Chapter 4

Locked out: Impact of Covid-19 on school relationships and staff wellbeing in Irish primary schools

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was quickly felt in Ireland once cases began to be identified and rise in early 2020. While the impact on health services continues to be widely documented and researched, the effects on the education system received less attention initially. The priority in the early stages of the pandemic was to try to ensure that hospitals were not overwhelmed. School closures were one strategy used by the Irish Government to contain the spread of the virus. While the primary function of this move was to protect the health of both the school and general population, its impact on all aspects of school lives has become a focus for researchers.

This chapter will outline the rationale, methodology and findings of a small-scale research project on staff wellbeing with school principals and teachers at primary level. Related literature will be outlined and key concepts defined. While the pandemic has abated, with restrictions lifted at the time of the writing of this chapter, its legacy will live on in schools for better or worse. This will be tentatively explored in the final section.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Covid-19 propelled schools into a way of working not previously imagined or universally welcomed. From the time of the first reported cases in Wuhan in China in December 2019 until school closures were announced on the 12th March 2020, the country was on high alert. The announcement of the initial school closure took many schools by surprise – little did they think then that it would be September before they would re-open. This was followed by a shorter closure from January 2021, with a phased return to classes in primary schools in March.

The current research sought to explore the impact on two particular cohorts – principals and teachers – to gain insight into the lived reality as they navigated school closures and openings in an uncertain and possibly infectious environment. The authors have an ongoing interest and established body of work relating to staff wellbeing in the education context. In addition, two of the authors lecture in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), which has been a key curriculum for promoting pupil wellbeing in the aftermath of Covid-19 in the Irish school context.

FOCUS OF PREVIOUS LITERATURE

School closures are not new in history. In some instances, these have been as a result of a natural disaster, for example after the earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2011. At other times they have occurred because of infection fears as happened in the current pandemic. A particular

focus of research has been the impact of closures on the spread of the disease (Rauscher 2020; Viner *et al*. 2020), or the effect on pupil learning and wellbeing (Asbury *et al*. 2020; Colso *et al*. 2020). Little attention has been paid to the effects of such closures on school leaders and teachers, although this has begun to be addressed in recent studies (e.g. Burke and Dempsey 2020). While the latter is a good example of a quantitative study of principal wellbeing in Covid times, the authors of this chapter were interested in a mixed methods approach which would encompass the lived realities of both teachers and principals and their perceptions of how school closures had impacted them. We are not aware of any similar work that has been undertaken in the Irish or international context.

KEY CONCEPTS EXPLORED

Subjective and institutional wellbeing are explored in this section as part of the theoretical frame for the research. Related concepts included emotion regulation and emotional labour.

Wellbeing

The interest in wellbeing in the education context in Ireland is underlined in official policy documents (e.g. Department of Education and Skills [DES] 2015; DES 2018), although it is not necessarily a well-understood concept in that setting (Tynan and Nohilly 2021). The definition adopted for the research was as follows:

> Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community.

> (DES 2018, p.10)

This broad definition allowed for exploration of wellbeing as a holistic construct encompassing its relational and individual aspects.

Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation (ER) refers to the "processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions" (Gross 1998, p.275). A principal or teacher's ability to regulate their emotions has a direct impact on the stress they may experience in the workplace, is a predictor of their wellbeing (Yin *et al*. 2016) and their ability to withstand burnout (Brackett *et al*. 2010). The focus on ER allowed the authors to explore what impact, if any, working in a school context in the midst of a pandemic had on wellbeing, emotions and burnout.

Emotional Labour

This concept refers to the effort involved in managing emotions in the public sphere in order to "create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (Hochschild 1983, p.7). In the normal course of events in schools, principals and teachers may use some of their energy to hide their emotions as a way of separating their personal lives from their working lives. This ability potentially becomes even more pertinent in the face of trauma or unprecedented events in schools (such as during a pandemic), where the focus tends to be on keeping things 'normal' for pupils. Some researchers suggest that when emotional labour is increased in the face of a natural disaster (such as an earthquake or a pandemic), it can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout in teachers

(O'Toole and Friesen 2016; Liu *et al*. 2021). These related concepts were of interest to the authors as aspects of teacher and principal wellbeing.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods longitudinal research methodology was adopted which it was hoped would give a rounded picture in terms of impact on wellbeing for key individuals in schools. The main research tools were semi-structured interviews and two questionnaires. The latter were: *Emotional Regulation Questionnaire* (Gross and John 2003); and the *Copenhagen Burnout Inventory* (Milfont *et al*. 2008), both of which are freely available to use and can be adapted to suit specific circumstances (such as Covid-19). These tools were utilised across two phases of the research: Phase1 in June – July 2020; Phase 2 in Dec 2020 – January 2021. Ethical approval was granted by Mary Immaculate College prior to the start of the research, and all ethical commitments were fulfilled throughout both phases of the research.

