table 1).

3.2. Challenges Faced by Leaders of Small Schools

From the 17 studies, 90 findings were extracted: 72 of which were classed as unequivocal and 18 as credible findings. These findings were classified into 23 categories, which were then synthesised into five final categories of: (a) nature of leadership role; (b) finances/resources; (c) relationship and partnership management; (d) teaching and learning; and (e) schools' location and accessibility (see Fig. 2). The synthesised findings and their constituent categories are described below in order of most frequently noted.

3.2.1. Nature of the Leadership Role

The six constituent categories captured the challenges in the leaders' role, their consequences on wellbeing, and pressures on capacity to undertake the role effectively.

Dual-/Multi-role. Most small school headteachers were noted to undertake a dual-role by both leading and teaching. Most studies identified the dual-role as a frequent challenge (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019; Johnston, 2019; Longman, 2011; Wilson, 2009a, 2009b). Senior leaders also recognised the multi-roles of their middle leaders, as "in a small school everyone wears so many hats." (Longman, 2011, p. 133). The subject leader and/or pastoral lead were also noted to be juggled alongside the teaching commitment.

Time Pressures. Time pressures also corresponded with the dual-role challenge (Hillyard & Bagley, 2013). Time required for administrative work (Waugh, 2000) and having to prioritise workload in relation to day-to-day tasks as well as introducing and implementing initiatives were all highlighted as challenges (Longman, 2011).

Mental Wellbeing. Aspects of mental health such as stress (Johnston, 2019; Waugh, 2000) and loneliness (Robinson, 2011) were highlighted as challenges. The nature of the role and lack of other leaders within schools (e.g., deputy headteacher) meant that headteachers had fewer staff to delegate tasks to and discuss key matters with. Other studies identified that the type and level of pressure placed on headteachers had increased over the years (Longman, 2011). School leaders also highlighted the multi-role challenges their middle leaders can face, resulting in "feelings of anxiety" (Longman, 2011, p. 133).

Training/Mentoring. Where training and/or mentoring was offered to new-to-role headteachers, they sometimes found it difficult to find the time for these (Robinson, 2011). There also appeared to be a lack of consistency in the quality of the headteacher mentoring and it not being provided at appropriate times such as being too late or not offered at all (Robinson, 2011). Another headteacher highlighted that some training available for themselves and their staff did not cater well for small schools (Walker, 2010). Headteachers taking over the mentoring role of their staff was also noted, for example, when the previous mentor's low expectations meant the Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) was at risk of failing her induction year (Longman, 2011).

Leadership Capacity. This category highlighted the lack of senior leadership roles in small schools. There were very few or no senior leader roles for the headteacher to delegate leadership tasks to (Longman, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Waugh, 2000). As such, this impacted on leaders' discussions and the ability to share problems (Robinson, 2011) as well as headteachers' workload.

Workload. This category captured "staff's intense workloads" (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023, p. 11) which appeared to be interrelated with the other challenges school leaders were facing. Workload related to financial pressures (Waugh, 2000), having few or no

Table 1
Overview of Included Studies Examining the Challenges and Potential Solutions of Small School Leaders in the UK

Author & Year	Participations	School type	School setting	Leadership title	Methods	Analysis	Challenges	Potential solutions
England								
Bagley & Hillyard, 2019; Hillyard & Bagley, 2013; Hillyard, 2020	School (50 pupils) 1 x HT (male)	State	Primary	Headteacher	Ethnographic study (3 years) – Semi-structured interviews (multiple - 8 × 1hrs)	Thematic analysis	Dual-role Threat of school closure HT recruitment and retention Staff attitudes (e.g., too much change) Time pressure Declining pupil numbers Competition (e.g., parental choice) Parental and community relationships (e.g., classrooms locked) Academic performance (e.g., Gov targets and pupil test results)	Resources (e.g., expansion) Community (e.g., village) Leadership structure (e.g., Acting HT) Parental relationships (e.g., building trust)
Burns, 2005	7 schools (<100 pupils) 4 x HTs	State	Primary	Headteacher	Semi-structured interviews (one off)	Grounded theory	CPD (e.g., perception mismatch, dominance management control, SDP and PM Influence, teacher identity, funding, compliance and disaffection)	CPD (e.g., learning, teacher voice, affirming and valuing contributions) Leadership (e.g., working together, agreeing improvement plan and one PM target linked to this)
Hill, Kettlewell, & Salt, 2014	4 schools (<100 pupils) 4 x HTs (3 male & 1 female)	3 x State (2 x VC) and 1 x MAT	Primary	Headteacher (inc. Acting and Executive HTs)	Case Studies (Four visits)	Description	Dual-role Finances (e.g., transport/ school costs) MAT (e.g., planning and direction) Pace of change (e.g., speed/ambition) Teacher attitudes LA support (e.g., not flexible)	Clusters/networks (e.g., informal partnerships, federation, MAT) CPD (e.g., joint training, observations) Senior leader support (e.g., meetings, phone calls etc) Funding/ resources (e.g., LA funding for partnerships, shared policies/plans, pooled resources and services, staff, ICT) Reducing teaching commitment e.g. (HT)
Johnston, 2019	School 39 pupils 1 x HT (male)	State (Church School)	Primary	Headteacher	Reflective memoir (over 6 years)	Text-based analysis	Dual-role Teaching standards Financial understanding/pressures Stakeholder expectations (e.g., Govs, pupils, parents, staff, LA, Ofsted, Diocese, villagers) Staffing (e.g., number of hours) SEN Provision Developing facilities (e. g., space, expansion, wireless connection) Mental wellbeing LA support	Reducing commitment (e.g., HT teaching) Relationships (e.g., staff and community) Communication (e. g., parents and staff) Financial understanding (e.g., managing budget effectively) Coping strategies (e.g., prioritising/ managing diary, staff wellbeing INSET, fitness) CPD (e.g., shared CPD, conferences/networking) Support (e.g., working with and supporting other schools inc. pooling resources) Leadership (e.g., planning management style to situation/knowing staff) Retention (e.g., developmental opportunities for HT, rewarding staff)
Longman, 2011	School 65 pupils 1 x HT (female)	State (Church School)	Primary	Headteacher	Autoethnography - Case study (5 years)	Thematic analysis	Teaching standards (incl. NQTs, TAs) Stakeholder expectations (e. g., LA) Attitudes (pupils and teachers) Relationships (parents	Leadership CPD/Staff Development Stakeholder engagement/support (e.g., Govs) Staff choice/retention

