TITLE

What are primary school teachers' views on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on primary school children?

Marino Institute of Education

Student Name: Brónach Gilroy

Word Count: 11,000 words

Supervisor: Dr Fintan McCutcheon

Submission Date: 09/05/2022

Declaration of Authenticity

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme leading to the award of the degree of Professional Master of Education, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I further declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this Institute and any other Institution or University. I agree that the Marino Institute of Education library may lend or copy the thesis, in hard or soft copy, upon request.

Printed name: Brónach Gilroy

Date 06/05/22

In accordance with the *Copyright and Related Rights Act, 2000 and S.I. 427 of 2000* I hereby give permission to the Marino Institute of Education to make available, at their discretion, for consultation, inter-library lending or copying the thesis detailed above. I agree that the Marino Institute of Education may deposit the thesis detailed above in the Institutional Repository managed by the Library and or in *Tara,* the Institutional Repository managed by Trinity College and if appropriate into *Arts and Culture in Education Research Repository* (ACERR). I confirm that the electronic copy consists of one PDF file mirroring the hardbound copy. I understand that the metadata (title, author, abstract, keywords) pertaining to all theses, including those under embargo, will be made available in the MIE Institutional Repository and *Tara,* on the Library catalogue and in any list of theses published by the Institute or to which the Institute may decide to contribute.

De réir an *Copyright and Related Rights Act, 2000 agus Ionstraim Reachtúil 427 de 2000,* tugaim leis seo cead d'Institiúid Oideachais Marino an tráchtas thuasluaite a chur ar fáil, faoina rogha féin, don bhreathnú, d'iasachtaí idir-leabharlainne nó do chóipeáil. Aontaím gur féidir le hInstitiúid Oideachais Marino an tráchtas thuasluaite a chur sa Stór Institiúideach a ndéanann an Leabharlann bainistíocht air, nó i gCartlann Taighde Choláiste na Tríonóide (TARA), an Stór Institiúideach a ndéanann Coláiste na Tríonóide bainistíocht air, agus más cuí, an tráchtas a chur i Stór an Taighde ar na hEalaíona agus ar an gCultúr san oideachas, nó ACERR mar is fearr aithne air sa Bhéarla. Deimhním gur comhad PDF amháin atá sa chóip leictreonach macasamhail na cóipe faoi chumhdach crua. Tuigim go mbeidh na meiteashonraí (teideal, údar, achoimre, eochairfhocail) a bhaineann leis na tráchtais ar fad, lena n-áirítear cinn faoi lánchosc, go mbeidh na meiteashonraí sin ar fáil sa Stór Institiúideach de chuid Institiúid Oideachais Marino agus TARA, ar chatalóg na Leabharlainne, agus in aon liosta tráchtas a fhoilsíonn an Institiúid nó ar liosta a gcuireann an Institiúid leis.

http://www.achtanna.ie/result.html?q_phrase=Copyright+and+Related+Rights+Act%2C+2000+&hits_per_page=25&button=Search

Abstract

This dissertation investigates primary school teachers' views on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on primary school children. The first point of research in this study is to highlight social and emotional issues in children, and how they can affect their day-to-day lives, particularly in the classroom. Following on from this, the correlation between a global pandemic and the prevalence of such issues is explored, focusing on the role of the COVID-19 pandemic. With an abundance of literature on children's well-being and its place in the primary school classroom, teachers' perspectives on this are explored. The final aim of this paper is to investigate the availability of various resources and supports in primary schools, and if present how they are used. Empirical research is used in this study in the exploration of these aims, with semi-structured interviews with primary school teachers.

The research data finds that teachers see a distressing prevalence in social and emotional issues among children post-COVID-19. Teachers see a significant negative impact on children's standards of attainment, which has occurred hand-in-hand with children facing emotional issues. The paper also documents an internationally-reported phenomenon of extreme demotivation in children with regard to school. Overall, this research highlights some of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on primary school children and the unquestionable need for increased resources and support being made available in primary schools.

Acknowledgements

Through the process of this Masters degree, I have faced unexpected challenges on both a professional and personal level. I would not have gotten through the challenging course and other circumstances without the amazing support system which I have had to rely on. I have the most sincere gratitude to each and every one of you.

First of all, I would like to express my sincere and eternal gratitude to my dissertation supervisor, Dr Fintan McCutcheon. The guidance, support and encouragement I have received over the course of this year has been invaluable. A task which I thought would be unimaginable and impossible to achieve successfully, was made manageable and also enjoyable with the support of my supervisor. I am eternally grateful to Fintan for this support and guidance.

I would also like to thank Dr Clíodhna Martin for her guidance and advice upon beginning this process. As a latecomer to the module, I received invaluable support in catching up with the timeline proposed and followed by my peers. This stressful period was made a lot easier with Clíodhna's support. Along with Dr Clíodhna Martin, Dr Rory McDaid was an immense source of guidance and advice when beginning this module. Dr McDaid kindly allowed my attendance of his lectures with a separate cohort of students. The extra guidance and support received from both Dr Rory Mc Daid and Dr Clíodhna Martin made my commencement of this overwhelming time a comfortable and supportive one.

Additionally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my interview participants, without whom this piece of research would not have been possible. Finally, I am eternally grateful to my family and friends for their unconditional support and encouragement throughout this trying year. Without their constant support, love and care I would not be where I am today.

Abbreviations

AD - Anxiety Disorders

DEIS - Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES - Department of Education and Skills / Department of Education and Science

GAD - Generalised Anxiety Disorder

HSE - Health Service Executive

ICP - Irish College of Psychiatrists

JCES - Joint Committee on Education and Skills

NCCMH - National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health

NEPS - National Educational Psychological Service

SAD - Social Anxiety Disorder

Table of Contents

1.0 *Introduction*

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the research question and the aims and objectives of this dissertation. The professional and personal motivations for research will be discussed, as well as the importance of the research. Chapter arrangement will be clearly outlined.

1.1.2 Research Question

What are primary school teachers' views on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on primary school children?

1.1.3 Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

- To research the current standing of well-being in the primary school classroom.
- To highlight how COVID-19 pandemic has affected these issues, and caused others (if any).
- To investigate the availability of various resources and supports in primary schools, and if present how they are used.

1.2 Motivation for the research

Professional: The motivation behind this research stems from both personal and professional experiences. By working as a student-teacher on placement and also as a substitute teacher, I have gained invaluable experience before, during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. I have witnessed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children first-hand in classrooms. As well as this, I have had the opportunity to informally speak with a large variety of professionals regarding this topic in a wide range of schools and educational settings. I

gained interest in this topic through insight into the detrimental effects the pandemic has had on some pupils, and I would like to gain an insight into the tools and support available which can be used in my future teaching career in supporting children.

Personal: The area of well-being has become extremely topical in the last number of years, with increasing importance in its place in the classroom and school community. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple lockdowns and isolation periods have occurred, and therefore promoting positive mental health and well-being has gained significantly more importance. The role of the teacher is no longer focused wholly on education, but also on the promotion of positive mental health in their pupils (Department of Education, 2016). For this reason, I crave further knowledge and understanding of the social and emotional issues children in my future classroom may face, and how best to support them.

1.3 Importance of the research

As previously mentioned, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic came multiple lockdowns, isolation periods, and a serious disturbance to the global populations' everyday routine. Adults have struggled to cope with the overwhelming uncertainty brought with the pandemic, never mind children. The impact of distance learning, lack of social contact, and isolation has had extreme effects on our young population, which is clearly visible in our classrooms. According to research carried out prior to the COVID-19 pandemic by the RCSI, 1 in 3 children in Ireland will experience some form of mental health issue by the age of 13 (Cannon et. al., 2013). It can be estimated that this figure will only increase with the lasting effects on children's social and emotional well-being. Some schools have the funding, teachers, and resources in abundance to support these children, and some schools simply do not. It is important that the opinions of the teachers are heard, regarding the prevailing effects of the

COVID-19 pandemic on their pupils, and how the school community is attempting to support them with the resources at their disposal.

1.4 Chapter Arrangement

This dissertation will explore the research question in the following chapters:

Chapter 2 will cover an extensive review of the literature published on the key themes of this dissertation.

Chapter 3 will discuss the methodologies and methods used throughout the dissertation.

Chapter 4 will consist of a presentation of the key themes established through the data analysis process.

The final chapter will discuss the conclusions drawn from the research, and the researcher will conclude with recommendations for future research on the topic.

