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# The disruptive impact of COVID-19 on relationships in Irish primary schools: key issues

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic is an event that will be written about in history, given its impact on life across the globe, on ways of working, on mortality rates and on day to day living. How schools undertook their work changed across the pandemic, as school buildings both in Ireland and across the world closed for long periods of time. In this timeframe, school communities adapted to online teaching and learning using a variety of platforms to support this. The impact of the pandemic on principal and teacher wellbeing is the subject of this research paper. Findings of a small-scale, mixed-methods study involving semi-structured interviews and the completion of two questionnaires undertaken with 21 Irish primary school principals and teachers are presented. The findings indicate a number of emerging issues for the school community relating to relationships, communication and support and the digital divide. Implications for teacher wellbeing are considered and recommendations for policy and practice relating to teacher wellbeing in particular are made.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Covid 19; Teacher wellbeing;  
Relationships

## Introduction

As with many schools across the world, primary schools in Ireland were forced to close school buildings and pivot to remote teaching and learning for substantial amounts of time as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Much research has been conducted on various elements of the pandemic, including the impact on health services, technology and the pivot to online and blended forms of learning and alternative examination arrangements and changes to national state assessments to mention but a few. Far less focus has been placed on the impact of the pandemic on school communities and on the relationships within the community, particularly the relationship among staff, the impact on school culture and other pressing issues for school communities (Hargreaves & Blais, 2021). The research project outlined in this paper arose directly from an interest on the impact of

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school closures on staff wellbeing. While the findings in relation to staff wellbeing, both from a personal and institutional level are mixed, one of the most interesting themes of the study in relation to emerging issues for school communities will be the focus of this paper. Relevant findings from a small-scale study undertaken with Irish primary school teachers and principals will be presented. To begin, relevant literature into pandemic, school culture and climate and staff relationships will contextualise the study.

### ***The Covid 19 pandemic***

The Coronavirus pandemic, more commonly known as the COVID-19 pandemic is considered one of the deadliest in history, given the number of cases and number of confirmed deaths worldwide. Cases continue to present in Ireland and in many other jurisdictions on a daily basis and the global situation in terms of confirmed cases and number of deaths is reported by the World Health Organisation continuously (World Health Organization, n.d.). From the first identification of the virus in Wuhan in China in 2019, it spread worldwide and many mutations or variants of the disease have been detected with varying levels of infectivity and virulence. Many countries, including Ireland experienced 'lockdowns' with varying degrees of freedom in an effort to contain the spread of the virus. Primary schools in Ireland are so often considered the heart of the community, particularly in small and isolated areas. This research enabled a micro story of how the pandemic impacted on the school staff, including their personal wellbeing and the impact on staff relationships to unfold. The context of school culture and climate is important to consider and the potential for COVID-19 to disrupt this aspect of school life is significant.

### ***School culture and climate***

School culture and climate is a term in the Irish educational context that we hear very often, however it is difficult to define exactly what school culture is because so 'much of it is unspoken and taken for granted' (Tynan & Nohilly, 2018, p. 62)". Even though the terms are often used interchangeably, a distinction is made between culture and climate; the culture of a school relates to its distinct way of operating and this includes the relationships in a school while school climate is an atmosphere where all individuals are valued, cared for and respected (Government of Ireland, 1999). School culture encompasses ideas, beliefs, values, knowledge, practices and attitudes of the stakeholders in a school. Factors that affect school culture include policies, procedures and expectations for teaching, learning and student achievement (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Kohm & Nance, 2009). Indeed, school culture is frequently revealed in the language used by the school community. Schools may be known for a sporting or musical culture, for being inclusive or for high academic results. School

climates are known to be associated with a range of student outcomes including academic, social, behavioural and affective (Aldridge & McChesney, 2020). According to the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999), a positive school culture and climate fosters the health and wellbeing of all members of the school community. It promotes respectful and caring relationships throughout the school and all members of the school community know that their voice is respected. Many policy documents and national guidance for schools focus on the promotion of a positive school culture and climate including the aforementioned SPHE curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999), the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2013), the Wellbeing Guidelines for Primary Schools (Department of Education & Skills & Department of Health & Children, 2015) and the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education & Skills, 2018). An analysis of the documentation outlined highlights that the focus and guidance provided in all documents are largely on pupil outcomes with limited reference to support for staff. School culture and climate to a large extent is influenced by staff. The relationships between staff support the development of a positive school climate. A study conducted by Eldor and Shoshani (2016) highlighted that compassion shown to teachers by colleagues helped them to cope with work-related stress and maintain high levels of commitment and job satisfaction. Developing positive relationships leads to a more dynamic and productive staff with higher levels of resilience and less burnout (author). While everyone has a role to play in developing staff relationships, the leadership of the school is pivotal.