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Author & Year	Participations	School type	School setting	Leadership title	Methods	Analysis	Challenges	Potential solutions
							and teachers) Understaffing (e.g., absences) Finances (e.g., facilities, dinner costs) Declining pupil numbers Ofsted (e.g., pressure/ expectations) Time pressures Dual-role Mental wellbeing Developing an SLT (e.g., created posts - staff quality a challenge)	Reducing HT commitments (e.g., teaching)
Poultney & Anderson, 2021	School (50 pupils) 1 x HT (Female)	Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)	Primary	Headteacher	Phenomenology – Semi-structured interviews (one off)	Thematic analysis	Declining pupil numbers Threat of school closure LA/National systems (e.g., safeguarding/ absence codes Teacher attitudes (e.g., flexi-schooling)	MAT (academisation) Flexi-schooling provision (e.g., parental requests/developing expertise) Changing national systems (e.g., absence codes (Parliament) and safeguarding provision at home)
Robinson, 2011	Schools <100 pupils 26 x HTs	Community, Church Foundation and Trust Schools	Primary	Headteacher	Semi-structured interviews (one off) and questionnaires	Thematic analysis	Dual-/multi- roles (e.g., HT/ middle leaders) Mental wellbeing (e.g., HT loneliness) Finance (e.g., small school HT pay scale) Parental support (e.g., less parents) HT Training (e.g., programmes, mentoring etc) Lack of SLT CPD costs and time Intense environment (pupils and teachers) Finance (e.g., fluctuating pupil numbers yearly/LA formula)	Reducing HT commitment (e.g., teaching) CPD/staff development (e.g., mentoring NQT, HT and staff) Clusters and networks (e.g., resources/staffing) Leadership Community (e.g., village involvement) Funding (e.g., funding formula) Stakeholder engagement/ support (e.g., Ofsted, LA)
Veater, 2022	School A – 100 pupils 1 x HT	State	Primary	Headteacher	Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews (one off)	Phase 2: Content analysis	Academic Performance (e.g., SEN, gender) Bullying/Safety Returning after Covid	School relationships
Walker, 2010	School <30 pupils 1 x HT	State (VC school)	Primary	Headteacher	Semi-structured interviews and informal observations (one off)	Thematic analysis	Threat of school closure School competition Declining pupil numbers Negative school reputation (e.g., vicar and parents) LA initiatives and training (e.g., relevance to small school) Lack of support (e.g., LA, Diocese) Access to school	Community (parents/wider) Partnerships and collaboration e.g. (schools) Provision/services (e.g. nursery, breakfast/ after-school clubs)
Waugh, 2000	5 small schools (<100 pupils) 5 x HTs	State	Primary	Headteacher	Structured interviews (one off) Longitudinal study	Content analysis	Finance/funding (e.g., LA formula, number of pupils, redundancies, admin support) Dual-role Curriculum initiatives Time pressure Mental wellbeing (e.g., overburdened) Recruitment (e.g., pay scale) ICT (e.g., resourcing, training, expertise) Accountability (e.g., target setting, Ofsted and league tables) Cluster work (e.g., competition, secondary school support/philosophies)	Cluster/networks (e.g., schools, finances, resources/staffing, agreed philosophies) Leadership and structures (e.g., collegiate approach) Coping strategies (e.g., incl. stress management) Grant Maintained Status (e.g., funding/ increased admin support)

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Author & Year	Participations	School type	School setting	Leadership title	Methods	Analysis	Challenges	Potential solutions
Scotland								
Wilson, 2008; 2009a; 2009b; Wilson & McPake, 2000	68 Headteachers and 9 case study schools	State	Primary	Headteacher	Postal questionnaire, semi-structured interviews (one off)	Thematic analysis	Dual-/multi-role SEN Provision Geographical isolation Poor facilities Pace of change (e.g., new initiatives) Lack of time CPD Low number of staff Decreasing pupil numbers Threat of school closure	Clusters/networks (e.g., other schools, sharing resources) Digital communication (e.g., emails/phone calls for HT support) Leadership and structure (e.g., teamwork, no hierarchy, open-door policy) Support (LA, clerical, other staff, national) Community (e.g., parents/ wider community) Facilities (e.g., using hotel swimming pool, secondary school)
Northern Ireland								
Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023	Small schools particularly 50-70 pupils and <50 pupils 62 x HTs	Controlled Catholic Grant Maintained, Controlled Integrated, Irish Medium	Primary	Principal	Online questionnaire (one off)	Thematic analysis	Financial pressures and lack of funding Intense workloads/ juggling Declining pupil numbers Pressure or threat of potential close Pressure to amalgamate Lack of staff opportunities for professional development Increasing number of pupils with SEN Competition from other schools Lack of time Mental health	Community relationships (e.g., schools, villages, churches) Shared Education Programme (e.g., teamed with other schools)

Notes. HT = Headteacher, SLT = Senior Leadership Team, CPD = Continued Professional Development, ICT = Information and Communications Technology, SEN = Special Educational Needs, LA=Local Authority, Govs = Governments, INSET = In-Service Education and training, MAT = Multi-Academy Trust, PM = Performance Management, SDP = School Development Plan, VC = Voluntary Controlled.