1.5 Summary

This first chapter introduces the reader to the research question, the aims and objectives of this dissertation. A brief overview of the dissertation, along with personal and professional objectives for carrying out the research was addressed. The importance of the research, and how the dissertation is structured were also detailed throughout this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 will consist of an extensive review of the literature published on the topic of well-being in the classroom and the prevalence of social and emotional issues with the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.0 *Literature Review*

2.1 Introduction

Chapter one examined the background, aims and objectives of this research, and the structure of the dissertation as a whole. In this chapter, a thorough literature review will focus on the topic of children's well-being on a national and international scale, and the impact an epidemic such as COVID-19 can have on children's wellbeing. Literature surrounding wellbeing in education will be explored in order to gain an insight into the value associated with well-being in primary schools today. An in-depth analysis of literature surrounding anxiety and social anxiety will be discussed, focusing on how these issues can affect children in their everyday lives. The idea of 'uncertainty', and how the COVID-19 pandemic, along with epidemics or disasters in the past can overwhelm the population with uncertainty will be addressed.

2.2 Social Anxiety in children

2.2.1 Defining social anxiety

In 1992 the World Health Organisation published *The International Classification of Diseases* 10th Revision (ICD-10), which consists of clinical descriptions and diagnoses relating to mental and behavioural disorders. Social anxiety disorder has been defined by the WHO (1992) as a persistent fear of one or more social situations where embarrassment may occur and the fear or anxiety is out of proportion to the actual threat posed by the social situation, as determined by the person's cultural norms. While anxiety is common in the general population, people with social anxiety disorder can worry excessively about certain social situations, sometimes weeks in advance. People suffering from social anxiety disorder fear that they will say or do something that in their minds is embarrassing (i.e. blushing,

sweating, shaking, looking anxious, or appearing boring, stupid or incompetent). According to The National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health (NCCMH), people with social anxiety disorder will attempt to avoid their most feared situations, although when this is not possible they will endure the situation with feelings of intense distress. The NCCMH states that people suffering from social anxiety also suffer "significant impairment in social, occupational or other areas of functioning" (NCCMH, 2013, pp.15).

2.2.2 Anxiety in children

The ICP estimates that 20% of children will have a mental disorder at any one time, 10% will experience a mild disorder, 8% will experience a moderate to severe disorder and 2% will experience a disabling disorder (2005). The ICP claims that there is an equivalent percentage of mental health disorders affecting the younger population as is affecting the adult population (2005).

Telman et al. state that anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental health disorders amongst children, and that the prevalence of AD in children ranges from 10%-20% (2017).

A study carried out by Gordon Capp in 2015 investigated the mental health services and supports available in schools. Capp suggests that an alarming 80% of pupils receive mental health support in schools. This alarming percentage of pupils availing of mental health supports in school (which from Telman et. al., 2017 we can guess is the majority anxiety disorders), shows the drastic prevalence of such disorders in children. According to Capp (2015), over the last two decades, mental health disorders in children have increased and there is a proportionate demand for increased mental health services and support to be made available to children.

According to research carried out by the RCSI, 1 in 3 children in Ireland will experience some form of mental health issue by the age of 13 (Cannon et. al., 2013). This figure relates to general mental health issues, anxiety included. Although the study goes on to suggest that about 1 in 12 children around 11 years of age were experiencing specifically an anxiety disorder at the time of this research. Social phobia was also found to be affecting approximately 1 in 20 of these children with rates of 5.1% and 4.7% respectively (Cannon et. al., 2013).

The NCCMH's 2013 publication on SAD discusses social anxiety in children. They refer to the differences in social anxiety in adults and in children, namely, how children may be less likely to recognise that their fears are irrational, even when removed from whatever social situation they fear. Specific situations which may cause heightened anxiety for socially anxious children include participating in classroom activities, asking for help in class, and activities with peers (i.e. team sports or attending parties). Participation in school performances can be a challenge for socially anxious children, as well as negotiating social challenges (NCCMH, 2013).

2.2.3 *How social anxiety affects children's lives*

Social anxiety can majorly affect children's quality of life and increases the risk for several adverse behaviours that can occur as a result of the anxiety. Particular situations commonly cause difficulty for socially anxious children, including participation in the classroom, asking for help when required, activities with peers, participation in school performances and negotiating social challenges. Mental health issues such as anxiety can affect school attendance, problems with motivation, concentration and attention, behaviour regulation, educational dropout and poor academic & professional achievement (Stein and Kean, 2000; De Socio & Hootman, 2004; Perou et al., 2013). Schools and teachers are in a

unique position to support children due to the active role they play in children's lives. Despite this advantageous position they hold, there seems to be a dearth of literature when it comes to the topic of supporting mental health in Irish schools. The studies that have been carried out on this topic have found that primary school teachers don't feel that they have the skills or confidence to promote health behaviours and support positive well-being (O'Dea, 2010). Internationally, there is the belief that school-based interventions should play a vital role in supporting the well-being of children (Collins, 2014), but in Ireland, these interventions are unfortunately not being deemed necessary (JCES, 2017). According to this report by the JCES, "there has been a change in the whole mindset that schools are about teaching and imparting information in the recognition that they are also about ensuring the wellbeing of students and school communities generally is at the heart of everything a school does" (2017). This change in mindset may have been recognised, although teachers all over Ireland are still struggling with promoting and maintaining positive mental health in classrooms across the country, actively seeking more training and development of resources for their schools (JCES, 2017).

Literature focusing on the importance of schools using their role in pupil's lives to address their mental health and the impact on academic success suggests that "school's nursing is well-positioned to respond to the need for mental health promotion, illness prevention, and early intervention related to children's mental health" (DeSocio and Hootman 2004, p. 189). Prevention is seen as the key to addressing pupils' mental health issues, or at least foreseeing early mental health issues in children, to provide the necessary support and prevent further impact on their academic success and experience in school. With this in mind, Maller and Townsend also suggest that children greatly benefit from developing and maintaining good mental health habits and mechanisms to cope with stress, so if these habits

and mechanisms were adequately promoted in schools and elsewhere an improvement may be seen (2006).

Further literature addresses the concerns which underpin this research - the importance of recognizing some of the possible mental health issues children may now be facing while starting a new school year, more than likely having to adapt to new social distancing measures and new routines which would be in place (Statistics Canada, 2020). A survey carried out by Statistics Canada showed that eighty per cent of parents of young school children between the ages of four and eleven years old were "very or extremely concerned for their children's behaviours, stress levels, anxiety and emotions" (p.1). The reasons behind these parents' concerns point to the increased use of screen time, the social isolation experienced by their children, probable loss in academic progress, and how children's general mental health could have been affected by this pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2020).

History doesn't lend much context for which schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so we can only speculate that due to the extensive isolation period the world's populations endured, children separated from school and friends may have suffered an impact on their mental health (American Academy of Paediatrics 2021). To second this, other studies have indicated that social interaction is key to the mental and physical development of young children, suggesting that inadequate social interaction experiences could lead to mental health-related problems such as anxiety and depression (Matthews et al., 2014). Further investigation to be carried out in this piece of research aims to uncover in-depth knowledge on how children's lives are affected by anxiety in school and out of school.

2.3 Positive Mental Health and Well-being

2.3.1 What is positive mental health and well-being?

Mental Health is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as "a state of well-being in which the individual realises their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and can contribute to his or her community" (2001). Positive mental health for children is seen as part of their overall health and is inextricably linked with well-being. (DES, 2021)

The Mental Health Foundation suggests that mentally healthy children possess the ability to: "develop psychologically, emotionally, socially, intellectually, spiritually; initiate, develop and sustain mutually satisfying interpersonal relationships; use and enjoy solitude; become aware of others and empathise with them; play and learn; develop a sense of right and wrong" (2002).

2.3.2 How can schools promote positive mental health and well-being?

Mental health promotion involves creating and enhancing environments that support the development of mental well-being and healthy lifestyles. The importance of a strong focus on mental well-being in children is backed by research which shows that "mental health promotion is most effective when it takes place early in a person's life" (Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2012). There is overwhelming evidence that students learn more effectively, including in their academic subjects, if they are happy in their work, believe in themselves, and their teachers and feel school is supporting them (Weare, 2000). Within the school context, positive mental health promotion should focus on "enhancing protective factors and minimising risk factors thereby building children's resilience to cope with the various stressors in their lives" (NEPS, 2016). Such as the psychological support available to all pupils in Swedish schools, a similar approach to mental health promotion could be adopted in Irish schools (Donlevy Day Andriescu & Downes, 2019).