### ***Leadership and school climate***

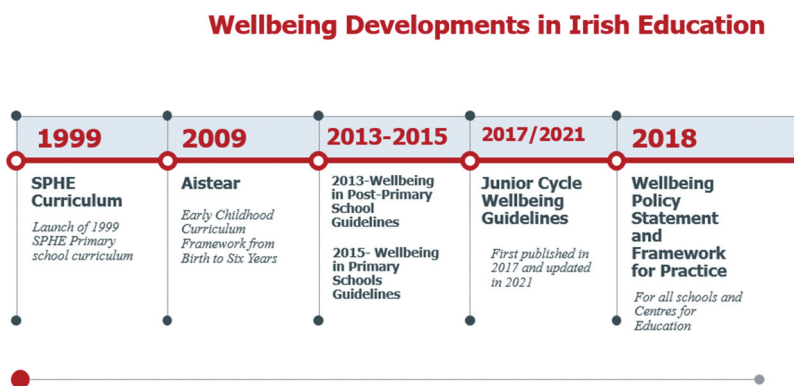
Educational leaders are individuals who aspire to influence other people's motivation, knowledge and practices to facilitate teaching and learning (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). While many forms of leadership exist within primary school settings in Ireland, the ultimate responsibility rests with the principal. Leadership in a school is central to so many aspects of school life and is considered paramount in the creation of a positive school culture and climate. School leadership behaviours are consistently acknowledged as a core factor in influencing school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2006; Sigurðardóttir & Sigbórsson, 2016), and have been linked to teachers' emotions (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017) and wellbeing (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018). Turan and Bektas (2013) advocate that the main task of a school principal in creating a positive atmosphere is to contribute to the creation of a strong school culture. This results in the school's formal and informal dimensions integrating with each other. As administrators, teachers and students take pride in the school they belong to,

this common sentiment provides cohesion and convergence amongst the school community.

Looking at *Our School 2016* and updated in 2022: *A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* is a self-evaluation framework that was developed to support schools in both evaluating and enhancing their work. There are two frameworks presented: a framework for teaching and learning and one for leadership and management. The four domains of the leadership and management framework include; Leading teaching and learning, Managing the organisation, Leading school development and Developing leadership capacity. The framework places a very strong emphasis on defining school leadership by its impact on learning. Across the four domains this is evident by reference to a ‘learning culture’ in the school and the establishment of an orderly, secure and healthy ‘learning’ environment. Furthermore, reference to the development of a vision for the school refers to expectations for the school as a ‘learning’ community (Department of Education, 2022). Undoubtedly, teaching and learning are the fulcrum of school life, however it can be argued that the framework neglects to fully consider the importance of the ethos of care and belonging that contributes in a fundamental way to the overall culture of school life. The wellbeing of the school community, particularly the school staff must be realised as a priority in practice. The primary focus of the research undertaken for this project was on teacher wellbeing, and through this focus, issues in relation to school culture and relationships emerged.

## Wellbeing

In Irish education as with other education systems internationally, the space and place of wellbeing has become more pronounced in recent years. Indeed, the Scottish framework for wellbeing (2014) has very much influenced developments in Ireland. The timeline in [Figure 1](#) below illustrates the numerous



**Figure 1.** Wellbeing developments in Irish Education.

developments in wellbeing in education, providing a vision for what wellbeing might be.

Despite the developments in education from early childhood to post-primary, a similar timeline could not be drawn for developments in teacher wellbeing. A review of the documents presented in Figure 11 demonstrates that there is little more than tokenistic reference to teacher wellbeing. The 2015 Wellbeing guidelines for primary schools (Department of Health and Department of Education) determine that it is 'crucial' that staff are supported in maintaining their personal health and wellbeing while the Junior Cycle Wellbeing guidelines (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2017, 2021) consider that by putting wellbeing on the school map, this creates opportunities for teachers to consider their own sense of wellbeing. Even though the guidelines have been recently updated, the section on teacher wellbeing remains unchanged from 2017. The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education & Skills, 2018) addresses teacher wellbeing in a generic manner through reference to the wellbeing of the whole school community, rather than specific reference and guidance for teachers themselves. The Teaching Council who are the professional standards body for the teaching profession have developed a framework for teachers' learning and continuous professional development; Cosán (Teaching Council, 2016). The framework captures wellbeing as one of six key 'learning areas' for teachers. While wellbeing is interpreted by the Teaching Council in broad terms, there is an acknowledgement of the importance of care of self so as to be able to care for others; 'teachers' well-being is vital if they are to effectively lead learning, and support and facilitate students in this endeavour" (Teaching Council, 2016, p. 18). The website has a dedicated section called 'Take Care of You' which provides a number of links to personal, professional and financial resources. In summary, schools have access to a number of websites and resources that may support different elements of teacher wellbeing and these are presented in the absence of a clear definition or framework for the area. In the absence of clarity on the issue, the research sought to investigate how teachers were affected by the pandemic and strategies they used to support their wellbeing.