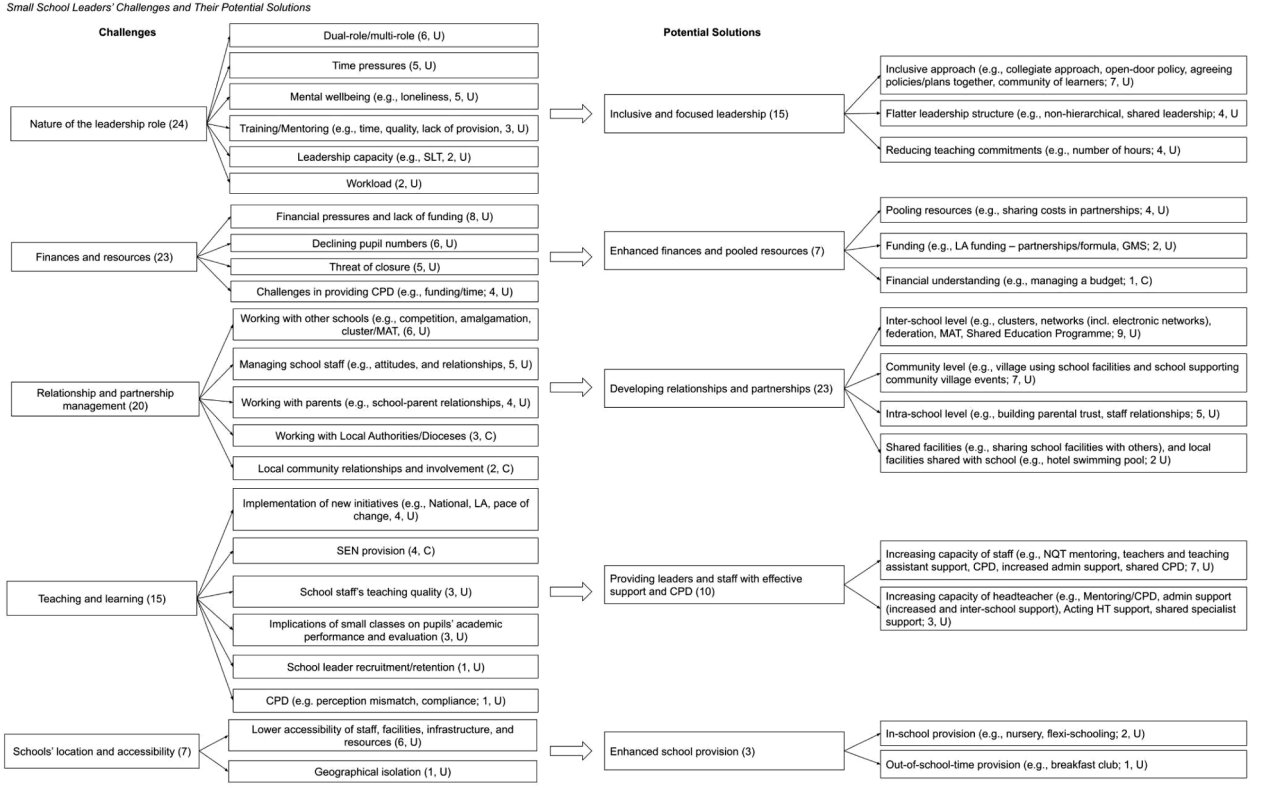

Fig. 2. Small School Leaders' Challenges and Their Potential Solutions.

other senior leaders (Longman, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Waugh, 2000), as well as undertaking a dual-role as it "can have a significant effect on the workload of a headteacher" (Robinson, 2011, p. 13).

3.2.2. Finances and Resources

The four constituent categories captured the financial challenges small schools faced, particularly as a result of national policy, declining pupil numbers, and their resulting threat of closure and difficulties in providing CPD.

Financial Pressures and Lack of Funding. This category captured different financial aspects including changes to schools' funding distribution, mentions of the Local Management of Schools (LMS) scheme, the National Funding Formula, and reduction in Local Authority grants. These changes were particularly found to impact small schools due to fewer pupils on roll, for example, with "seven children less next year (…) the ghost funding goes from £34,000 this year to nothing…" (Robinson, 2011, p. 137). This is further emphasised by both the rising cost per pupil once the pupil roll drops below 100 and associated funding implications on resourcing and staffing with a smaller budget (Walker, 2010).

Declining Pupil Numbers. This category captured small schools' challenges with decreasing pupil numbers (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; Wilson, 2008) due to parental choice, competition (Walker, 2010), and academic standards (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019). According to Walker (2010), parents are identified as "consumers" who within an "educational marketplace" (p. 713) have the options to shop around for the right school. Bagley and Hillyard (2019) supported this idea as they found local 'wealthy' parents to not send their children to the local small school due to low standards. The quality of teaching also led to pupil numbers decreasing in some schools (Longman, 2011) as parents were unhappy with a teacher (NQT) and moved their child to another school.

Threat of Closure. Declining pupil numbers resulted in some schools feeling the threat of closure (Hillyard, 2020; Poultney & Anderson, 2021). Threat of closure can have a negative impact on the school's reputation and parental choice in that "I know at least three children who would have come here but because the school is under threat they have gone elsewhere" (Walker, 2010). This was also identified in Northern Ireland where families chose not to enrol their children due to threat of closure (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023).

Challenges in Providing Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Having money to pay for CPD opportunities was considered to be a challenge due to costs (Burns, 2005; Hill et al., 2014) and arranging cover. When CPD opportunities fell on the day part-time staff members did not usually work, headteachers noted the additional pressure as staff members could refuse to attend the event (Robinson, 2011).

3.2.4. Relationship and Partnership Management

The five constituent categories captured the challenges headteachers faced in managing relationships and partnerships with parents, staff, other schools and the local community.

Working with Other Schools. Headteachers noted the challenges working with other schools given their specific contexts. For example, in Northern Ireland the "majority of principals described the communities their schools served as either mostly Catholic or mostly Protestant" (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023, p. 12), which posed amalgamation issues for them and the community.