A whole-school approach to addressing mental health and well-being is the Health Promoting School process (WHO, 1998). "A health-promoting schools approach is a way of thinking and working that is adopted by all in the school to make it the best possible place to learn, work and play (Queensland, 2005)".

With regards to promoting positive mental well-being in a pandemic, time of crisis or a critical incident, NEPS have provided guidelines which are there to support schools with particular types of incidents such as those mentioned above. The guidelines cover areas such as the role of the school in promoting mental health and effective care systems, being proactive in preparing for critical incidents, and responding to critical incidents (DES, 2016).

2.3.3 Supporting children's mental well-being in the aftermath of the pandemic

As documented in the Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion by the DES, careful consideration needs to be given by school management in organising the reintegration of children following a period of distress (in this case, a pandemic). A number of the recommendations provided by the DES are "to acknowledge the children's difficulties; agree on an appropriate communication system between parents/guardians and supporting teachers; and to carefully consider the information provided by the professionals involved" (2016). The previously mentioned NEPS publication on 'Responding to Critical Incidents' provides guidelines and resource materials for schools in dealing with "any event or sequence of events that overwhelms the normal coping systems within a school"(NEPS, 2016). Within these guidelines are useful information and resources, such as how to handle such critical incidents, establishing a management team, checklists for reviewing policy and plans, and short/medium/long term actions for the various stages of response. NEPS outlines their role in response to such incidents: helping school management to draw up a response plan; providing information and advice; being available for support meetings, working with

teachers to identify students in most need of support, and reviewing their needs/supporting onward referral if necessary (NEPS, 2016).

School management, principals and teachers have a duty to provide the best quality and most appropriate social, personal and health education for their pupils. The effective use of additional government funding which had been allocated to schools would be of use to these children. The reasoning behind this funding is that it be used in providing additional support for pupils who are at significant risk as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (DES, 2021).

2.4 Uncertainty

2.4.1 Uncertainty-related anxiety

Uncertainty related anxiety has been recognised worldwide and can be seen amongst children since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. People of all ages struggle with the concept of uncertainty, finding comfort in the familiar where the outcome is already known. Intolerance to Uncertainty (IU) is a term used to describe this struggle with uncertainty, from which many people suffer. IU is defined as "an individual's dispositional incapacity to endure an aversive response triggered by the perceived absence of salient, key, or sufficient information, and sustained by the associated perception of uncertainty" (Carleton, 2016, pp. 31).

The construct of IU was initially suggested as a key construct in generalised anxiety disorder (Dugas et al. 1998). Since its inception, it has received increasing attention in a wide range of contexts, including within clinical psychology and in other areas of applied psychology (Carleton, 2012). According to Carleton (2016), at the core of IU is fear of the unknown, and there is now evidence that IU might be a transdiagnostic risk factor for the

development and maintenance of clinically significant anxiety more broadly as well as for depression (Carleton et al., 2010).

Robinson suggests that children as young as four years old implicitly demonstrate that they are able to identify multiple possibilities when uncertainty exists both in their mind and physical world. IU involves the 'tendency to react negatively on an emotional, cognitive, and behavioural level to uncertain situations and events' (Buhr and Dugas, 2009, p.216). Carleton concurs with this, stating that uncertainty is perceived as threatening by people suffering from IU, contributing to significant somatic stress responses in the face of novel or uncertain situations (2012). IU has been most commonly linked to the development and maintenance of GAD but has more recently been linked to social anxiety disorder (Gentes and Ruscio, 2011).

2.4.2 Pandemic-induced uncertainty

Although children are among the less vulnerable to the severe sickness that comes with the virus, they are nonetheless susceptible to stress and anxiety associated with the pandemic. Unfortunately, current knowledge of psychological functioning and strategies to aid in reducing the distress caused by pandemics is quite limited. During the peri- and post-pandemic periods, anxiety spectrum disorders in paediatric populations are expected to rise dramatically (Czeisler et al., 2020). In a study carried out by Czeisler investigating the prevalence of mental health issues caused by the pandemic, he found that the prevalence of anxiety disorder was approximately four times that reported the year previous (25.5% versus 8.1%).

The magnification of the threat that uncertainty poses has shown to cause various adverse sequelae such as distressing worry and anxiety. Given the timelines for the expected course of the virus, the population has been suffering fear about the future. A lucky fraction of the population of course is not affected by this anxiety, although due to media coverage,

and the prospect of getting infected, levels of anxiety have prevailed with this uncertainty. Due to the many factors associated with this pandemic, it is not yet clear whether the main anxieties are rooted in medical reasons, or from associated phenomena such as school and community closures, loneliness resulting from lockdown, or discrimination faced by cultural groups (Horesh & Brown, 2020). Whatever the reasons, it is clear the many uncertainties that go hand-in-hand with the COVID-19 pandemic are huge causes of anxiety to world populations.

2.5 Pandemics

2.5.1 Historically

It is now well-documented that for as long as we have historical records, people have psychologically suffered from loss, war, violence, oppression, and disasters.
While some types of traumas, such as war, sexual assault, and natural disasters have been studied extensively, COVID-19 forces us to acknowledge an arguably new type of mass trauma (Horesh & Brown, 2020). The similarities between a disaster and a pandemic have to be recognised, with the abrupt change in daily life, a sense of uncertainty, resource limitations, a spread of misinformation and so on only add to the strain on the mental health of the population concerned (Esterwood & Saeed, 2020).

One of the most traumatic factors affecting the mental health of the population since the start of the pandemic has been periods of quarantine. Quarantine is defined as the separation and restriction of movement of people who have potentially been exposed to a contagious disease to ascertain if they become unwell, and so reducing the risk of them infecting others (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Quarantine and Isolation, 2017).

A study carried out on hospital staff who underwent quarantine as a result of possible contact with SARS found that immediately after their quarantine period (9 days) had ended,

having been quarantined was the biggest anxiety inducer of the situation (Brooks et al., 2020). According to this study carried out by Brooks et al., inadequate information given by public health authorities was cited as a main cause of anxiety during the SARS epidemic. Lack of clarity about the different levels of risk led to participants fearing the worst, as well as confusion about the purpose of quarantine. These stressors are all too relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic, with very similar factors causing stress and anxieties among the population.

2.5.2 In history: how have disasters affected children

According to Kar (2009), children exposed to disasters are particularly vulnerable to psychological problems, the most common symptoms of anxiety. In a 2010 report by the National Commission on Children and Disasters, the vulnerability of children to the mental health impact of disasters, and the lack of experience, skills and resources to independently meet their mental health needs are addressed. The report states that following disasters many children experience academic failure, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, bereavement and other behavioural problems (National Centre for Disaster Preparedness, 2010). The 2014 Ebola outbreak is another example of how a disaster and its after-effects can impact society and its children. A study comparing mental health issues in parents and children quarantined with those not quarantined found that the mean scores were four times higher in children who had been quarantined than in those who were not quarantined (Sprang & Silman, 2013).

2.6 Summary

This chapter reviewed the relevant literature on child well-being; social and emotional issues children are facing; IU and how it relates to the current pandemic; how schools can best

support positive mental health, particularly in times such as these, and what can be learned from previous pandemics. The NCCA and DES publication on *Well-Being in Primary Schools - Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion (2021)*; NEPS document on *'Responding to Critical Incidents - Guidelines and Resources for Schools' (2016)* have been examined, highlighting the focus on promoting well-being and how to best support children in unprecedented times. Literature suggests that times such as a pandemic will only escalate already present social and emotional issues in children and that schools are in a vital position to best support and prevent further progression of such issues. Taking advice from NEPS, a whole-school approach to promoting positive mental health and well-being must be adopted. With such international research and findings related to social and emotional issues in children, along with guidelines and support available to schools in Ireland, further into this study the researcher will focus on how these issues are affecting individual children and classrooms, and how, if at all these supports are being implemented. Chapter Three will present the methodology design of this research.

3.0 Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction

The researcher has decided that a qualitative approach is best suited to this research topic, as it should allow for an in-depth understanding and personal insight into the perspectives of primary school teachers on the overall impact of COVID-19 on pupil wellbeing. The field of well-being and mental health in children is a thoroughly researched field, and it is well understood that the global pandemic of COVID-19 has only exacerbated some of the issues already present. Following on from this established issue among primary school pupils, my specific research question will address the perspectives of primary school teachers on the overall impact of COVID-19 on pupil wellbeing and anxiety.