Data Analysis

Two methods of data analysis were employed in the research. The qualitative data from the interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in order to capture the lived experiences of the participants. Interviews were transcribed and read and re-read to identify themes. These were then entered into a table and reviewed by the researchers.

In the case of the questionnaires, statistical analysis was undertaken using Excel inputs which were then imported into IBM SPSS Statistics 25 (IBM Corp. Released, 2019). The questionnaires showed acceptable reliability with Cronbach's alphas for both, ranging from .815 to .919. In Phase 1, all the participants completed the questionnaires, while in Phase 2, 15 of the 22 participants completed the questionnaires and we shall present a more detailed quantitative comparison of Phases 1 and 2, with this smaller group, in a subsequent paper.

Participants

Ten principals and 12 teachers from across Ireland volunteered to participate in this study (16 women and 6 men). While every effort was made to have a gender balance in the research, in both phases there were more women than men across the two participant groups. In relation to geographical location and denominational status, these mirror national statistics in the main – for example, 18 out of the 22 schools were of Catholic denomination.

The authors acknowledge the limitations of this small-scale study both in terms of sample size and demographics of participants (see tables), however we believe the findings are illustrative of and true to aspects of the lived experiences of the participants and may resonate with the wider educational community.

Table 1: *Teacher Participants*

Name	Gender	Role	Years Teaching	School Type
Teacher 1 (T1)	Female	Special Education Teacher (SET)	10	Large Roman Catholic (RC) Urban School
Teacher 2 (T2)	Female	SET	20	Large RC Urban School
Teacher 3 (T3)	Female	SET	20	Large RC Urban School Designated Disadvantaged
Teacher 4 (T4)	Male	Mainstream Class Teacher (MCT)	8	Large RC Urban School Designated Disadvantaged
Teacher 5 (T5)	Female	MCT	20 years plus	Small Multi Denominational School
Teacher 6 (T6)	Male	MCT	10 years plus	Large RC Rural School
Teacher 7 (T7)	Female	MCT	20 years plus	Large RC Rural School
Teacher 8 (T8)	Female	MCT	1 year	Large RC Urban School Girls
Teacher 9 (T9)	Female	MCT and Deputy Principal	25 years	Large RC Rural School
Teacher 10 (T10)	Male	MCT	40 years	RC Rural School
Teacher 11 (T11)	Female	MCT	25 years	Gaelscoil Urban
Teacher 12 (T12)	Female	MCT	15 years	Large RC Rural School

Table 2: *Principal Participants*

Name	Gender	Years as Principal	School Type
Principal 1 (P1)	Male	3 years	Small Church of Ireland Rural School
Principal 2 (P2)	Female	5 years	RC Rural School
Principal 3 (P3)	Female	9 years	Large RC Urban School
Principal 4 (P4)	Female	4 years	Gaelscoil (Developing) Junior Infants – 2nd Class
Principal 5 (P5)	Female	7 years	Large Urban Educate Together School
Principal 6 (P6)	Male	9 years	Small RC Rural School
Principal 7 (P7)	Male	16 years	Large RC Urban School
Principal 8 (P8)	Female	15 years	Small RC Rural School
Principal 9 (P9)	Female	5 years plus 7 years in another school	RC Urban Senior School
Principal 10 (P10)	Male	1 year	Educate Together Urban School

FINDINGS

Rich data were collected in both phases of the research, however it is beyond the scope of this chapter to present all the findings here. Key themes of wellbeing (subjective and institutional) and staff relationships will be explored through the qualitative data, and, where relevant, the quantitative data which gives insights into the wellbeing theme in this chapter. Participants will be identified by role and number (e.g. P3 [Principal 3] and T5 [Teacher 5]) while the phases will be noted (Phase 1 and Phase 2).

Wellbeing

That school closures affected the wellbeing of staff may seem an obvious finding, however the impact was not always what might have been anticipated.