Competition with other schools was also recognised as "wealthy people'' chose to send their children elsewhere (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019, p. 282). Competition through already established cluster work was also highlighted with reference to Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills; a non-ministerial organisation in England tasked with inspecting schools and any services provided for children and young people) and SATs (Standardised Assessment Tests; tests conducted in primary schools in England to monitor educational progress). Specifically, a headteacher reported that "It's all about status, who gets the best Ofsted and the best results in the SATs, and who can recruit the most pupils. Competition has crept in, but we're not competitive at this end" (Waugh, 2000).

Cluster work and working within a MAT also presented some challenges in terms of the time headteachers could commit to teaching (Waugh, 2000) as well as the agreed activity/activities across the cluster being pertinent. Headteachers in Hill et al.'s (2014) study reported the need for collaboration to "meet our needs and hopefully other schools will see how we can help them" (p. 50).

Managing School Staff. Staff attitudes were recognised as being difficult to manage sometimes due to situational changes. For example, when multiple headteachers were acting as temporary leaders, staff (and parents) were not able to "trust anything anymore" (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019, p. 280). In a study by Poultney and Anderson, teachers' experiences of flexi-schooling were commented on. Flexi-schooling is recognised as a formal and agreed arrangement whereby children attend school for a certain number of agreed days per week and are then educated either at home or elsewhere for the remaining days. According to Poultney and Anderson (2021), flexi-schooling is a widely accepted arrangement across the UK involving the Headteacher and families concerned but it is "not a right" (p. 182). Therefore, not all schools may offer or agree to this arrangement. In the study, teachers found the introduction of the flexi-schooling approach difficult as teaching and learning were shared between teachers and parents rather than it being solely led by teachers (Poultney & Anderson, 2021). Inter-staff relationships were highlighted as being difficult to manage (Johnston, 2019; Longman, 2011). This can also be the case in larger schools but, within a small school, the heightened intensity impacted other staff and pupils. Longman (2011) described this as the "small school magnification effect", which created a very "intense and emotionally charged" environment and situation (p. 114). This directly affected most staff whereas in a larger school this could be diluted with some staff not being aware of any staff issues.

Working with Parents. This category focused on challenges in developing and establishing relationships with parents/carers (Hillyard, 2020; Hillyard & Bagley, 2013; Johnston, 2019; Longman, 2011; Robinson, 2011). At times, this was due to historic parental school experiences, for example, a new headteacher noted that "a lot of the problems with the parents are that they had bad experiences at school" (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019, p. 280). "Warring" families within the village were also identified as a challenge in having

to manage the "conflict" that affected the school (Hillyard & Bagley, 2013, p. 418).

Having fewer and less diverse parents/carers the leaders of small schools could call upon was seen to result in less "professional support from families", especially by schools in deprived areas (Robinson, 2011, p. 192). Fewer parents also directly impacted the choice and suitability of those wanting to become governors leading to headteachers having to recruit governors outside of the local community (Hillyard & Bagley, 2013).

Working with Local Authorities/Dioceses. Challenges related to the breakdown in relationships between school leaders and the Local Authority (LA) and/or Diocese were highlighted. Lack of support was identified in different ways such as feelings of being "discarded" by the LA and Diocese when facing school closure (Walker, 2010). One teacher also expressed having to "watch my own back" when the "School Development Adviser (the person assigned to support me and the school) seemed to take it into her head that I was the problem" (Longman, 2011, p. 89). Another school with flexi-schooling provision faced challenges around safeguarding procedures for pupils being educated at home that were brought by the LA (Poultney & Anderson, 2021).

Local Community Relationships and Involvement. leaders of small schools faced challenges in forming and maintaining community relationships and engagement (Johnston, 2019). This is particularly tied to parental involvement and previous negative community experiences: "I believe previously the school wasn't perceived to be a school that was open to the community" (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019, p. 282). These experiences were based on a previous headteacher's legacy and the community's struggles of using the school's facilities, which contributed to the community becoming used to not interacting with the school (Hillyard, 2020).

3.2.5. Teaching and Learning

The six constituent categories captured the challenges headteachers faced in developing effective teaching and learning practices including the implementation of new initiatives and the provision of effective resources for pupils identified with SEN. It also considered the consequences of small year group sizes on academic performances and evaluation as well as the impact low quality teaching can have on school end of key stage results.

Implementation of New Initiatives. Leaders of small schools found it difficult to implement a range of national and local initiatives over the years (Walker, 2010; Wilson, 2009a, 2009b; Wilson & McPake, 2000). This was due to low staff numbers undertaking multi-roles with a lack of time to lead. For example, one headteacher recognised that "I need to spend time for me to be sure I understand exactly what's being asked and whether I can do it and whether I can make it work in my school…" (Wilson & McPake, 2000, p. 124). Another headteacher filed LA initiatives "in the bin" (Walker, 2010, p. 723) due to their perceived irrelevance to small schools. The other side of these challenges were that they could be considered as a positive attribute of small schools. For example, when implementing a new initiative or making changes in small schools, it was noted to be easier to share and discuss information with colleagues (Longman, 2011), quicker to implement and also an opportunity to be more creative than a large school (Robinson, 2011).

SEN Provision. This category highlighted the increasing numbers of pupils with special educational needs being enrolled in small schools (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; Wilson, 2008). However, it is important to note that larger schools (80-116 pupils) in Northern Ireland were experiencing more increased numbers of SEN pupils than small or very small schools (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023). According to Wilson (2008), some families may favour sending their child to small schools as they can provide a "family environment" (p. 83) and enable staff to divide their time and support across fewer children. However, small schools can face difficulty in ensuring adequate levels of provision and resources (Johnston, 2019). Support was also recognised as providing time and strategies required to deal with specific behavioural issues of some pupils identified with SEN.

School Staff's Teaching Quality. Headteachers faced pressures in their dual-role, which seemed to affect their teaching: "children were not getting as good a deal as they might with someone who was only employed as their teacher" (Johnston, 2019, p. 62). In contrast, another headteacher identified that, as a newly appointed head, teaching was part of the dual-role they could easily provide (Wilson, 2009b) as it was their strength. This category also referred to the importance of headteachers employing effective teachers because of the detrimental impact poor practitioners could have on academic performance and parental choice (Longman, 2011). Being "choosey" as to who was employed in a small school was important to one headteacher who preferred to employ teachers who were like them (Wilson, 2008, p. 84).