3.2 Research Design

Qualitative research is commonly utilised in the study of social relations due to the pluralisation of worlds. The pluralisation of life is the rapid change within social aspects of the world resulting in life becoming more diverse (Flick, 2009).

Within qualitative research, participants are asked open-ended questions to ensure the opportunity to express their views. The researcher collects open-ended data with the intention to develop a theme or a theory from this data collected (Creswell, 2003).

The researcher wanted to gain an insight into the actual lived experiences of primary school teachers, therefore a qualitative approach was suitable as this approach often focuses on the lived realities encountered in the field setting (Creswell, 2003).

The researcher considered both qualitative and quantitative approaches to this research topic, however in the end decided upon a qualitative approach as it seemed best suited due to its many advantages in gathering a more detailed insight. In qualitative research, the researcher has an opportunity to delve deeper into the topic at hand by further questioning and prompts.

Due to the open-ended nature of this approach, participants have the freedom to detail their underlying beliefs, values and assumptions. They have the opportunity to express their insights and views concerning the topic being discussed. Within this method of research, there is an opportunity to explore the views of both diverse and homogeneous groups of people (Choy, 2014).

3.3 Research Methodology

Data will be collected through interviews with multiple primary school teachers. The researcher has decided upon this method of data collection as it offers the opportunity for the participant to speak freely and their views and opinions can flow naturally. Interviews allow the researcher to prompt and guide findings that cannot be just simply observed - "we can probe an interviewee's thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives" (Wellington, 2000). The researcher aims to interview multiple teachers to gain their perspectives on their pupils' well-being, therefore interviews will work best for this. The interviewee is allowed to voice their opinions and perspectives during interview processes' (Wellington, 2000). The type of interviews that will be conducted will be semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. Semi-structured interviews will be used as the researcher plans to have questions and prompts prepared in advance, while still allowing the participating teachers the freedom to air their opinions and speak freely. Open-ended questions will be used frequently throughout the interviews, in an attempt to gain the teachers' rounded perspectives on the topic in question - "the interviewer has considerable flexibility over the range and order of questions within a loosely defined framework" (Wellington, 2000, p 74).

3.4 Sampling

Interviews will be conducted with approximately seven primary school teachers, ranging from the junior end of the school to the senior end of the school. This variety will ensure a broad insight into the topic of discussion, and how it may or may not vary among age groups. Participants will be chosen from a variety of schools across Dublin and other counties. Selection criteria will be based on the age group taught and the location of the school in which they teach. The participants will be chosen using a snowballing technique (Creswell, 2003). In this way, the participants invited may invite further possible participants for this study. Some of the teachers contacted may not accept the invitation, so the researcher plans to invite more participants than required. They will be invited to participate via email, clearly detailing the purpose of the research.

3.5 Research Participants

Teacher 1	+5 years of teaching experience, teaching in DEIS Band 1 school in West Dublin
Teacher 2	+7 years of teaching experience, teaching in DEIS Band 2 school outside of Dublin
Teacher 3	+8 years of teaching experience, mostly in DEIS Band 1 school, now substitute teacher in schools in North Dublin and rural Cavan
Teacher 4	+20 years of teaching experience mostly in DEIS Band 1 school in West Dublin, also in non-DEIS schools in Dublin
Teacher 5	+15 years of teaching experience, teaching in a non-DEIS rural country school

Teacher 6	+12 years of teaching experience, teaching in a non-DEIS school in South Dublin
Teacher 7	+3 years of teaching experience, teaching in DEIS Band 1 school in North Dublin

3.6 Ethics

Participants will be thoroughly educated on all relevant details regarding the purpose of the research, and their right to retract participation at any time. They will be made aware of how their insights will be used, to whom they will be available and where they will be available. The researcher will ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary; how the data collected from the interviews will be used; how and to whom it will be reported; the time that will be required of them in terms of the interviewing process. Permission has been granted to carry out this research in the SERC form.

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the data collected for this research. Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The researcher will use thematic analysis as by focusing on a particular meaning across the collected data, thematic analysis allows for the exploration of shared meanings and experiences. In this way, the thematic analysis identifies recurring themes in the topic discussed and aids in making sense of the commonalities.

There are a variety of reasons why the researcher would choose to use thematic analysis throughout the research. Two of the main reasons are the flexibility and accessibility associated with it. The thematic analysis informs the researcher in ways of coding and analysing

qualitative data systematically. Thematic analysis is not an approach to conducting research, instead, it is just a method of data analysis. As aforementioned, thematic analysis is flexible in nature, one reason for this is that it can be conducted in a variety of ways. Thematic analysis will be conducted through inductive data analysis. Inductive data analysis is carried out through a bottom-up approach and is defined by what the data collection consists of. This means that the codes and themes come from the data collected by the researcher. Within this type of data, the researcher does not begin with any preconceived notions, the data collected over the course of the research tells the story and the themes emerge from the data (Bruan & Clarke, 2012).

3.7 Data Analysis

The use of Creswell's six-step approach to data analysis was adopted by the researcher once the interviews were carried out. Firstly, the organisation and preparation of data for analysis were carried out - transcription, writing up field notes and reading through the data on multiple occasions in an attempt to establish main themes. Steps three and four involve the process of coding, which according to Cohen et al. code is "a name or label that the researcher gives to a piece of text that contains an idea or a piece of information" (p. 559, 2011). A more defined number of specific themes were then developed through a more in-depth process of coding. This process needed to be thoroughly data-driven, with the researcher not allowing themselves to revert to any pre-study perceptions. The following step, step five, involved narrating the newly established themes, represented through a convincing and authentic account of the data. Step six involved interpreting the data by comparing the findings of the research with the literature previously explored.

3.8 Limitations

Although the focus of this research related wholly to primary school pupils, the researcher did not interview any children. This was a small scale study with a small sample and a limited timeframe for the investigation.

3.9 Reliability and validity

According to Lincoln and Guba, the trustworthiness of research can be met "by introducing the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (as cited in Nowell et al, 2017). The researcher kept this in mind when writing up the data findings. As well as this, the participants had the opportunity to read what had been written about their interviews, ensuring validity and reliability.

3.10 Summary

Within this chapter, the context of this particular research was outlined. As well as this, research paradigms and the research approaches associated with these paradigms were also discussed. The logic behind choosing a qualitative research approach rather than a quantitative was explored, along with any concerns regarding using a qualitative approach. A detailed insight into the data collection and analysis process was provided, along with any ethical considerations relevant to this piece of research. Chapter Four will explore the major themes and subthemes which have emerged through the coding and data analysis process.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Introduction

With a central focus on investigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on pupil wellbeing, it was imperative that a deep and honest understanding was gained through the data collection process. Interviewing teachers from a variety of settings and backgrounds has given an authentic insight into the evident impact the previous two years have had on their pupils. This chapter presents the findings which have come to light through semi-structured interviews. After returning to the data with a fresh mind on multiple occasions, the researcher went through various trial and error processes with the aim of establishing the major emergent themes. After this earnest handling of the data, three main themes came to light.

Following on from methodological procedures laid out in the previous chapter, this chapter will be structured according to the themes that have emerged. The order that which these themes will be addressed has been thoroughly premeditated and choreographed.

Theme 1 addresses the ‘emotional issues which have prevailed in a post-pandemic classroom’. Embedded within this theme are the sub-themes of ‘general anxiety in the classroom’, and ‘social anxiety in the classroom’.

Theme 2 is ‘the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the classroom day-to-day’. This theme incorporates ‘demotivation and lack of interest in pupils’, and ‘the effect on pupils' academic performance’.

Theme 3 will explore the 'interventions and supports according to teachers'. Within this theme, sub-themes such as 'the support, and the lack of support felt by teachers in the school community' and 'teachers individual interventions developed to support the needs of the classroom post-pandemic'.

4.2 Theme 1: Emotional issues which have prevailed in a post-pandemic classroom

Theme number one will explore primary teachers' insights into the dominant issue in their pupils since returning to school post-Covid-19. The prevalence of emotional issues in primary school children has been noted by all participating teachers as one of the most frightening consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns. According to Cannon et. al., 1 in 3 children in Ireland will experience some form of mental health issue by the age of 13 (2013), and the detrimental effects of a global pandemic will undoubtedly have escalated these figures. These emotional issues affect not only individual children, but the overall running of the classroom, and therefore it is important this theme is explored at the outset, laying the foundation for consecutive themes.

