Wellbeing in Post-Covid Schools: Primary school leaders' Reimagining of the Future

A previous e-scéal in May 2021, an overview of this research by Dr Jolanta Burke and Dr Majella Dempsey was provided with a focus on the *Executive Summary* and *Conclusions*.
This week Chapter 2 outlines Leaders' Pressures.

Chapter 2 - Leaders' Pressures

a. *Role Complexity*

To best understand what changes need to be made in primary school leaders' role to ensure leadership sustainability and provide leaders with the necessary time to rebuild their school community post-Covid, we first reviewed how many hours a week leaders usually work and how much of that time they spend teaching. We then delve deeper into the complexities of leaders' daily tasks.

a. Hours of work

96% of principals work usually over 36 hours. Specifically, 21% work 36-40 hours, 44% work 41-50 hours and 30% work over 50 hours a week. The remainder work 35 hours and less.

A larger number of administrative leaders work over 40 hours compared to the teaching leaders. Specifically, 48% of administrative leaders work 41-50 hours a week, compared with 40% of teaching leaders. Also, 33% of administrative leaders work over 50 hours a week, compared with 26% of teaching leaders.

b. Teaching

Whilst the majority of administrative leaders (52%) did not report any teaching/contact hours, almost 4 out of 10 (37%) teach 1-4 hours a week, 1 out of 10 teach 5-10 hours a week and 1 % teach 11-20 hours. Of the teaching leaders, 7 out of 10 (74%) teach 21+ hours, 2 out of 10 (18%) teach 11-20 hours, and the remainder (7%) teach less than 10 hours.

c. Daily tasks

The impact that daily tasks have on leaders during the school year was assessed using a series of questions relating to 27 tasks relating to Administration, System, Personal, Inter-personal, and Covid-19.

Of the 27 tasks (page 31) the five tasks that had the highest impact on leaders were:

1. Covid-related safety measures
2. Time pressures
3. Ensuring all DE guidelines are followed
4. Late night/Friday communications from DE
5. Procurement.

The three **Administrative** tasks that had the highest impact on leaders during the school year were:

- Ensuring all DE guidelines are followed

- Late night/Friday communication from DE
- Interpreting DE guidelines.

Of the two **System** tasks, system problems, such as Wi-Fi connectivity issues, phone had a higher impact on leaders than noise/lack of suitable office space.

The two **Personal** hassles that had the greatest impact on leaders were:

1. Time pressure
2. Continuous interruptions.

The three **Interpersonal** tasks that had the most significant impact on leaders during the school year are:

1. Ensuring team building in the midst of social distancing restrictions
2. Communicating with parents
3. HR issues.

In terms of other daily tasks, as one leader put it "Schools have become everything to everyone" and by default this means the leader has become everything to everyone. The following are the key categories:

- Teaching, learning and curriculum
- Special Educational Needs
- Other administrative tasks - Finance, HR, procurement, requests for information
- Structural tasks - building works - capital, emergency and minor, maintenance, managing caretaking/cleaning
- Managing expectations and communications from the DE and other agencies.

The complexity of the leader's role, both principal and deputy principal, in primary school has resulted in many extra tasks that they deal with on a daily and weekly basis. Appendix B provide an overview of the different agencies that they deal with as mentioned by the respondents.

From the data, there are many comments on the need to provide emotional support to children, teachers and parents and that this exerts a personal toll on leaders' own wellbeing. In addition, the need to teach while leading. This came up in the previous reports also, however, in these data it is described in more personal terms and linked to the leadership role. The need to teach and lead is having a personal toll on leaders. It is certainly an area that adds to the daily stress of the leaders. This applies to both the principal and the deputy principals who responded to this questionnaire.

d. The impact of Covid-19 on leaders

A total of 583 participants (68%) reported that the pandemic affected their wellbeing a lot; further 215 participants (25%) reported it affected them moderately; and 63 participants (7%) claimed it affected their wellbeing only a little (Figure 12). Therefore, the findings indicate that Covid-19 pandemic took a toll on many leaders' wellbeing.

As would be expected Covid-19 has brought a lot of additional tasks for the leaders to implement and ensure that all guidelines are being met. In qualitative responses the following main themes emerged.

- **Covid - 19 related HR issues** - There was an increase in staff absenteeism during Covid-19 pandemic due to the need to isolate if you were a close contact or if you suspected you had Covid-19. This added to leaders work in securing cover for classes and in many cases leaders

reported that they had to step in a take classes. They also found themselves acting as interpreter for HSE and DE guidelines.

- **Implementing Covid -19 protocols**, including cleaning, supervision, managing entry and egress of students and HR related issues due to teachers and SNAs being out sick or as close contacts.
- **Additional tasks around entry and egress of children** - This added task is making taking a break almost impossible for leaders.
- **Increased supervision for the leader** - There is a need to look at how supervision rota are organised so that all staff get a break from children during the day.
- **Increased stress among parents** - The social supportive role needed at this time is taking its toll on leaders.

The tasks that leaders had to take on during the last school year in order to keep schools open has taken a toll on their wellbeing and made a busy role even busier with many additional administrative, social and emotional demands on their time. The need for structured support for schools to ensure that all staff can take a break away from children at some point during the day is important.

e. Areas that could be centralised

In order to help leaders to find more time so that they can focus on enhancing the wellbeing of their school community post-Covid, we asked leaders to identify tasks which according to them could be centralised. The main four that emerged related to:

1. centralising building works
2. hiring, paying and sourcing staff
3. policy development
4. managing special educational needs provision.

Additional suggestions for centralisation can be found in Table 10 on pages 47-49.

Many people mentioned the need to put secretaries and caretakers on the DE payroll. In describing the different tasks that could be centralised the leaders give an insight into the complexity of their role and how it could be supported.

f. Summary

In this section, we reviewed leaders' daily pressures. We identified that the vast majority of leaders work overtime, as they are unable to cope with the demands of their daily work. The daily tasks that have the highest impact on them are Covid-related safety measures, general time pressures, ensuring all DE guidelines are followed, late night/Friday communications from DE and procurement. Some of the tasks are not possible to eliminate, however there are a number of leaders' daily responsibilities that can centralised. The two main ones that leaders have mentioned are building works and arranging substitute teachers. Alleviating some of the pressures from leaders' daily work will provide them with extra time to focus on the priorities of ensuring quality teaching and learning and school community's wellbeing post-Covid.

Access the Report
The full report is available here: http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/14412/