Implications of Small Classes on Pupils' Academic Performance and Evaluation. This category focused on the heightened impact of assessment results and Ofsted inspections. In a small school, national test results are often not published due to the small numbers and potential identifiability of children in the class. However, the impact small classes can have on overall academic performance and the subsequent evaluation of the school can "change dramatically from one year to another" (Waugh, 2000, p. 305). In some cases, this can be due to higher numbers of pupils identified with SEN (Waugh, 2000) and/or observations that "they're [the group of pupils are] a particularly poor year going through" (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019, p. 280). However, as highlighted previously, academic performance can then impact parental choice (Waugh, 2000). Also, the impact of Ofsted inspections within a small school were considered by headteachers to be more intensive as individual classes were observed more frequently than in larger schools (Waugh, 2000).

School Leader Recruitment/Retention. This category highlighted the seemingly difficult aspect of recruiting and retaining senior leaders. Bagley and Hillyard (2019) reported a school had 22 headteachers in 20 years, 11 of which were acting headteachers. Headteachers cited the lack of salary incentive and higher workloads in small schools as contributors: "why swap a deputy headship with a reasonable salary and some responsibility and status for a headship with no financial benefits and lots of stress" (Waugh, 2000, p. 346). Parents and staff stated a lack of trust and confusion from having had too many school leaders (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019).

Continuing Professional Development (CPD). This category focused on different aspects of CPD including: a mismatch between perceptions of what is and what should be the focus for CPD, the influence of the School Development Plan (SDP) and performance management on CPD for individuals, as well as headteachers' dominating and controlling CPD choices and needs (Burns, 2005).

3.2.6. Schools' Location and Accessibility

The two constituent categories captured the challenges in lower accessibility and geographical isolation some small schools faced.

Lower Accessibility of Staff, Facilities, Infrastructure, and Resources. Studies noted the lower numbers of staff being employed, given lower pupil numbers, and the lower accessibility of the schools. For example, a primary school was located next to a busy road and, therefore, deemed unsafe for children to walk (Walker, 2010). Challenges with poor or inadequate facilities were highlighted, including small classrooms with no separate access and no dining rooms or staffrooms (Wilson, 2008), to "not having toilets and access to outdoor playspace" for the Early Years Foundation Stage (Longman, 2011, p. 9). Resourcing ICT (Information and Communication Technology) was considered a challenge (Waugh, 2000), not only in terms of equipment provisions but also having reliable internet connections (Johnston, 2019).

Geographical Isolation. The geographical location and positioning of the school contributed to feeling isolated. In Wilson's (2008) study, 39% of the sampled "headteachers described their schools as geographically isolated and a quarter of all respondents (16) associated geographical isolation with feeling more stressed" (p. 81).

3.3. Potential Solutions to Challenges Faced by Leaders of Small Schools

From the 17 studies, 58 findings were extracted: 57 of which were classed as unequivocal findings and 1 as a credible finding. These findings were classified into 14 categories, which were then synthesised into five final categories of: (a) inclusive and focused leadership; (b) enhanced finances and pooled resources;(c) developing relationships and partnerships; (d) providing leaders and staff with effective support and Continuing Professional Development (CPD); and (e) enhanced school provision. The solutions, in the form of synthesised findings and their constituent categories, are described below in the order in which the challenges presented in the previous section could be addressed (see Fig. 2). However, please note that different combinations of the proposed solutions can be used to address other challenges too.

3.3.1. Inclusive and Focused Leadership

The three constituent categories captured how headteachers can demonstrate effective leadership, considering their leadership style, the leadership structure, reducing their teaching commitments, and practising communication.

Inclusive Approach. The importance of including teachers, parents and other stakeholders in school decisions and communication (Johnston, 2019; Longman, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Waugh, 2000). Headteachers emphasised a collegiate approach to leadership being beneficial (Wilson, 2009a) as it allowed teachers to take part in schools' decision making processes (Burns, 2005). Taking "time to communicate with all staff" and providing "clear strategies for teaching and learning without overloading" (Wilson, 2009a, p. 814) were recommended as part of this approach. Johnston (2019) emphasised "promoting a line of communication" (p. 71) and providing constructive feedback, which could avoid future challenges.

Flatter Leadership Structure. In most small schools, the absence of other senior leaders (e.g., deputy headteacher) meant that a flatter leadership structure was deployed (Robinson, 2011). All staff were involved in whole-school decision-making resulting in regular informal and formal consultations (Wilson, 2009b). The flatter structure also provided a platform for the headteacher to become a member of the team as opposed to primarily being the hierarchical leader (Robinson, 2011).

Reducing Teaching Commitments. Some headteachers reduced their teaching commitment to increase their focus on leadership aspects of the dual-role (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019; Waugh, 2000; Wilson, 2009a). Teaching time commitments varied across studies with some headteachers reducing it to 10-30% (Robinson, 2011). Other leaders changed the type of teaching commitment by providing classroom cover instead of having regular hours (Longman, 2011) or removing the teaching commitment altogether by federating with another school to become an Executive Headteacher (Johnston, 2019).

3.3.2. Enhanced Finances and Pooled Resources

The three constituent categories captured the need for appropriate funding and resources, which may be acquired through additional external funding, procurement for services across schools, and building a better financial understanding.

Pooling Resources. There were benefits of schools working together to secure the services of and share the costs for coach travel, school meals, IT support (Hill et al., 2014) and administration support (Johnston, 2019). Most studies highlighted joint and shared activities with other schools to share costs (Hill et al., 2014). Thus, schools secured more competitive deals as well as extended resources and provision to benefit more schools collectively.

Funding. The types of funding available to schools at the time of the research was named. For example, LA funding for cluster work was available to small schools through a one-off payment (Hill et al., 2014). Changes in government funding have also been seen to benefit some small schools such as Grant Maintained Status (Waugh, 2000). However, these particular financial resources represent the time in which the studies were written and do not reflect the current educational policies and financial climate.