4.2.1 General anxiety in the classroom

The prevalence of varying emotional issues in children returning to the classroom post-pandemic had been the central focus of this research, therefore it was important to gain teachers' insights into this prevalence at the beginning of each of the interviews. Interestingly, all participants reported a significant prevalence in emotional issues in children in their classrooms post-COVID-19. The majority of responses reported anxiety or other general emotional issues:

> "what it seems to be is just a general feeling of heightened anxiety that they're unable to cope with" (T6);
>
> "I did have a girl who suffered from anxiety coming back to school… When she came back to school, she was actually pulling out her hair" (T3);

T7 recalled the various ways in which this anxiety has presented itself in the classroom,

> "I've had so many occasions, for no apparent reason, nothing that seemed to set it off, but just crying… I didn't expect at all the degree that I saw (of anxiety), absolutely never experienced anything like that before".

Although a global pandemic does not come under the umbrella of a 'disaster', there are many similarities in how an infectious disease outbreak and a natural disaster can affect mental health. "An abrupt change in daily life, a sense of uncertainty about the future, resource limitations, fear for personal well-being, increased use of media and spread of misinformation represent a few of the similar experiences felt during a pandemic and natural disaster" (Esterwood & Saeed, 2020).

A 2010 report investigating the vulnerability of children to the mental health impact of disasters states that following disasters many children experience academic failure, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, bereavement and other behavioural problems (NCDP, 2010). These reports would seem to correlate with the data collected from the interviewees, where a prevalence in emotion, anxiety and behavioural issues has been witnessed across a broad range of classes and situations.

One participant made reference to one pupil in particular, who returned to school after the pandemic with very obvious emotional issues which the teachers had not witnessed in her before:

> "She had been very happy coming to school and just loved school, and was really very academic. And then all of a sudden we noticed that her behaviour had kind of changed, that she was very down and would be very emotional, like over little things that usually wouldn't have bothered her." (T1)

A study investigating the psychological responses of children to pandemic disasters, specifically in disease-containment situations such as quarantine, found some distressing, however not so surprising results. The study compared mental health issues in children quarantined with those not quarantined and found that the mean scores were four times higher in children who had been quarantined than in those who were not quarantined (Sprang & Silman, 2013). These findings are all too relevant to this piece of research, as, with multiple lockdowns and quarantine situations, children have had to face unexpected isolating situations, which they would not have the tools to deal with physically or the emotions that come with such situations. One participant reported a similar analysis upon returning to school.

> "I think some of the children in my class have been emotionally impacted by the pandemic…confined to their home for quite a long period of time. This may have been a tough time for some children and families, particularly in disadvantaged areas" (T6).

The research on this theme suggests the uncertainty of a global pandemic, lockdowns, and quarantine situations have had a clear impact on children and may have caused a prevalence of such emotional issues which are now evident in the classroom.

4.2.2 Social Anxiety in the Classroom

Many of the participating teachers reported a considerable decrease in group or whole-class involvement in games and activities in the classroom. Research suggests that socially anxious children can experience heightened anxiety in such activities.

> 'They don't mix as much anymore and are more clicky in terms of whom they've hung out with during when they were at home…Group participation, they hate talking in a paired working activity…they just sit there looking at

> the wall. They don't interact with each other, they don't want to voice their opinion… 'oh, no, don't ask me, ask somebody else', then they kind of go into themselves' (T3).

An interesting observation from one participant stated that,

> 'Some of the children find it hard to socially interact with other children… they don't know how to play with other children, because they've missed two years… They find it hard to interact with others… not used to having to share or get on with people… we're nearly having to teach that again. How to play with others, be empathetic towards others, share, listen to other people's points of view…And I think they find that hard' (T1).

This specific scenario of reported anxiety in pupils with regards to navigating certain social situations correlates with what the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health states,

> 'Specific situations which may cause heightened anxiety for socially anxious children include participating in classroom activities, asking for help in class, and activities with peers, as well as negotiating social challenges (NCCMH, 2013).'

Further developing on how anxiety can manifest in children, but also how it can affect the running of the classroom:

> "I think social anxiety is more common now… they get upset very easily when things don't go their way…find it hard to follow instructions and then they cry. I've noticed a lot of kids having meltdowns more often, anxiety not wanting to participate in PE especially when they're not used to some games from lockdown." (T7)

This finding would indicate that the social anxiety felt by children may be a result of some group activities which may be new to them following two years of social distancing rules.

Children suffering from social anxiety disorder "fear that they will do something that in their minds is embarrassing." (NCCMH, 2013, pp.15) This research suggests that socially anxious children will experience heightened anxiety in certain social situations, which suggests a reason for the reported significant decrease in group participation, as well as negotiating social challenges with peers.

Issues with social anxiety can have an alarming knock-on effect outside of fearing social embarrassment, such as poor school attendance, problems with motivation, concentration and attention, behaviour regulation, educational dropout and poor academic & professional achievement (Stein and Kean, 2000; De Socio & Hootman, 2004; Perou et al., 2013).

4.3 Theme 2: The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Classroom Day-to-Day

Following on from theme 1, theme 2 will address the various ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the everyday running of the classroom. Issues such as demotivation, lack of interest, and standards of attainment in pupils are all consequences of an unpredictable and frightening two years. The emotional issues discussed in Theme 1 play an integral role in the weakened stability of the everyday classroom. Research has shown that mental health issues such as anxiety can affect school attendance, problems with motivation, concentration and attention, behaviour regulation, educational dropout and poor academic & professional achievement (Stein and Kean, 2000; De Socio & Hootman, 2004; Perou et al., 2013).

4.3.1 Demotivation & Lack of Interest in Pupils

An unexpected trend among participants is the demotivation witnessed among children in school post-lockdown. A finding that was not anticipated by the researcher, however, was

reported among several of the interviewees, "lethargy, lack of interest or an ounce of motivation." (T4) One participant, with many years of experience in fourth class, expressed concern with the lack of interest or enthusiasm in her class,

> "What previous classes found to be sort of exciting, a scavenger hunt, an interactive game on the whiteboard, prize giving on a Friday, or earning bonus points etc, they have zero enthusiasm or motivation towards." (T4)

Another participant reported a negative and demotivated attitude towards school which was not present pre-COVID-19,

> "Some kids have a more negative attitude to school, to doing work…I've noticed kids as young as second class say 'I don't mean to be rude, but I don't want to do it', and they just refuse to take part…which I've never seen before." (T3)

These common reports among participants were highly unexpected, however, there is a correlation with an 'epidemic of demotivation in lockdown children'. In a study carried out in Austria since the return to face-to-face teaching, teachers reported seeing a decreased ability to concentrate in more than half of the students. They reported worse perseverance, and a lower motivation in children than before the COVID-19 pandemic (Senft et al., 2022).

4.3.2 Impact on Standards of Attainment

Multiple participants reported an alarming decrease in literacy and numeracy standards in children post-COVID-19. One participant noted that a reduction in standards of attainment was expected following long periods of time without face-to-face classes, however, the length of time it is taking some children to catch up to where the teachers would hope them to be is quite alarming. One teacher noted a 'huge gap in the middle' between some pupils who are high achieving and those who are on the weaker end of the spectrum.

> “There is a huge gap in the middle. Some of our first and second class children are still working on CVC words and pm readers from senior infants level.” (T3)

A distressing reduction in receptive and expressive skills among children has been observed among several participants, with an emphasis on their oral language. The increased addiction to technology among children is being given a portion of the blame for this observation. The fascination with technology among young children has been observed in schools internationally, with a teacher in a California elementary school reporting the "eerily silent classrooms, with first and second graders struggling to hold a pencil correctly". These teacher's reports correlate with the observations of Irish primary school teachers - the negative effect the increased use of technology has had over the course of lockdowns on children's standards of attainment.

“It is as if some of the students fell into their screens and they haven’t come out yet” (Tornay, 2022).

This research corresponding with the data collected from the interview process suggests that the increased use of technology and the subsequent decrease in the use of oral language (receptive and expressive language), literacy, numeracy and cerebral tasks over the course of lockdowns had a significantly negative impact on children's academic performance.