Subjective wellbeing

In analysing the data in both phases relating to staff wellbeing, it became obvious that closing the schools for the first lockdown had a less detrimental effect than opening them back up. For some, the enforced change of routine was an opportunity to take stock and spend time on their wellbeing:

> We just made the best of it and I spent loads of time outdoors with the kids which was great. We'll never get the chance to spend that much time with them again, so we just made the most out of it.
>
> (T6, Phase 1)

> I went to my parents who were living a mile over the road and then we'd just be outdoors and spend a couple of hours there. I have been so caught up in the job, so to have those hours to spend over there and do bits of jobs, I'm really grateful for it. I realised maybe that I was missing that, missing wellness.
>
> (P6, Phase 1)

Many of those interviewed valued the time to change their routines, to spend more time outdoors and appreciate nature, and to re-engage with hobbies they might have neglected previously, while continuing to fulfil work responsibilities. However, some participants were impacted negatively:

> At stages during lockdown, my own wellbeing definitely suffered because my interactions with my wife were difficult at times and most certainly my extended family too… I definitely wasn't the nicest person to be around because I was always trying to tick off some professional obligation.
>
> (P1, Phase 1)

> Yeah, I have discovered that working from home would not be the best job for me… Like my wife is doing it brilliantly and I am finding it crazy because I like to interact with people.
>
> (T4, Phase 1)

In analysing the quantitative data, the Irish figures were analysed for personal, work-related and client (student)-related burnout. While these figures on their own tell us little, if they are compared to other categories of workers (e.g. Kristensen *et al.* 2005) and similar studies of teachers (e.g. Milfont *et al.* 2008 in New Zealand), the Irish participants in this study reported less personal

burnout than some caring professionals in Kristensen *et al*.'s study, yet their personal, work-related and client-related burnout were higher than those of senior medical and nursing staff in the same study. All three burnout factors for the Irish teachers were less than the teachers in Milfont *et al*. (2008), but were similar to the burnout levels reported by the Christchurch teachers 18 months post-earthquake (O'Toole and Friesen, 2016). In comparison to other recent studies conducted during the pandemic, the Irish participants showed less burnout than nurses in two studies (Clinton *et al*., 2021; Montgomery *et al*. 2022), and also less than German government employees (Meyer *et al*. 2021).

Overall burnout for the 15 participants did not change significantly by Phase 2, with the exception of client-related burnout (Wilcoxon test statistic: -2.17, p.<.05). This is an interesting finding which may be supported by their use of cognitive reappraisal for emotion regulation, as was also found for the Christchurch teachers post-earthquake (O'Toole and Friesen, 2016). At Phase 1, they were already using reappraisal strategies more frequently than suppression strategies, and reappraisal did increase significantly by Phase 2 (Wilcoxon test statistic: -3.22, p.<.01).

In contrast with the quantitative data in relation to burnout, qualitative data from Phase 2 suggests that, for principals in particular, the stresses and responsibilities of opening the school and maintaining it as a safe and healthy place for all took its toll on them. This followed a period of intense preparation during their Summer holidays:

> For me, I would say it was the first time in twelve years of being a school principal that I really felt the weight of the responsibility of the role, you know? I felt very responsible for over four hundred people's health and wellbeing on that day and it had to be right. … the weight of that responsibility was one of the biggest memories I have of that time.

(P9, Phase 2)

It is notable that within the relatively small group of principals (10) who took part in the research, one had not returned to school after the first lockdown because of illness, while another principal took sick leave in late November 2021 (when schools had re-opened), and another was advised to do so but declined. This comment sums up the feelings of one:

> I would say there are a lot of people really struggling out there and I would say there are some people who are broken at the end of this and I wouldn't be surprised with high levels of retirement coming up soon.

(P9, Phase 2)

Teachers who were interviewed were more positive about their subjective wellbeing on their return to school. While there was some acknowledgement that there was a lot of preparation before schools opened, it was not reported at the same level of intensity as the principals. For one teacher, being back in school allowed for connection with staff which was missing during school closures:

> I think it has helped my wellbeing by being back. It's definitely better being back and I think by being back there's an element of cohesion that happens naturally.

(T1, Phase 2)

Institutional Wellbeing

A mixed picture emerges of institutional wellbeing in both phases of the research. In Phase 1, the first few weeks of lockdown could be described as the 'honeymoon' period where schools were anticipating a temporary closure. Those schools who had sent home textbooks and a plan of work for students were able to draw breath:

> I do think back in the first two weeks, the time when we had the two weeks of work prepared, those two weeks, I had them almost to myself.