### ***Teacher wellbeing***

Teacher wellbeing in the workplace is not easy to define. Teaching has been ranked as one of the highest in stress-related outcomes from a database of 26 occupations and the emotional involvement of teachers with their students is considered the primary explanation for such findings (Johnson et al., 2005). Song et al. (2020) contend that it is indeed a challenging endeavour to retain the heart, mind and effectiveness of teachers who work in an intellectually, emotionally and physically challenging

place called school. Teacher wellbeing has been positively linked to successful student outcomes, collegial support and positive school climate (Baumeister et al., 2003). A recent empirical study by Fox (2021) to define wellbeing produced a four-component definition with psychological and social elements. These four components include teacher efficacy (i.e. teachers' beliefs in their teaching abilities), teacher disposition (i.e. qualities and characteristics of the teacher), school connectedness (i.e. teachers' relationships with others in the school), and job specific stress (i.e. experiences that may hinder wellbeing when disproportionate to the three positive elements of teacher wellbeing).

In a study undertaken by Bower and Carroll (2017), wellbeing is conceptualised as a complex array of social, emotional and mental health factors that can be organised into two states: hedonistic and eudaimonic. In summary, hedonia is a state of feeling happy and satisfied with life. Hedonistic wellbeing for teachers may encompass finding enjoyable moments in teaching students. Some teachers may derive happiness from the personal or academic interactions they have with students. Positive emotional states such as a sense of confidence, safety or engagement may induce a sense of wellbeing for a teacher entering a classroom. In order for this to be effective, a teacher must be able to regulate and understand his/her emotions.

Eudaimonic wellbeing is concerned with having a purpose in life and reaching one's potential which may involve responding to a 'calling' in life or having meaningful connections with others. Some teachers do indeed believe that they have experienced a 'calling' to teaching. Deep and positive emotions can be experienced from a love of subject matter or from an experience where a teacher feels they have really exerted an influence over student learning. Teachers are motivated by the sense that they make a difference in children's lives and in society as a whole (Bakar et al., 2014). Such experiences affirm teacher efficacy. These two states have some overlap, both conceptually and statistically. Clearly teacher emotions are a core element of teacher wellbeing. Acton and Glasgow (2015) provide a definition of teacher wellbeing which recognises its hedonic, eudaimonic and relational aspects:

'Teacher wellbeing may be defined as an individual sense of personal professional fulfilment, satisfaction, purposefulness and happiness, constructed in a collaborative process with colleagues and students'. (Acton & Glasgow, 2015, p. 102)

Furthermore, this definition of wellbeing recognises that teachers' experience of wellbeing are formed in relation to their environments and interactions with others in the school space (Brady & Wilson, 2021). The current study undertaken with a number of primary school teachers and principals on the impact of COVID-19 on their wellbeing provides interesting insights into not only wellbeing, but other concerns emanating from the school community.

## ***The study***

This paper reports the findings of a mixed-methods study undertaken with Irish primary school principals and teachers. The overall aim of the study was to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on principal and teacher well-being. A mixed-methods longitudinal research methodology with a qualitative focus was undertaken to explore the impact of COVID-19 on teacher wellbeing. There were two phases of research undertaken as part of the study: phase one was undertaken in June and July 2020, while phase two was undertaken in December 2020 and January 2021. In phase one, primary school principals and teachers were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview to reflect on their experiences of education and schooling since schools were closed on NaN Invalid Date . Prior to completion of the interview, they were asked to complete two short questionnaires; The Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003) and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Milfont et al., 2007). These measures were intended to assess the impact of the pandemic on the teachers' and principals' perceptions of burnout and emotional regulation. The interviews themselves were conducted via Zoom and recorded on this platform as well as on a recording device used by the researcher. All interviews were undertaken on an individual basis. There were two researchers involved in conducting the interviews. One of the researchers conducted all of the interviews with principals, while the other researcher conducted all of the interviews with teachers. The teachers and principals selected were all working in different schools. The participants received a number of pieces of information via e mail in advance of the interview; including an information and consent sheet and the two questionnaire documents. In advance of the interviews, the consent form and questionnaires were completed and were returned to the research team. Following the completion of both phases of the interview, the transcribed interviews were returned to the participants to ensure member checking. There were no requests to change any of the data following this process. Ethical approval to undertake the study was granted by the university in which the lead researcher was working.