One teacher noted that the extended length of lockdowns in Ireland, especially in a socially disadvantaged area, has had a tremendous impact on the children’s literacy and numeracy. Numerous teachers have noted the length of time it is taking children to catch up, as the initial return to school was spent “trying to get them used to being back in school and the structure of the day.” (T1) Some participating teachers working in socially disadvantaged areas noted the lack of engagement with distance learning, and so the academic losses are even greater in these areas.

> "When we first came back, some of them were wrecked, having to be present in the classroom all day…some of them, especially in a DEIS Band 1 school, hadn't held a pencil for that length of time…interaction wasn't great for online learning, so some of them that had missed out on school, academically there was a huge loss there. We're only seeing the gaps now because the foundations weren't there." (T1)
>
> "We missed January into most of March…and then when we did come back, we didn't get back into things for a while, because they weren't able. So we were trying to get them used to being back in school and the structure of the day. " (T7)

Previous research on the impact of distance learning has reported both positive and negative effects. However, it would be naive to assume that in socially disadvantaged areas, or in an 'emergency situation', that distance learning would outperform in-person learning.

> "While some pupils were very well equipped at home and supported by their parents, in some households pupils lacked basic materials such as a working computer or a desk, and had to deal with dysfunctional family arrangements" (Tomasik et al., 2020).

The unexpected occurrence of distance learning meant that neither teachers nor pupils had time to prepare, and the impact of this is now visible in primary school classrooms.

4.4 Interventions and Supports According to Primary School Teachers

The final theme, theme 3, addresses the various ways in which teachers have attempted to deal with the issues addressed in themes 1 and 2. This theme will explore the support, or lack thereof available in the school community, as well as individual teachers' interventions in supporting these children. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have been actively

seeking more training and development of resources for their schools in order to support their pupils' mental health (JCES, 2017).

4.4.1 Supports Available

There are varying opinions among participants regarding the support available to them, to the pupils, and to the wider school community during this unprecedented time. A number of the participants reported a positive support system among staff, with everyone doing their best to be there and support each other when possible.

One participant had a broad insight to the support available in a variety of schools, working as a substitute teacher. This gave an unparalleled insight which could not have been gained from a teacher working in one single school. This teacher (T3), noticed an increased number of learning support in different schools, with a single teacher assigned to each year group, carrying out academic support, as well as movement breaks or social interaction groups with the pupils identified as most in need. This increased support was witnessed in a variety of schools, not just in urban areas but also in rural schools. Additional government funding had been allocated in the past academic year, "provided to each recognised school, from which schools can provide additional teaching support for pupils who, in their view, are at significant risk of learning loss and/or at risk of early school leaving resulting from Covid-19" (Department of Education, 2021).

> "There were kids going out just for social interaction and just for movement breaks. Not so focused on academic learning support." (T3)

Another participant mentioned an abundance of support in their school (DEIS Band 1), with play therapy facilitated for children whom they feel most need it, along with social and emotional groups, nurture groups, and a newly installed nurture room in the school.

> “These groups go out and discuss social and emotional issues that are affecting them. They do this in small groups or 1 to 1 depending on the needs.” (T2)

The focus on "fostering personal development, health and wellbeing of pupils helps to ensure that they develop resilience, respect diversity, learn to create and maintain supportive relationships and become active and responsible citizens in society (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). In DEIS schools such as mentioned here, the act of redeploying resources where necessary is very common, due to the complexity of needs. For example, the CLASS hours obtained by this DEIS school may be used in social and emotional groups rather than solely for literacy or numeracy learning support. These supports which have been made available to certain schools can have extreme benefits beyond academics. They can have a significant effect in improving social, emotional and behavioural outcomes among children, participating in activities designed to address a wide range of needs.

4.4.2 Lack of Support

Two of the participants had a slightly different perception of the support made available to their class since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a mutual opinion of an extreme lack of support when it came to attempting a smooth transition back to 'normal' school life. One teacher, who had an insight to the support in a variety of schools, noted that some schools received an abundance of support, whereas others did not seem to have the same support available:

> “Most schools, yes. And other schools, no, they just kind of go on about their daily routine as it was. It's kind of like just trying to pick up the pieces.” (T3)

It is unknown the reasons for additional support available to some, but not all schools post-pandemic. One possibility is the DEIS status which certain schools in communities at risk of

disadvantage or social exclusion have acquired. These schools are deemed the most in need, and for this reason, additional support may have been offered and not to schools without a DEIS status. Another possibility is that the resources available to some schools may not be deployed in the manner which they may be most needed. The school community may have an assumption of normal resumption upon returning to school, failing to address the need for reconfigured team teaching, learning support, emotional support, and collaboration in co-teaching. The more experienced teachers have a duty to lead the way and challenge the idea of normal resumption in schools.

Another participant noted that the government had facilitated the addition of one extra teacher to offer learning support, "shared amongst a huge amount of children…there certainly wasn't enough support." (T4) The COVID-19 pandemic has created a world of uncertainty, worry, anxiety and loss for some children, and these teachers believe that the failure to offer them social and emotional support, and therapies of different types upon returning to 'normal life' has been the country's biggest downfall.

> "There's no drama therapy…no support to help teachers cope with anxiety that children have. No NEPS psychologist, no psychologist in school, no psychologist available in the health service." (T4)

The lack of support in schools is felt even more so now with the detrimental effects of the pandemic on children's mental health. Teachers are actively seeking more training and development of resources for their schools (JCES, 2017). Social and emotional issues in children can have a disastrous effect on their education, where a usually talkative child might become withdrawn, start skipping meals, or disengage from their favourite activities. Not only do these issues affect the individual child, but it can affect the whole running of the classroom and school if not dealt with adequately.

> "The aggression among some of the children creates a negative atmosphere in the class… sorting out problems etc. eats so much into teaching and learning time. Trying to exert discipline when the children appear to have had no discipline over the lockdowns." (T4)

Individual children with these social and emotional issues have experienced a negative effect on their academics, and it is now also affecting other children in the classroom. The opinion of several participants is that if the correct supports in promoting and maintaining children's mental health were available in the school, the running of a positive teaching and learning environment would be a much more attainable goal.

"Emotional counselling is also available in Sweden, where all students have access to a school doctor, school nurse, psychologist and school welfare officer at no cost and in Slovenia". Donlevy Day Andriescu & Downes(2019). If such support were available where needed in Ireland's primary schools as they are in Sweden and other countries, the successful running of a positive teaching and learning environment would be much more effective.

> "We'll be experiencing the repercussions for many, many, years…These problems are just going to continue…it's all a huge concern as an educator. And it feels very difficult to feel hopeful and enthusiastic when that's the reality." (T4)

The dread of the knock-on effect this lack of mental health support will have in years to come is another great concern among teachers. Not only is the everyday running of the classroom affected by the lack of support for children with these issues, but the stress and worry of the teachers who can see no end in sight with no support available for these children is an additional challenge and fear in schools.

4.4.3 Individual teachers' interventions

With mixed opinions among participating teachers regarding the support or lack thereof throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the differing individual teachers' interventions have emerged through the data collection process. Many teachers have praised the idea of a 'brain break', where the class spends ten minutes or so where they shift their focus to something other than what they are working on, or what may be going on in their head. "I think it lifts the weight of anxiety." (T6) Mindfulness-colouring, belly breathing, and reading are popular brain breaks among the participants.

While multiple teachers were implementing interventions with the same goal, one teacher found the 'Worry Box' worked very well. "It was there for the kids that have anxieties and worries… they knew that they could pop it into the box anonymously." (T3)

A similar strategy was utilised by another participant, where children independently place their name on a particular spot on the 'feelings board', this way the lesson being taught was uninterrupted, and the class teacher knew to speak with and to support the children who needed it. Advice from the Department of Education on how to best support pupils with distressing feelings suggests "talking to a trusted adult/peer, acknowledging their thoughts/feelings/body sensations, and deciding what unhelpful thoughts/feelings/body sensations they should work on relieving (National Educational Psychological Service, 2022).

Mindfulness and meditations were popular interventions utilised among teachers, where they taught the class strategies to use in regulating their emotions.

> "Anxiety is something that most of our children never felt before Covid". (T1)
>
> "We've done a lot of work on their feelings and how to express their feelings. What is the feeling? They would say, 'I'm sad' when they don't know why they're sad, or what does that mean?...they have to be specifically taught what they mean." (T4)

Two of the interviewees noted the lack of understanding children have on their emotions, what different feelings mean, or why they feel them. According to their teachers, the use of daily meditations and mindfulness has aided the children in coping with their emotions in the classroom.