Financial Understanding. Headteachers highlighted the importance of understanding and managing the school budget, especially given that most training did not address this need (Johnston, 2019). The flexibility and freedom of a healthy budget enabled the headteacher to explore options such as securing administration support through more competitive packages and sustaining fluctuating pupil numbers.

3.3.3. Developing Relationships and Partnerships

The four constituent categories captured the importance of building effective relationships and partnerships at the inter-school, community, and intra-school level as well as sharing facilities with others to combat challenges.

Inter-school Level. Schools developed both informal and formal partnerships, through collaborations, networks, and becoming part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). In Northern Ireland (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023), three-quarters of schools—including both very small and small (up to 79 pupils) and larger schools (80+ pupils)— were involved in the Shared Education-based Initiative, which enabled schools to work collaboratively with other schools across the border as well as engaging with 'other' communities (e.g., different religions).

In Scotland, both formal and informal networks were used to provide support through regular meetings "once per month (…), generally to discuss our week." (Wilson, 2009a, p. 816). This also included the development of electronic networks, liaising with other headteachers and the LA through emails and phone calls. These networks were used to share resources and policies as well as provide opportunities for pupils through "food labs" and joint sports days (Wilson, 2009b, p. 485). Most survey participants (Wilson, 2009b) were involved in some form of clustering activity; including informal exchanges (91%), devising policies and schemes (50%), and joint teaching and sharing resources (32%).

In England, similar inter-school relationships/partnerships were found, such as clusters (Hill et al., 2014; Robinson, 2011; Waugh, 2000) but also more formal partnerships such as Multi-Academy Trusts (Hill et al., 2014; Poultney & Anderson, 2021) and federations (Hill et al., 2014, Johnston, 2019).

By joining a MAT, one school noted that they were able to share their flexi-schooling expertise and give advice to others (Poultney & Anderson, 2021). However, they reported further benefits of receiving advice and support from their academy trust partners. Through clustering opportunities, leaders were able to work together to develop web-based learning pages (Robinson, 2011) as well as curriculum projects (Hill et al., 2014). The importance of forming effective partnerships was apparent across most studies as being "critical to survival as being with people 'in the same boat' is sometimes the only way to really be able to offload" (Johnston, 2019, p. 139).

Community Level. The importance of developing two-way partnerships with the community was highlighted (Bagley & Hillyard, 2019; Johnston, 2019; Walker, 2010) with the community being defined as either the school community (mostly parents; Wilson, 2009a) or the wider community (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023). Regardless of the definition, different ways through which the school could support the community were identified, such as organising village fairs and events with the local church, and linking with the village preschool (Robinson, 2011).

Intra-school Level. Relationships and partnerships were developed with parents and staff by building trust (Veater, 2022; Walker, 2010). This was particularly vital in some schools due to the legacy of a previous headteacher(s), which had eroded parental and staff confidence (Hillyard, 2020). Johnston (2019) recognised the importance of building trust with parents by providing time and having an open-door policy for interactions within the school. Valuing staff to strengthen relationships within the school was further highlighted (Johnston, 2019) as small schools can create more intense environments that require staff to get along (Wilson, 2009a, 2009b).

Shared facilities. There were benefits to small schools sharing facilities with other schools and the local community. In Wilson's (2008) study, a small school used a local hotel swimming pool for swimming lessons whilst other schools used local secondary school facilities to compensate for their own lack of space and resources. Equally, small schools shared their facilities with the local community to run clubs and groups for them (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023).

3.3.4. Providing Leaders and Staff with Effective Support and CPD

The two constituent categories outlined the importance of providing support and CPD opportunities to increase staff and headteacher capacity and how this could be achieved financially.

Increasing Capacity of Staff. Different ways to increase staff capacity were identified; namely through CPD, mentoring and other support mechanisms (Johnston, 2019; Robinson, 2011; Waugh, 2000; Wilson, 2009a). For example, mentoring of NQTs (Longman, 2011) and teaching assistants was recognised as key "to get [them] on board" (p. 142). Such support was particularly important for new headteachers as well as those trying to introduce new initiatives and changes.

CPD through in-school training, external providers and shared opportunities were also highlighted as solutions to providing support. Having opportunities to work collaboratively with other staff was recognised as vital as "teachers were at risk of being too insular" (Hill et al., 2014, p. 46). Observing teaching and learning in different school contexts provided avenues for staff to interact with others and increase their capacity (Hill et al., 2014).

Increasing Capacity of Headteacher. Different ways through which headteacher capacity could be increased were outlined, including mentoring/CPD opportunities and different types of inter- and intra-school support. The benefits of headteachers receiving mentoring beyond the new-to-role headteacher's first year was recognised (Robinson, 2011). This could be tailored to focus on specific problems or concerns like the NQT induction programme (Robinson, 2011).

Providing specific opportunities such as training to be a Local Authority School Improvement Partner (SIP) and Local Leader of Education (LLE) or taking a role as a temporary acting headteacher for another local school were seen to provide development opportunities (Hill et al., 2014; Johnston, 2019). Finally, mobilising specialist support across a cluster of schools such as a music specialist (Hill et al., 2014) and/or administrative support (Waugh, 2000) released the headteacher from some elements of their dual-role.

3.3.5. Enhanced School Provision

The two constituent categories captured the marketability of small schools can be increased through offering enhanced out-of-school-time and in-school provision.

In-school Provision. Expanding in-school provision was identified as an option as the "neighbouring school (…) had the advantage of having a nursery on-site" (Walker, 2010; p. 722), which made it easier to market themselves. In some schools, offering flexi-schooling may also provide an advantage if parents are interested in this option (Poultney & Anderson, 2021).

Out-of-school-time Provision. This category highlighted how the provision of services before or after school can set the school apart from others in the area. For example, Walker (2010) explained the "development of extended school services, such as breakfast and after school clubs" (p. 722) would help the school to market themselves to parents.