Convenience sampling was employed to engage teachers and principals in the research project, while ensuring that a range of both male and female teachers and principals, with varying years of experience and teaching and leading in a variety of school types, were engaged in the study. The research team contacted local education centers and principal and teacher networks to recruit participants. There was a very strong response rate with 90% of those contacted agreeing to participate in the study. In phase 2 of the research, the same participants were once more invited to participate in an interview to reflect on their experiences of returning to school since September 2020. Once again, the participants were invited to complete the two questionnaires so the results could be compared across

phase 1 and 2 of data collection. Table one and two below presents demographic details of the teachers and principals involved in the study. In total 12 teachers and 10 principals participated in phase one of the study. In phase 2 of data collection, 11 teachers and nine principals participated in the study. One principal was on sick leave from school, while one teacher had not returned to school due to an underlying health condition. The overall aim of the study was to provide an opportunity for both principals and teachers to reflect on how the pandemic impacted on their wellbeing and by inference, emerging issues in the school community as a result of the pandemic.

### ***Participants and settings***

Ten principals and 12 teachers from across Ireland volunteered and agreed to participate in this study (16 women and 6 men). Their ages ranged from 22 to 60 years ( $M=42.45$ ;  $SD\ 9.40$ ). Of the total 22 participants, four principals and two teachers were employed in rural schools including two multid denominational schools, while the remainder were employed in urban schools, including two that were non-denominational. The majority of the participants (18/22) were employed in Catholic schools. In Ireland 88% of all primary schools are under catholic denomination. There were no significant differences associated with any of these demographic variables, which are presented in [Table 1](#) and [2](#). Acknowledging that the sample size was small, both in sample-size and

**Table 1.** Demographic details of teachers involved in the study.

Name	Sex	Role	Years of experience	School Type
Teacher 1 (T1)	Female	Special Education Teacher (SET)	10	Large Roman Catholic Urban School
Teacher 2 (T2)	Female	SET	20	Large Roman Catholic Urban School
Teacher 3 (T3)	Female	SET teacher	20	Large Roman Catholic Urban DEIS school
Teacher 4 (T4)	Male	Mainstream Class Teacher	8	Large Roman Catholic Urban DEIS school
Teacher 5 (T5)	Female	Mainstream class teacher	20 years plus	Small multi denominational school
Teacher 6 (T6)	Male	Mainstream class teacher	10 years plus	Large Roman Catholic Rural school
Teacher 7 (T7)	Female	Mainstream class teacher	20 years plus	Large Roman Catholic Rural school
Teacher 8 (T8)	Female	Mainstream class teacher	1 year	Large All Girls Roman Catholic Urban school
Teacher 9 (T9)	Female	Mainstream class teacher and Deputy Principal	25 years	Large Roman Catholic Rural school
Teacher 10 (T10)	Male	Mainstream class teacher	40 years	Roman Catholic Rural school
Teacher 11 (T11)	Female	Mainstream class teacher	25 years	Urban Gaelscoil
Teacher 12 (T12)	Female	Mainstream class teacher	15 years	Large Roman Catholic rural school

**Table 2.** Demographic details of principals involved in the study.

Name	Sex	Years of experience as Principal	School Type
Principal 1 (P1)	Male	3 years	Church of Ireland rural school
Principal 2 (P2)	Female	5 years	Small co-educational catholic rural school
Principal 3 (P3)	Female	9 years	Large urban co-educational catholic school
Principal 4 (P4)	Female	4 years	Developing Gaelscoil with pupils up to second class
Principal 5 (P5)	Female	7 years	Large Urban Educate Together school
Principal 6 (P6)	Male	9 years	Small co-educational catholic rural school
Principal 7 (P7)	Male	16 years	Large urban co-educational catholic school
Principal 8 (P8)	Female	15 years	Small rural co-educational catholic school
Principal 9 (P9)	Female	5 years plus 7 years in another school	Catholic urban co-educational senior school
Principal 10 (P10)	Male	1 year	Urban Educate Together co-educational school

demographics of participants, the findings are reflective of the ‘lived experience’ of the participants at the time and may reflect experiences of the wider educational community.