4.5 Summary

Chapter four has outlined and detailed the findings that have emerged throughout the research for this dissertation. Three strong themes have been identified throughout the process; emotional issues which have prevailed in a post-pandemic classroom; the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the classroom day-to-day ; interventions and support according to teachers. The data collected through semi-structured interviews has provided an honest insight of the interviewees views on the various effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children returning to school post-lockdown. It was a popular opinion among teachers and is evident in international research, that there has not been one area of the children's lives that hasn't been affected by the extensive lockdowns over the past two years. The researcher questions what it is these themes will mean for the children affected by the pandemic. It is clear the academic performance, social awareness, and emotional wellbeing have all been majorly affected, and without adequate resources and support available to these children, the repercussions will likely be seen for many years to come.

The conclusions of this dissertation will be detailed in the following chapter. The limitations relevant to this research will be discussed, along with recommendations for future research.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This research aimed to investigate and examine the effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on primary school children's well-being according to their teachers. The data related to this research was collected through semi-structured interviews over a period of four weeks. The in-depth insight of primary school teachers detailed the effects the pandemic has had on children's well-being. Extending from this, an exploration into what well-being and social and emotional issues mean for children occured, focusing on the effects these issues may have on their everyday lives. A comprehensive insight into the support available in schools to help these children, or lack thereof, was discussed. Individual teachers' interventions which they deem useful with their pupils was also discussed. This chapter will present the conclusions drawn from this dissertation, derived from the data collected and analysed.

5.2 Conclusions

5.2.1 Emotional issues which have prevailed in a post-pandemic classroom

Clearly evident following a comprehensive review of the literature and a series of interviews, it has emerged that primary school teachers have noticed an alarming increase in social and emotional issues in children post-COVID-19 pandemic. Research clearly suggests that upon returning to school following consecutive lockdowns, isolation periods and distance-learning, school children have not adapted for the better. In a study carried out by Czeisler investigating the prevalence of mental health issues caused by the pandemic, he found that the prevalence of anxiety disorder was approximately four times that reported the year previous (25.5% versus 8.1%). Teachers' opinions on this phenomena correlated with Cziesler's findings. The majority of interviewees reported anxiety or other emotional issues in their pupils

upon returning to ‘normal’ school-life. A study carried out pre-Covid by Sprang & Silman investigated the mental health issues in children quarantined with those not quarantined. The research found that the mean scores were four times higher in children who had been quarantined than in those not quarantined (2013). There is an extreme relevance of these findings to this dissertation, with teachers reporting the distressing emotional impact of quarantine and isolation periods on their pupils.

5.2.2 The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Classroom Day-to-Day

An unexpected trend among all interviewees was the demotivation witnessed among their pupils post-COVID-19. This finding was not anticipated by the researcher, however does correlate with international studies reporting similar findings. Such demotivation has had a negative impact on teaching and learning, with little interest in lessons, and an increased sense of entitlement on which lessons they want to or don’t want to take part in. An ‘epidemic of demotivation in lockdown children’ has been referenced internationally, with worse perseverance, and lower motivation in children than before the pandemic (Senft et al., 2022).

An intense decrease in standards of attainment in literacy and numeracy was also reported by all interviewees. While a negative impact on such standards were expected post-lockdown, the time it is taking children to catch up is what is alarming. The increased fascination and addiction to technology, and decreased use of oral language, literacy and numeracy has been cited as having a significant impact on children’s standards of attainment.

5.2.3 How teachers are trying to support their pupils

Mixed opinions were voiced throughout the interview process on the support, or lack of support available in schools post-lockdowns. Some teachers felt there was adequate resources available to support pupils with re-adjusting to school-life, and with any new or

heightened emotional issues they may be facing. While increased learning support was noted among most participants, an increase in social and emotional groups was also noted. CLASS hours appointed to schools in assisting with this re-adjustment to school has been utilised as schools deem necessary, for pupils who are "at significant risk of learning loss or at risk of early school leaving resulting from Covid-19" (DES, 2021).

Two participants had a mutual opinion of an extreme lack of support, with some schools having an 'assumption of normal resumption', failing to redeploy resources where necessary in this unprecedented time. Even prior to the pandemic, teachers have been actively seeking more training and development of resources in their schools relating to children's mental health (JCES, 2017). With a lack of support felt by these teachers, they have had to develop individual interventions to support their struggling pupils. Brain breaks, belly breathing, reading time, mindfulness colouring, worry boxes and many more were popular among the interviewees. Mindfulness programmes initiated upon returning to school seemed to have the most positive impact on children, with the strategies still used regularly.

5.3 Recommendations (300)

Based on the findings emerged from this piece of research, the researcher puts forward the following recommendations:

- Firstly, the general consensus regarding an increase in social and emotional issues post-Covid highlights the need for an increase in support. While a couple of interviewees felt adequately supported, there is still an obvious lack of support felt among teachers. Increased social and emotional support groups and drama and play therapy are two of a large range of supports which would provide the support these children need. CLASS

hours and SET hours should be redeployed where most necessary in the hope of supporting children struggling with various issues resulting from the pandemic.

- Relating to the lack of support available in schools, emotional support in the form of qualified psychologists should be made available to schools with children in need of them. The long-waiting list present in Ireland for children's psychologists needs to be addressed, with detrimental effects occurring as a result of a lack of help and support for children who need it. NEPS psychologists are available to some schools, however none of the interviewees reported the availability of them to their schools. With adequate psychological support to children, there is no doubt that a positive impact on teaching and learning would occur for the whole classroom.
- Lastly, the researcher recommends further research in the area of child wellbeing, and what can be done to support these children, particularly in Irish schools. With the focus on the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a lack of literature and studies carried out locally. Further research into what support can be made available would allow for recommendations and propositions to be made in supporting these children.

5.4 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on pupil well-being according to teachers. With a preliminary review of relevant literature the researcher gained an initial understanding of the subject area. The empirical research consisted of an in-depth interview process, resulting in key findings being discussed and analysed. Recommendations by the researcher have been discussed, with particular areas highlighted for future research.

References

American Academy of Pediatrics. (2021). COVID-19 Guidance for Safe Schools. Retrieved from https://www.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/

Bogels, S., Maric, M., Telman, L. & van Steensel, F. (2017). Are Anxiety Disorders in Children and Adolescents Less Impairing than ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorders? Associations with Child Quality of Life and Parental Stress and Psychopathology. Child Psychiatry & Human Development. *48*, 891-902.

Braun , V., & Clarke , V. (2012). Thematic analysis . *APA handbook of research methods in psychology*

Brooks, S., Webster, R., Smith, L., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. (2020). The Psychological Impact of Quarantine and How to Reduce It: Rapid Review of the Evidence. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, *395*(10227). https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3532534

Buhr, K., & Dugas, M. J. (2009). The role of fear of anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty in worry: An experimental manipulation. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 47(3), 215–223. doi:10.1016/j.brat.2008.12.004.

Cannon, M., Coughlan, H., Clarke, M., Harley, M., & Kelleher, I. (2013). The mental health of young people in Ireland: A report of the psychiatric epidemiology research across the lifespan (PERL) group. Dublin: Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

Capp, G. (2015). Our community, our schools: A case study of program design for school based mental health services. Children & Schools, *37*, 241–248.

Carleton, R. N., Collimore, K. C., & Asmundson, G. J. G. (2010). ‘‘It’s not just the judgements—It’s that I don’t know’’: Intolerance of uncertainty as a predictor of social anxiety. Journal of
Anxiety Disorders, 24(2), 189–195. doi:10.1016/j.janxdis.2009.10.007.

Carleton, R. N. (2012). The intolerance of uncertainty construct in the context of anxiety disorders: Theoretical and practical perspectives. Expert Review of Neurotherapeutics, 12(8), 937–947. doi:10.1586/ern.12.82

Carleton RN. Into the unknown: A review and synthesis of contemporary models involving uncertainty. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders.* 2016;39:30–43. doi: 10.1016/j.janxdis.2016.02.007

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Quarantine and Isolation. (2021). *Quarantine and Isolation | Quarantine | CDC*. Cdc.gov. Retrieved 7 October 2021, from https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/index.html.

Choy , L. (2014). The Strengths and Weaknesses of Research Methodology: Comparison and Complimentary between Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 19*(4).

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). Research Methods in Education (7th Ed.). Oxon: Routledge.

Collins, S. (2014). Effects on coping skills and anxiety of a universal school-based mental health intervention delivered in Scottish Primary Schools. School Psychology International. *35*(1), 85-100.

