

## Locked Out: Impact of Covid-19 on School Relationships and Staff Wellbeing in Irish Primary Schools

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted all our lives over the last 18 months or so. 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. The research project outlined in this presentation arose directly from an interest in the impact of school closures on staff wellbeing, an area of research which is under-developed in the literature on school closures.

The overall aim of the study was to provide an opportunity for both principals and teachers to reflect on how Covid-19 impacted on their wellbeing and, by inference, the impact of the increased emotional labour of teaching during a pandemic (O'Toole and Friesen 2016). The small scale study outlined in this presentation had a mixed methods approach. Principals (10) and teachers (12) were interviewed in two phases (Phase 1: June - July 2020; Phase 2: Dec/January 2020/21). Participants were employed in a range of school types which were in a variety of locations (e.g. urban/rural). In addition to the interviews, participants completed two questionnaires: the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross and John, 2003) and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Milfont et al. 2008) which was adapted for use with teachers and principals. Interview data were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), while statistical analysis across quantitative and qualitative data allowed for comparison across data sets.

The findings to be presented relate to the impact of school closures on the relationships between teachers and principals; pupils and their teachers; parents and teachers/principals; and teacher/teacher relationships. While there were challenges to the maintenance of relationships during lockdown, there were also opportunities to interact in a different way. The picture that emerges is mixed across all relationship types.

In terms of wellbeing, both principals and teachers reported positive and negative effects of school closure and lockdown. In Phase 2 of the research, while all participants indicated they were happy to be back in school, for some principals, burnout became an issue. As the country moves to a staged return to the "new normal", this research suggests that for some schools, the impact of the pandemic on relationships and wellbeing will be felt for some time to come.



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