### Methodology and data analysis

While this research study collected both qualitative and quantitative data in the context of related literature on teacher and principal wellbeing and teacher emotional regulation strategies, given that the focus of this paper is on teacher wellbeing and the emerging issues within school communities in relation to school culture and climate, the data reported upon is the qualitative data from phase 1 and 2 of the interviews. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the qualitative interview data. Specifically, IPA is a qualitative approach developed in particular within the field of psychology (Smith, 2004) and it contends that ‘human beings are not passive perceivers of an objective reality, but rather that they come to interpret and understand the world by formulating their own biographical stories into a form that makes sense to them’ (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p. 88). The participant’s ‘lived experience’ is coupled with a subjective and reflective process of interpretation, in which the analyst explicitly enters the research process (Reid et al., 2005). The analysis involves a five-stage process that was detailed by Smith and Osborn (2003). The stages are: 1) Looking for themes in the first place, 2) Looking for connections 3) Developing a table of themes, 4) Continuing the analysis with other cases and 5) Developing a master list of themes for the group.

**Table 3.** Relevant themes and sub-themes from phase 1 and 2 of data.

Themes	Subthemes
Emerging Issues within the School Community (Phase 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Relationships</li> <li>● Communication and Support</li> <li>● The Digital Divide</li> </ul>
Emerging Issues within the School Community (Phase 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Relationships</li> <li>● PrioritiesSilver Linings</li> </ul>

This process was applied to both phase 1 and phase 2 of qualitative data analysis. The themes and subthemes that are relevant to this research are presented below emerged from both phases of analysis are presented in Table 3 below.

### ***Emerging issues within the school community***

The main theme that is reported upon in this research paper is ‘Emerging Issues within the School Community’. This theme emerged from the data in phases 1 and 2. The sub-themes relating to the overall theme vary from stage 1 to stage 2 of data collection and the sub-themes of ‘priorities’ and ‘silver linings’ from phase 2 are not relevant to this paper. Excerpts from the discussions are given to provide a true picture of participants responses, and to present them contextually and as authentically as possible.

### ***Emerging issues in relation to relationships***

The sub-theme of relationships spans across both phase 1 and phase 2 of data collection. Relationships have a huge impact on the culture and climate of a school. In phase 1, analysis of the principal’s responses highlight how they focused on their relationships with staff and with the wider school community and how these relationships were managed:

Staff wise it was a very difficult few weeks for me, I was, I probably felt a certain obligation to touch base with my staff every day, 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 . . . I had never been friends with my staff on that level, I have never discussed their personal lives and I have always made a point to keep my personal life personal (P6, phase 1)

The parents, when I ring them, they won’t let me off the phone, everyone is in lockdown and no one has seen anyone so to hear another adult, I felt like I was more there for the parents than the children (P4, phase 1).

We had staff meetings . . . but we would also have a cup of tea and a chat, we talked a bit about school but we would also have a cup of tea and a chat about how we were getting on, how were our kids, all that sort of thing . . . I would text them as well just to

see how they were doing; I just kind of you know, I didn't, it wasn't always about school, you know, it was about having a chat kind of thing (P8, phase 1).

While principals reflected on relationship across the school's community, the teacher responses in relation to relationships focused mainly on staff relationships:

What caused the most destruction in our school was in terms of, 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, they would, it's going to come out with parents and so on (T1, phase 1)

It was clear that some staff members were conscious of the wellbeing of colleagues and reached out to them as they felt necessary. This is exemplified by T2, a senior teacher with a post of responsibility:

What I do is looking at people's faces and in the large staff meeting, 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 (T2, phase 1)?

Some teachers were also of the opinion that the principal was bombarded with varying responsibilities while teachers were not:

What I feel is that the principal is working harder than ever, while the rest of us are not (T12, phase 1).

Another teacher felt it was difficult to provide appropriate support in the absence of the physical relationship and the caring school culture:

I wouldn't want to start asking questions that would be seen as intrusive, I would wait for somebody to come to me. But maybe if we were in school you would read that in somebody so I think it's a different type of support now. It's not an emotional support, it's a work support if that makes sense. (T5, phase 1).

Looking at both the Principal's and teacher's data from phase 1, it is clear that there was a significant impact on relationships as a result of the pandemic: principals certainly found feeling responsible for all relationship types including those with the school staff and the parent body and principals also found themselves in positions where they had check on the personal wellbeing of staff members more than they usually would. The management of relationships was both stressful and time consuming for principals and this was all taking place in the absence of the supportive atmosphere of the school. Teachers were able to reflect on the impact of online communication on staff relationships and also felt that it compromised the type of support they might provide to colleagues where there was more opportunity to be a confidant if required.

