

Chapter 12

The Impact of COVID-19 on Educational Leader Wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 outbreak resulted in higher anxiety levels, in which cyberchondria played a significant role. However, little is known about the factors that helped individuals maintain their wellbeing amid the pandemic. The current chapter presents selected results from three surveys carried out with school leaders in Ireland in relation to their source of stress, and factors that helped them cope with the COVID-19 crisis. The first survey took place a week after the COVID-19-related school closure (study 1, N = 2,864). The second survey took place two months after the school closure (study 2, N = 939). The third survey took place three months after the school re-opening (study 3, N = 861). Participants were asked about their source of stress and the actions they took to maintain wellbeing. Similarities and differences were identified across all three samples using thematic analysis. Unique factors associated with specific stages of the pandemic were identified. This chapter discusses implications in relation to the policy and practice of school leaders during the school closure.

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic heralded a dramatic shift in education worldwide. Overnight, all school activities were channelled remotely to maintain teaching and learning for their students (Department of Education, 2020). Navigating through the pandemic was for many of them as challenging as “*doing a cryptic crossword puzzle without clues*” (Respondent T1). In the largest experiment ever conducted in distance education (Gouëdard et al., 2020), school leaders became the boundary spanners, the main interpreters, and conduits of recommendations from both the Department of Health and the Department of Education, in addition to other stakeholders.

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Boundary spanners are individuals who communicate and coordinate activities within organisations such as schools, which incorporate a multitude of perspectives and contexts (Schotter et al., 2017). During the pandemic, when physical distancing prevented people from perspicuous sharing of tacit knowledge, the role of boundary spanners became particularly important, as they gathered information from external agencies and filtered it down to their inner groups (Schotter, 2021). School leaders have arguably always occupied a role of boundary spanners for their school communities, in terms of educational concerns. However, in 2020, they also took on a new role in navigating their school community through the maze of the health and safety guidelines spewing out of the Internet, media, and formal communication from the government.

School leaders' roles were particularly challenging given that they specialised in education, not healthcare. They were forced by the circumstances to become diagnosticians, deciding what child, class, or teacher should be sent home with coronavirus symptoms, health and safety officers setting up and enforcing health guidelines in the schools, not to mention the need to work during the pandemic as essential workers who were exposed to higher infection risk, which resulted in many of them experiencing health-anxiety (Dempsey & Burke, 2020, 2021; Santamaría, Mondragon, Santxo, & Ozamiz-Etxebarria, 2021).

The challenges arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, however, were not confined to education. They were presented across all sectors as the most recent “wicked” problem that societies were forced to tackle (Horst & Melvin, 1973) (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wicked problems are problems that are not easily solved, such as healthcare or environmental actions, which require collaboration between multiple agencies to address (Williams, 2012). The Covid-19 pandemic is one such problem, as it crossed many boundaries from organisational boundaries (for example, World Health Organisation (WHO), European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), National Public Health Emergency Team for COVID-19 (NPHET)), professional boundaries (Research teams working on vaccines, medical personnel and so on), sectoral boundaries (health, education, social welfare), generational boundaries (older generation most impacted in early days of pandemic), and individual boundaries (no-one escaped the impact of the pandemic). School leaders recognised that the need for collaboration was never more important, and schools proved to be agile in response to the pandemic.

In the Republic of Ireland, teaching, learning, and assessment moved online from March to June 2020. Face-to-face teaching was reinstated between September 2020 and December 2020, and then the schools closed their door to students once again from January 2021 until April 2021. The school closures in Ireland were one of the longest in Europe as they amounted to up to 163 days¹ for some students (UNESCO, 2021). During this time of flux the school leaders took on the role of interpreters and conduits between their school community and the various bodies, providing their pupils, teachers, and parents with health advice.

The existing digital divide in Ireland, coupled with the lack of resources, training, and hardware in schools, as well as homes, highlighted the educational inequalities and made the situation even more demanding for school leaders (Gouëdard et al., 2020; Mohan et al., 2020). Despite the lack of stable and unified technological infrastructure, school personnel found alternative methods to communicate with their students, such as sending them emails, or providing them with hard copies of work (Burke & Dempsey, 2020; INTO, 2020). As resourceful as their actions were, the relentless pressures associated with managing their schools remotely and the accompanying demands of leading virtual teams took a toll on school leaders' wellbeing (Burke & Dempsey, 2020; Dempsey & Burke, 2020). Leaders reached the apex of their stress levels with as many as 8 out of 10 reporting experiencing “a lot” of perceived

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