4. Discussion

This systematic review is the first to summarise the challenges faced by leaders of small schools in the UK, as well as the potential solutions that could help address these challenges. The review identified 17 studies, which captured the experiences of small primary school headteachers, mostly from England but also from Scotland and Northern Ireland. Many of these findings echo those reported in previous international reviews on leaders of rural schools (Preston et al., 2013) and schools in general (e.g., Tintoré et al., 2022), attesting to the potential generalisability of the current findings beyond the UK context. That is, given that challenges faced by leaders of small schools are often associated with the nature of leadership and administrative and operational challenges of running a small school, other cultural contexts may find it helpful to reflect on the challenges, and the potential solutions to these problems, reported in the current study.

4.1. Challenges Faced by Leaders of Small Schools

The systematic review identified five challenges: (a) nature of leadership role; (b) finances and resources; (c) relationship and partnership management; (d) teaching and learning; and (e) schools' location and accessibility. Some of these challenges were similar to those faced by school leaders generally (Tamadoni et al., 2021; Tintoré et al., 2022) and from rural schools (Preston et al., 2013). However, there were also challenges that were unique to the small school context, related to both its day-to-day operations as well as contextual and systemic challenges.

The complexity of the role was noted by leaders of small schools. This seemed to differ slightly from the juggling of multiple complex and high intensity tasks that were found in the previous reviews (Preston et al., 2013; Tamadoni et al., 2021; Tintoré et al., 2022), given the context of small schools. That is, leaders of small schools often have dual- or multi-roles, whereby, due to smaller staff numbers, school leaders are required to both lead and teach, and teaching would often be multi-stage classes (Wilson, 2009b).

Moreover, managing staff is a complex duty for school leaders of any context (Tamadoni et al., 2021; Tintoré et al., 2022), though this seemed to be even more of a delicate issue in the small school context, similar to that in rural schools (Preston et al., 2013). As small schools are often found in smaller communities, problems in the schools or even the community were noted to have been felt more intensively and widely, which Longman (2011) termed as the "small school magnification effect" (p. 114).

Finance management was also found to be a challenge in other reviews (Tamadoni et al., 2021; Tintoré et al., 2022). Leaders of small schools, however, seemed to have faced heightened financial pressures, as they were working with a more restricted financial budget. One reason for this may be explained by the nature of the UK's National Funding Formula (Department for Education, 2022), which is more appropriate for funding larger schools (Ovenden-Hope & Luke, 2020). Even though the sparsity factor has been considered by the government to provide additional funding to remote and small schools to negate this potential disadvantage (Education & Skills Funding Agency, 2023), our findings corroborate with other studies (e.g., National Association of Headteachers, 2023) that indicate that this challenge remains.

Thus, though there are similarities in the challenges that leaders of small schools face compared to those leading in other contexts, its unique context and thereby its associated challenges should be recognised when potential solutions are identified and implemented to support leaders of small schools.

4.2. Potential Solutions to Challenges Faced by School Leaders

Five potential solutions to the challenges faced by leaders of small schools in the UK were identified. They were: (a) inclusive and focused leadership; (b) enhanced finances and pooled resources; (c) developing relationships and partnerships; (d) providing leaders and staff with effective support and Continuing Professional Development (CPD); and (e) enhanced school provision.

The most frequently noted solution was developing inter-school partnerships and networks, which is in line with previous research. School leader support networks was one of the most strongly recommended strategies to support new school leaders in the UK (Hobson et al., 2003). An international review also mentioned it as a solution to the challenges of experiencing poor relationships with stakeholders as well as poor professional development opportunities (Tamadoni et al., 2021). That is, the value of peer support networks or mutual support groups is highlighted whichever context a school leader may be working in. Though rural school leaders noted the value of professional networking, they also found it difficult to engage in them due to factors such as isolation from participating in these programmes, and the difficulties in arranging the logistics and expenses of travelling. These challenges may also be present for leaders of small schools and thus must be borne in mind when inter-school partnerships and network models are considered. One model that could be considered involves small schools joining a federation and/or online networks, which have been found to be effective for some school leaders in a county in England (Hill et al., 2014). Through such partnerships, whether formal or informal, leaders of small schools may contribute to and benefit from pooled resources and knowledge that can open new and more diverse opportunities and support, which they may not have had access to otherwise.

Surprisingly, the study found that leaders of small schools who were new-to-role seemed to have questioned the benefits of mentoring. That is, although providing mentoring has been previously recommended to assist with solving some of the challenges faced by new school leaders (Hobson et al., 2003), in the case of leaders of small schools, there seemed to be questions about the quality

and timing of the mentoring (Robinson, 2011) as well as the appropriateness of the training content to the small school context (Walker, 2010). In fact, any programmes and opportunities offered to leaders of small schools should ensure that they are contextualised to meet the context-specific needs of the leaders. An example of this is the Church of England's(2023) National Professional Qualification for small schools, whose curriculum is tailored to the small school context. This goal may be best achieved by co-creating the content and andragogy of the professional development programmes with the leaders, as they are most familiar with the needs of the schools and context (Hardwick-Franco, 2019).

Enhanced finances and pooled resources can be helpful in reducing many leaders' challenges, including providing and participating in CPD, networks and other collaborative groups. The school funding model has changed throughout the decades, and with the recent partially funded pay rise of teachers (Department for Education, 2023), small schools are likely to face even more financial pressure. Thus, enhanced national financial support for small schools is critical for the survival and effectiveness of small schools.

Implementing these solutions may be helpful not only in addressing some of the challenges faced by leaders of small schools but also in preventing or reducing the severity of these challenges from rising in the first place. Whenever possible, these strategies should be considered with the school leader so that they are able to meet the needs of both the individual as well as the school.