> (P6, Phase 1)

However, as it became clear that schools would not re-open, and that online teaching would replace face to face interactions for an unknown period of time, tensions emerged in most school contexts. As well as the pressure to be seen to be doing at least as well as other local schools which was felt by some principals, teachers were aware that their digital skills were being laid bare within their staff groups. The following remarks of a teacher are indicative of the type of tensions that existed at that time:

> I felt that the staff was the hardest bit because it was just a new way of working, there were many different ideas and you're trying to be fair to everybody and balance it and … what caused the most destruction in our school was in teams, one person doing one thing and not necessarily being upfront about it so like if I were to go up and have a zoom with my whole class and not let my peers know, that would, it's going to come out with parents and so on.

> (T1, Phase 1)

For both principals and teachers, there was a recognition that online staff meetings were not an effective substitute for meeting face to face:

> As a staff, I think, we have to do a little bit of work when we go back on our wellbeing. You know, because there has been a lot of frustration and tension and it's so hard to communicate that over Zoom.

> (T1, Phase 1)

> … we have a staff meeting every Monday [online] and I tell them you are like a postage stamp there, not moving. And I say anything, I don't even know if they hear me and I'm like, okay hello, put your hands up like this now if you agree. … but you know. I find it draining.

> (P5, Phase 1)

In Phase 2, the positive emotions expressed by most participants on their return to school were eroded to some extent by the working conditions that were a necessity in the circumstances:

> … the staff don't get to socialise with the big group any longer. That of course has a knock on effect then on people's moods and that kind of thing …I think if I was to look at a negative impact, it definitely is the lack of socialisation between classes, between teachers. The lack of that emotional connection that's really difficult to create in these circumstances, you know?

> (P10, Phase 2)

> It's been very hard socially. I could go weeks without seeing most of the staff you know? It's very hard because you can't go down to burst –You can't go down to a classroom to have a visit, do you know? To have a chat to a friend, let's say. You can't go down because you're bursting the bubble you know?

> (T12, Phase 2)

This inability to connect with colleagues has been keenly felt by both principals and teachers, and has limited the potential to maintain and repair relationships. The next section will explore this in more detail.

Staff Relationships

During both phases of the research it is evident that there has been a significant focus on the maintenance of communication and support for and between staff members, and indeed other stakeholders in the school community who are outside the focus of this chapter (e.g. parents). The holding of online staff meetings has been detailed in the previous section as a means of communicating which had mixed effects for both principals and teachers. In this section we focus on the more informal strategies that were employed in most schools to maintain staff relationships.

Phase 1

For some principals initially, their efforts to be available to staff members and to check in with them individually on a weekly basis was stressful:

> Staff-wise it was a very difficult few weeks for me. I felt probably a certain obligation to touch base with my staff every couple of days, so was ringing them and checking in with them, and it was very well received by them, but what I was finding, I was almost taking on a lot of their personal burdens that I wouldn't necessarily, usually come across in a professional environment…

> (P1, Phase 1)

This principal (in common with others) eventually drew on the management team to divide the staff into groups for support and communication purposes which worked well. In another school the principal and deputy principal worked together:

> … we were just available, myself and [deputy principal] we worked really well and we just made ourselves available to the staff all day, evening times, whatever it took to get everything in order. And follow up with emails, phone calls, zoom calls…

> (P9, Phase 1)

This level of engagement was necessary because staff were working in a different way, using new technology in many instances, which was challenging:

> I think that the hardest thing following the closure was lack of staff cohesion. There was massive disagreement about which direction to go in. And when you're trying to get your head around things for the first time and engaging with each other through technology, it's diffcult to reach the benefits that you would if we were all in the same room.

> (T1, Phase 1)

One principal encouraged staff to support one another:

> Well what I did was, what I tried to do was to link teachers to support one another so that everything wasn't going to go back to me. …

<div align="right">(P3, Phase 1)</div>

An interesting insight into how one teacher adopted this approach is seen in this comment:

> What I do is looking at people's faces and in the large staff meeting [online], and I am looking at some that may be very quiet or somebody that might be, whatever, and you know, I might give them a call afterwards or a few days later saying look how are you?

<div align="right">(T2, Phase 1)</div>

Another school set up a social media group specifically for communication and support for one another outside the official school communication channels. In addition, some schools built in weekly team-building gatherings such as quiz nights, while others focused on end of term online gatherings to acknowledge the efforts that had been put in by staff. However, there was an overall sense that work would have to be done when schools re-opened to build up "relationship capital" (P10, Phase 1) that had been depleted.