Phase 2 of the data enabled both principals and teachers to reflect on relationships now that staff were returned to work in the school building. The aftermath of the pandemic and the consciousness in relation to social

distancing continued to impact on relationships and the prevailing school atmosphere. Guidance issued by the Department of Education in August 2021 encouraged both pupils and staff to be structured into class 'bubbles' or 'pods' which essentially meant small groupings of staff working and taking breaks together; 'To the greatest extent possible, pupils and teaching staff should consistently be in the same Class Bubbles (Department of Education, 2021, p. 16)'. Naturally, this had an impact on the organisation of break times and normal socialisation between staff members in a school. Principals felt that they were not engaging with either children or staff in a way that they normally would:

I'm not as present in classes as I would have been in the past . . . . The staff don't get to socialize with the big group any longer. That of course has a knock-on effect on people's mood and that kind of thing. There is a lack of that emotional connection that's really difficult to create in these circumstances you know (P10, phase 2).

Indeed, this ultimately was impacting in a significant way on the school culture and climate, with many principals feeling the positive culture they had built was being eroded. It is clear that leading the school in circumstances where the school climate and atmosphere were impacted by physical constraints placed a toll on the principals as exemplified by P.10:

I suppose from a leadership point of view, what I've massively found difficult is not having in-person staff meetings like we would have before because they're online now and it's not the same. The connection isn't the same. The personal element isn't the same and I think people are maybe even sharper when you're online in that online space because it's hard to get the emotion, the empathy that you might have if you were in the physical space. (p10, phase 2)

Analysis of the teacher responses in phase 2 highlighted that collectively the respondents missed the normal engagements with staff that were restricted by pods and bubbles, once again impacting in a very significant way on the normal culture and atmosphere in the school:

What I really miss is the people you're less close to, the camaraderie. Like someone you bump into in the staffroom, you're having a cup of tea with and you get chatting to or the fun you have by sitting down with someone you haven't seen in a while. That I massively miss. And the collective laughter you have, that's completely eliminated and I feel that a lot of people deeply feel that in my school (T6, phase 2).

Teachers felt that there was a divide in staff as a result of the requirements in relation to physical distancing which had an impact on relationships:

Like, we're very divided, do you know what I mean? See, I see the same people just for little break. So, there's people I haven't seen haven't spoken to at all. There's no Christmas party. There's no bit of craic together. (T4, phase 2)

What is evidently clear from the data across both phases of research is that Covid and the ongoing preventative measure to limit its spread once schools reopened took its toll on relationships and on the culture that had been built

over time in a school; there was an impact on relationships between management and staff, relationships between staff members themselves and relationships between the school and the wider school community. The data presents a clear picture that the negotiation of relationships in a virtual environment with the absence of physical connectedness was challenging and impacted on the joy of going to work every day.

### ***Communication, support and the digital divide***

In phase one of the data collection the themes of 'Communication and Support' and the 'Digital Divide' were further emerging issues that were identified as schools operated virtually. Initially schools were informed that they were closing up until the Easter break and when it became obvious that school buildings were going to remain closed, communication between staff and more especially with families and pupils became a pressing issue, none of which had been discussed given the immediacy with which schools closed on NaN Invalid Date . Communication was certainly a challenge for the teachers from feeling bombarded by all of the communications coming their way to not being sure how or when or what to communicate with parents and pupils:

I suppose, it took us a while to from our school approach, so internally, that was frustrating (T8, phase 1)

Personal circumstances in Principal's lives also impacted on communication:

No, we haven't had any whole school staff meetings or zoom calls or anything like that. My principal's father passed away two weeks ago, he was dealing with all of that at home as well. You know, it's just, there's so much going on in people's personal lives, you don't know where they are. (T6, phase 1)

Teachers' own personal circumstances seemed to impact on the 'how' and 'when' teachers could communicate and support families, particularly for those teachers who had small children at home; it became clear that there were differing opinions on acceptable levels of communication as illustrated by T12:

Well from the outset the principal set out this is what we're doing. Everybody needs to do it this way because if one does it a different way, our parents around the local town, they all know each other, they all talk to each other, so we are taking a unified approach. Like some teachers were saying, I think we should be doing more but then, there are other teachers, who can, like myself, with small kids and that, who can literally only do the bare minimum. (T12, phase 1)

The principals' reflections on communication focused on trying to get a cohesive approach to making contact with parents and pupils across the staff:

I had offered parents communication to the school via the school e mail, what they actually wanted was communication with the teachers in particular and between the teachers and their children . . . then we opened up our Aladdin noticeboard around the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> week of lockdown and I did get a bit of backlash from the teachers because they were fearful of what they would receive, they didn't necessarily have the head-space at that point to deal with parents issues and children issues but obviously we have a professional duty, we are paid during lockdown, and I kind of insisted that they open up communication this way. (P. 4, phase 1)