4.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The included studies only used qualitative methods, which limits the extent to which these findings can be generalised beyond the studied population. To obtain a more holistic perspective, future studies could administer a survey to a national representative sample of leaders of small schools across the UK that quantitatively examines the most frequent challenges assessing levels of pervasiveness. The current study combined the nations of the UK, given the relative lack of studies of small schools in the UK. One must note, however, that the nations of the UK do have differences in the educational systems, policies, and programmes (Machin et al., 2013). Thus, future studies may consider collecting sufficient samples from each nation to examine the similarities and differences between the nations of the UK.

The current study focused on identifying the potential solutions to the challenges faced by leaders of small schools in the UK as a first step in filling the research gap in small school leadership literature in the UK. Small schools in other countries have been suggested and implemented some solutions to the challenges, such as finding alternative methods to generate school funds (Mansor et al., 2022) and using virtual learning environments to enhance collaborative practices between schools (Whalley & Barbour, 2020). Thus, future studies may consider assessing the efficacy of the solutions implemented across multiple countries so that researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in the UK may glean from the lessons learned in other countries.

The current study examined small schools only. Though this was the focus of the study, some may argue that qualitative or literature-based studies should include multi-sites featuring different types of rurality or compare findings with non-rural sites (e.g., Coladarci, 2007). This was not possible to do in the current review as very few included studies contained both rural and non-rural schools (Burns, 2005; Waugh, 2000). Neither was it possible to compare small with large schools as studies either focused on just the one small school site (Hillyard & Bagley, 2013; Johnston, 2019; Longman 2011; Poultney, 2021; Walker, 2010), several small schools (Robinson, 2011; Wilson, 2008; Wilson 2009a, 2009b; Wilson & McPake, 2000) or small schools with just over 101 pupils e.g., 116 pupils (Fargas-Malet & Bagley 2023) and 110 pupils (Hill et al., 2014). Thus, future studies may consider widening the study pool to examine a variety of school types to understand the nuances in the similarities and differences between small schools and other types of schools.

Moreover, given that the focus of the study was on leaders of small schools, others' perspectives and experiences (e.g., teachers, parents, pupils) were not included in the review. Future studies may examine the experiences of other stakeholders, including pupils, given their unique experiences in academic and social-emotional development in small school settings (Kvalsund, 2000). However, there are a limited number of studies which have implemented some of the solutions that have been suggested. There are also no intervention studies that have assessed the effectiveness of these solutions, thus reducing the ability to assess their effectiveness. That is, the effectiveness of solutions cannot be evaluated at this point due to the lack of studies on this topic, thus necessitating more research on small schools in the future.

4.4. Implications for Policy and Practice

School leaders of small schools in the UK, as in other countries, face various challenges as part of their role, and addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Though holistic principles may help leaders of small schools, each small school may face challenges that are based on its specific context. Therefore, the individual needs and circumstances of each leader of small schools should be considered before tailoring and implementing the chosen solution strategies. Nevertheless, based on the above findings, four policy and practice approaches are suggested that may assist with addressing the challenges faced by leaders of small schools.

In line with previous studies' recommendations (e.g., Hobson et al., 2003; Tamadoni et al., 2021; Tuck, 2009), leaders of small schools can benefit from connecting and collaborating with other schools and their leaders. Additional support may take the form of clusters, federations, networks, conferences, workshops and online communities where one can share resources, knowledge, and best practices as well as provide emotional support for one another. Such collaborative practices have found to be beneficial, not only for the leaders of small schools but also school staff and pupils (Hill et al, 2014; Johnston, 2019; Robinson, 2011 and Wilson 2009b).

Attracting and retaining high-quality school leaders can be challenging in any school (MacBeath, 2009). However, as the current review found, this can be particularly challenging for leaders of small schools due to factors such as the dual-role of the position, which has associated implications on time pressures, and lower pay compared to larger urban schools. Thus, to help attract and retain

high-quality school leaders, governors should consider providing opportunities for interested leaders to seek career progression and professional development. These may be in the forms of educational qualifications and certifications through collaboration with educational institutions, which is increasingly being encouraged in England through the introduction of National Professional Qualifications (NPQ), such as NPQ in Headship and NPQ in Executive Leadership (Department for Education, 2020) and NPQs designed for leaders of small schools (The Church of England Education Office, 2023). It may also mean providing time and financial resources for the leaders to receive coaching, which a review found to be promising for teachers for their instructional practices and student achievement (Kraft et al., 2018), and so may also be effective for school leaders.

Financial constraints are a common challenge for small schools in the UK. Currently, the Department for Education (2022) National Funding Formula, in simple terms, consists of a lump sum that is the same across schools, together with a sum considering the number of pupils enrolled. Even though small schools can receive additional sparsity funding, small schools are naturally financially disadvantaged compared to larger schools (Ovenden-Hope & Luke, 2020). Thus, policymakers should consider providing alternative funding methods and school leaders seeking additional national funding sources and resources to ensure adequate funding of small schools.

Lastly, leaders of small schools should actively participate in educational policy discussion and raise awareness and advocate for the unique needs of small schools, for example by engaging with educational and research associations, networks, charities and institutions. By collaborating with them, leaders of small schools can raise awareness and contribute to research, practice, and policy processes and outcomes that affect small schools and work towards changes that support their sustainability and effectiveness. Moreover, they may choose to participate in co-created and/or co-produced projects (see Voorberg et al., 2015 for a review), where they are able to bring their knowledge and insight into forums that can shape the future of their schools.

5. Conclusion

Some of the five challenges faced by leaders of small schools in the UK identified in this systematic review were similar to those experienced by leaders in schools in the UK (e.g., Hobson et al., 2003 and across multiple countries (Tintoré et al., 2022). As such, countries may reflect on whether the potential solutions presented in the current study may be applicable to leaders of small schools in their own contexts. Further, policymakers and practitioners are encouraged to consider the level of appropriateness and feasibility of the five solutions suggested here for implementation in the unique contexts of their respective country and small school, including those in the UK. Given the relative invisibility of small schools in leadership research, further research on this topic is encouraged, for example in assessing the efficacy of the proposed solutions in supporting leaders of small schools.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Lisa E. Kim: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Sarah E. Crellin:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Hanna L. Glandorf:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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