Phase 2

When schools re-opened again in September, different pressures emerged in staff relationships. The difficulty of socialising while maintaining social distancing measures has already been dealt with in a previous section. For some principals, implementing the school Covid plan had its tricky moments:

> … some of the trickier elements of the response plan that you have to implement, it can cause a little bit of tension where maybe someone doesn't agree with it… So that has presented its challenges from an interpersonal perspective at times, you know?

<div align="right">(P10, Phase 2)</div>

This sense of the guidelines getting in the way of maintaining and repairing staff relationships in Phase 2 of the research was pervasive, with one teacher making a strong statement about this:

> I think this is a horrible thing. I don't know if anybody's parents are sick, if anybody has cancer, if anybody is suffering from a marriage breakdown, if anybody if going through…if anybody's child is sick.

<div align="right">(T12, Phase 2)</div>

Overall, it appears that getting back to school has not necessarily delivered in terms of 'normal' staff relationships. It remains to be seen what effects this new 'normal' will have on relationships within schools in the medium or longer term.

DISCUSSION

This chapter has focused on two aspects of the data gathered in Irish primary schools: wellbeing and staff relationships. The picture that emerges is a mixed one on both counts. On the one hand, there were opportunities to order personal and professional lives differently (particularly in the initial stages) which fostered wellbeing, while on the other the pressures to engage children in online learning and keep schools safe once they re-opened impacted negatively on principals and teachers. The additional stress articulated by principals who worked through their Summer holidays and, in some cases, their mid-term breaks has not been acknowledged officially, although principals and teachers were buoyed up by the obvious happiness of pupils and the gratitude of parents on re-opening. This euphoria was eroded as principals and teachers grappled with the reality of working with Covid plans, bubbles and pods, isolation rooms and bans on singing. And as both principals and teachers acknowledged, finding the time to work on wellbeing and staff relationships is difficult:

> And to be honest with you, see this now, for me, I don't know where is going to be the time for teacher wellbeing…

(T7, Phase 1)

In addition, one principal wondered how this might be done:

> I know as a principal I want to be sure I prioritise staff wellbeing in the year to come, but how I am going to do that I am not exactly sure.

(P6, Phase 1)

The relatively lower levels of burnout measured in the participants in this study in Phases 1 and 2 quantitative data is worth noting. It may be that teachers and principals have well-honed reappraisal and suppression strategies in the normal course of their work which stands them in good stead in the face of particular challenges, as suggested by O'Toole (2017), however what lasting impact this pandemic will have on wellbeing and staff relationships in schools is unclear at this point. Will principals who were close to retirement anyway take the plunge as has been noted by one participant (and effected by another in this small study)? It is telling that in the research carried out by Dempsey and Burke (2020) in the Irish context, none of the principals surveyed saw themselves as thriving psychologically in the Covid-19 crisis that enveloped them.

What happens to the tensions and frustrations articulated by teachers in relation to colleagues who adopted individualistic stances in working online with children? And how long can staffs stay cohesive when socially distanced from colleagues on a daily basis? That this will affect newly-appointed teachers disproportionately seems obvious. The authors are not aware of any national or regional initiatives to address these issues. While key policy documents support wellbeing of school staff (e.g. DES *Wellbeing Policy Statement 2018*), it is significant that the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) was stood down for a period during the pandemic, while its current wellbeing offerings for teachers consist of generic videos created by the Health Service Executive (HSE) and curriculum courses on teaching for wellbeing. One Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provider (Clare Education Centre) has an offering for principals which would address wellbeing and staff relationships in a series of online talks (www.clareed.ie 2022). Other education centres facilitate principals' support groups on an ongoing basis which may also allow discussion and guidance on these issues. It remains to be seen whether these

initiatives will address principals' needs at this time, and there appears to be no equivalent CPD for teachers in relation to school wellbeing and staff relationships.

CONCLUSION

In these unprecedented times for society in general and schools in particular, it is not yet clear what the legacy of the pandemic will be in terms of staff wellbeing and relationships. Commentary in the media suggests an emerging trend in increased marriage breakdown and divorce. Early retirement and/or career changes might be the equivalent in the school setting, however there is no data available yet on these possible effects. What would be useful is a follow-up study with the same participants which could yield valuable insights into these issues. A commitment to support schools as they come out of this pandemic may be as important (if not more so) as what was available to them during closing and opening of schools.

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