Many of the principals were animated about the number of communications they received from the Department and Teacher and Principal unions and the timings of some of the communications were not appreciated:

So the first two weeks I won't lie, they were insane. I feel we were being bombarded left, right and centre with these e mails coming in. I felt I was stuck to my email trying to make sense of, you know you had the Irish Primary Principals Network, you had the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, you had, it was just trying to get to grips with all of the information coming in. (P.10, phase 1)

The response from the Principals would indicate this would have a lasting effect in terms of their relationships with their Union and Principal networks. Principals were also conscious of how much communication was appropriate so that families also did not feel bombarded:

And I got this e mail from a parent who had, both himself and the wife had lost their jobs and he just said you are sending too many e mails, back off (P.9, phase 1)

The resources available to families was also another factor that schools and principals had to consider as exemplified by P7:

You know the other thing, some houses don't have IT. One of the parents actually contacted the teacher to say that they're finding it really difficult because the child is using the mother's phone for all the class work and the screen is broken. So imagine trying to work. And there are families who have three or four children but they have only one tablet. And if they are in secondary school they have to get the tablet. So the others can't access things. (P7, phase 1)

Indeed, this is an example of cultural dissonance as a school that normally treats everybody equally became aware of inequality in terms of access to learning by pupils during lockdown. The factors that school leaders and teachers had to deal with in relation to communication and support were many as is illustrated by the data but the consideration of personal circumstances for all members of the school community required emotional responses to situations as well as solution focused responses to developing a system of support for teaching and learning to pupils. It is very evident that teachers were responsive to the demands on parents as they navigated their way through Covid with many other competing demands. The method of support and availability of the teacher to pupils was not an easy space to negotiate given the differing

expectations of staff personnel combined with personal circumstances. The principal had to consider this in terms of agreeing a strategy for communication and support to parents and also the circumstances of parents' lives, their access to IT devices and awareness of the harsh reality of living through a pandemic, which culminated in many complexities for consideration when trying to develop an appropriate response. In the midst of all of these considerations principals and teachers were intent on ensuring that the culture and climate of the school prevailed in the online space which was not an easy task.

The 'digital divide' between staff became a real issue of contention as it became apparent that schools were not going to re-open after the Easter holiday as originally had been proposed. T2 reflects the divide between staff in many primary schools:

When there is a large staff there is always going to be a divide, there are some with zero technology expertise and I really felt for them because it is a huge learning curve, for other people it's not so bad because we have been using technology in different ways over the years. Overall, in my experience the engagement with parents and kids was far less stressful than engaging with the staff. (T2, phase 1)

Some teachers also reflected on the fact that they worked off their own initiative in developing resources to support pupils learning but this was met with a mixed reaction by other staff:

I know some teachers were stressing when they heard I was doing videos for Maths because they didn't know how to do that and they were kind of worried what the parents would think if the 6<sup>th</sup> class teacher is doing videos and they're not able to. (T6, phase 1)

The reflection from one teacher who found the use of technology challenging indicated that she felt her teaching skills were in question:

In the classroom you are the expert; in terms of content, methodology, learning strategies, you have it at your fingertips ... but all of a sudden that's cut from you and all of a sudden you are in a totally different landscape and despite all of your years of experience you are learning from almost the beginning in terms of technology and zooming and see-saw and all of this (T3, phase 1).

Principals' had a very challenging role in negotiating this divide between staff and agreeing protocols with staff. One principal found her personal safety became a concern:

My suggestion for the staff was, would we start off by sending a video or two a week to the children. Some of my teachers were concerned about putting their faces on a webcam or a video and it became the most difficult thing to overcome during the whole process. It got quite personal between some of my staff members and me. One of my staff member's partners was threatening me. (P7, phase 1)

Another principal who agreed that the effort and workload put in by her staff was 'extraordinary' found that challenges emerged in terms of staff confidence

from highly competent teachers who were concerned about how they might appear in a public setting:

You know, I had two very difficult conversations with staff in order to get them on board with this. Through the process, it was pretty much counsellor role I ended up in then ... we had to talk through fears, concerns. One member presented very, very defensively which was unusual because she is on top of her game and she didn't want to be perceived by other staff or parents as not being able to be on top of the game. So that was difficult because I have a really good rapport with staff. (P2, phase 1)

Navigating a new method of 'teaching' and communication with pupils that had to be agreed via technology of some method proved complex; complex because of the skill level among the staff; the competing demands of teachers' time, the varying opinions of staff members and fundamentally the fear of change and of potential reputational damage proved to be more challenging negotiations than the engagement with technology itself. It is clear from the data that these experiences have impacted on relationships in the short and medium term. What is less obvious is the impact that this may have on school culture and climate in a post-Covid world. Teachers and leaders' experiences of feeling under pressure, inadequate and indeed frustrated by other staff members lack of engagement in IT is very much a teacher wellbeing issue.

## Discussion

Had principals and teachers been asked in the months leading into the pandemic how a school might operate if the school itself were forced to close its doors, they could not have imagined how schools reimaged themselves to provide a service of teaching, learning and communication to its community as it did. Schools responded in extraordinary ways to respond to the needs of their community, and in so many cases remained as it always did, at the heart of the community. However, the impact was real in terms of principal and teacher wellbeing as illustrated through the research findings. It impacted on work/life balance, on life outside of school and most especially on social engagements and interactions which are central to the enjoyment of teaching and learning.

As the research findings of this study have clearly highlighted, school culture and climate is pervasive and is also considered tangible but what has emerged clearly from this study is that the pivot to online teaching and learning and the absence of support and comradery in the school environment took its toll on the positive school culture and climate that is intrinsic to school life, and this in turn impacted on teacher wellbeing. Both school leaders and teachers experienced the lack of emotional support from colleagues and the wider school community by not working together in a physical space. As the work of Eldor and Shoshani (2016) has highlighted compassion enables higher levels of job satisfaction and as the research participants have reported- it was hard to be

compassionate and provide support without a real awareness of personal circumstances in colleagues lives. While this is a small-scale study, it is likely that these findings are a microcosm of what was reflected across the teaching community.

Leadership in a school at any time is a challenging role but as the research findings have highlighted leading a school community through a pandemic was especially demanding. The ideal of Turan and Bektas (2013) in developing a strong school culture was beyond a demanding task during the pandemic and indeed on the return to school as they operated in pods and bubbles. It is clear from the data findings that this did take its toll on principals and their overarching concern was for the wellbeing of their school community, in particular, the staff.

The four-component definition of wellbeing by Fox (2021) includes both teacher efficacy and job specific stress as components of teacher wellbeing. It is likely that the pivot to online teaching impacted on teacher efficacy; perhaps positively in some cases but negatively for many competent teachers with years of experience. This then became a 'job specific stress' which again is a further component which impacts on teacher wellbeing. As well as the engagement with the technology itself impacting on wellbeing, the whole-school approach to teaching online did seem to impact on relationships across the school; teachers felt this via staff online engagements and principals certainly felt it. In some cases, the lines between professional and personal lives became blurred with one principal reporting the impact on personal space. Given that teachers and school leaders were catapulted into an online teaching space with no preparation for same, it is perhaps unavoidable that there would be some stress associated with the transition, however this does have the potential to impact on relationships and the overall school culture and climate as school return to 'normal' functioning. At the time of data collection in phase 2, schools were operating in 'pods' and 'bubbles' and this continued to impact on the relationships and sense of unity across a staff so it was not possible to ascertain the impact of the pandemic on staff relationships overall. What this emphasized more than anything is that relationships are at the heart of teaching. This again relates to the work of Fox (2021) in that connectedness is an essential element of teacher wellbeing.

The definition of teacher wellbeing presented by Acton and Glasgow (2015) encompasses hedonic, eudaimonic and relational aspects of wellbeing, however the individual sense of fulfilment, purpose and happiness is reliant on a collaborative process with students and colleagues. The pandemic appears to have impacted on these collaborations and in many ways the soul of a school; its laughter, its fun and the sense of belonging is absent. This absence is likely felt by the whole school community but especially by the teachers and the most positive elements of work that in turn support wellbeing are the elements that really do matter so much!

## Conclusion

The World Health Organization considers that at this time we appear to be in a phase of transition in relation to Covid 19. At this time of transition many other issues are a cause for concern; not least the cost of living, the global energy crisis, the war in Ukraine and the hunger crisis. Teacher wellbeing really matters; it supports positive student outcomes, positive school relationships and enables teacher efficacy. The nourishment of relationships across the school community should be a priority for schools and for the Department of Education – more often the focus is on pupil wellbeing. Post-pandemic support for teacher wellbeing should be the priority presently. Based on the findings of this study, there is an urgent need to provide in-school models of support to acknowledge the recent past and enable school staff to move forward in a positive way. While there are limitations to this study including the small sample size and the study being restricted to primary schools only, schools need to be provided with tools for capturing where they are at in relation to school culture and climate and for being enabled to set goals for moving forward in a positive way.

## Disclosure statement

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