Creswell, J. (2003). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches.* Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Czeisler MÉ, Lane RI, Petrosky E, Wiley JF, Christensen A, Njai R, Weaver MD, Robbins R, Facer-Childs ER, Barger LK, Czeisler CA, Howard ME, Rajaratnam SMW. Mental health, substance use, and suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 pandemic—United States, June 24–30, 2020. *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.* 2020;*69*:1049–1057.

Department of Education. (2021). *Ministers Foley and Madigan launch Covid Learning and Supports Scheme for measures to mitigate learning loss and provide targeted additional teaching supports for students following Covid-19 school closures*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/13c7e-ministers-foley-and-madigan-launch-covid-learning-and-supports-scheme-for-measures-to-mitigate-learning-loss-and-provide-targeted-additional-teaching-supports-for-students-following-covid-19-school-closures/

Department of Education and Skills. (2017). *DEIS Plan 2017: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools*. Department of Education and Skills.

Department of Education and Skills. (2016). *Responding to Critical Incidents: NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools.*. Department of Education and Skills.

DeSocio, J., & Hootman, J. (2004). Children's mental health and school success. The Journal of School Nursing, *20*(4), 189–196.

Donlevy, V., Day, L., Andriescu, M., and Downes, P. (2019) *Assessment of the Implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving.* Commissioned Research Report across 35 countries for EU Commission, Directorate General, Education, Sport, Youth and Culture. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Dugas, M., Gagnon, F., Ladouceur, R., & Freeston, M. (1998). Generalized anxiety disorder: a preliminary test of a conceptual model. *Behaviour Research And Therapy*, *36*(2), 215-226. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0005-7967(97)00070-3

Esterwood, E., & Saeed, S. (2020). Past Epidemics, Natural Disasters, COVID19, and Mental Health: Learning from History as we Deal with the Present and Prepare for the Future. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, *91*(4), 1121-1133. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-020-09808-4

Flick , U. (2009). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* . London : Sage

Gentes, E. L., & Ruscio, A. M. (2011). A meta-analysis of the relation of intolerance of uncertainty to symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Clinical Psychology Review, 31(6), 923–933. doi:10. 1016/j.cpr.2011.05.001.

Horesh, D., & Brown, A. (2020). Traumatic stress in the age of COVID-19: A call to close critical gaps and adapt to new realities. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, And Policy*, *12*(4), 331-335. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000592

Irish College of Psychiatrics. (2005). A better future now: Position statement of psychiatric services for children and adolescents in Ireland. Dublin: Irish College of Psychiatrists

Joint Committee on Education and Skills. (2017). Report on Positive Mental Health in Schools. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas

Kar, N. (2009). Psychological impact of disasters on children: review of assessment and interventions. *World Journal Of Pediatrics*, *5*(1), 5-11.

Liu, M., Wang, L., Shi, Z., Zhang, Z., Zhang, K., & Shen, J. (2011). Mental Health Problems among Children One-Year after Sichuan Earthquake in China: A Follow-up Study. *Plos ONE*, *6*(2), e14706.

Matthews, T., Danese, A., Wertz, J., Ambler, A., Kelly, M., & Diver, A. et al. (2015). Social Isolation and Mental Health at Primary and Secondary School Entry: A Longitudinal Cohort Study. *Journal Of*

Mental Health Foundation (2002). The Mental Health Needs of Young People with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. Bright Futures: Working with Vulnerable Young People. London: Mental Health Foundation.

National Centre for Disaster Preparedness. (2010). Preliminary Findings of the Coastal Population Impact Study. New York: Mailman School of Public Health Columbia University.

National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health (UK). (2013). *Social Anxiety Disorder: Recognition, Assessment and Treatment*. British Psychological Society.

National Commission on Children and Disasters. (2010). *The 2010 Report to the President and Congress*. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

National Educational Psychological Service. (2022). *Normalising Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours A Guide for School Staff*. Retrieved from http://file:///Users/bronachgilroy/Downloads/85408_433e2296-1dd8-44ab-a0c0-4d2b4780d1e4.pdf

Oireachtas Library & Research Service (2012). Spotlight: promoting mental health in schools.

O'Dea, T. (2010). The views of students, parents and teachers concerning mental health terminology and mental health promotion in primary schools in Ireland (Doctoral Thesis). London: University of East London.

Osmanağaoğlu, N., Creswell, C., & Dodd, H. (2018). Intolerance of Uncertainty, anxiety, and worry in children and adolescents: A meta-analysis. *Journal Of Affective Disorders*, *225*, 80-90.

Perou, R., Bitsko, R. H., Blumberg, S. J., Pastor, P., Ghandour, R. M., Gfroerer, J. C., et al. (2013). Mental health surveillance among children—United States, 2005–2011. MMWR Surveillance Summary. *62*(1), 1–35.

Queensland Government, Queensland Health Education, Queensland (2005). A Toolbox for Creating Healthy Places to Learn, Work and Play

Robinson, E., Rowley, M., Beck, S., Carroll, D., & Apperly, I. (2006). Children's Sensitivity to Their Own Relative Ignorance: Handling of Possibilities Under Epistemic and Physical Uncertainty. *Child Development*, *77*(6), 1642-1655. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2006.00964.x

Senft, B., Liebhauser, A., Tremschnig, I., Ferijanz, E., & Wladika, W. (2022). Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Adolescents from the Perspective of Teachers. *Frontiers In Education*, *7*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.808015

Sprang, G., & Silman, M. (2013). Posttraumatic stress disorder in parents and youth after health-related disasters. *Disaster medicine and public health preparedness*, *7*(1), 105–110.

Statistics Canada. (2020). *The impact of theCOVID-19 pandemic on Canadian families and children* (p. 1). Statistics Canada.

Stein, M., & Kean, Y. M. (2000). Disability and quality of life in social phobia: Epidemiologic findings. The American Journal of Psychiatry, *157*, 1606–1613.

The American Academy Of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, *54*(3), 225-232. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2014.12.008

Tomasik, M., Helbling, L., & Moser, U. (2020). Educational gains of in-person vs. distance learning in primary and secondary schools: A natural experiment during the COVID-19 pandemic school closures in Switzerland. *International Journal Of Psychology*, *56*(4). https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12728

Tornay, K. (2022). 'Tired, Exhausted and Unmotivated': How Sonoma's Students Are Doing Amid Pandemic. *Sonoma Magazine*. Retrieved 19 April 2022, from https://www.sonomamag.com/tired-exhausted-and-unmotivated-how-sonomas-students-are-doing-amid-pandemic/.

Townsend, M., & Maller, C. (2006). Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing and Hands-on Contact with Nature: Perceptions of Principals and Teachers. *The International Journal Of Learning: Annual Review*, *12*(4), 359-372. https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9494/cgp/v12i04/46554

Weare, K. (2000). Promoting Mental, Emotional, and Social Health: A Whole-School Approach. Routledge: London and New York.

Wellington , J. (2000). Interviewing . *Educational Research* .
Zins , J., & Elias , M. (2007). Social and Emotional Learning: Promoting the Development of all Students . *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* , 233-255.

World Health Organization. (1992). *The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders : Clinical Description and Diagnostic Guidelines.* (10th ed.). World Health Organization.

World Health Organization (1998). WHO's Global School Health Initiative: Helping Schools to Become 'Health Promoting Schools', Geneva.

Appendices

Appendix A

List of questions for semi-structured interviews:

1. In your opinion, has the COVID-19 pandemic had any impact on pupil wellbeing in your class? If so, elaborate.

2. Have you noticed any particular changes in any of the pupils in your class? Has there been any changes in their wellbeing since returning to school?

3. In what ways have you noticed this affecting them? (emotionally, behaviourally, academically)

4. If you answered yes to Q.1, have you noticed anything that helps pupils' wellbeing / any interventions which have a positive effect?

5. Have you felt supported in school with regards to helping these pupils? Are there adequate resources available for you to help support them? Explain.

Appendix B
Research Participants

Teacher 1	+5 years teaching experience, teaching in DEIS Band 1 school West Dublin
Teacher 2	+7 years teaching experience, teaching in DEIS Band 2 school outside of Dublin
Teacher 3	+8 years teaching experience, mostly in DEIS Band 1 school, now substitute teacher in schools in North Dublin and rural Cavan
Teacher 4	+20 years teaching experience mostly in DEIS Band 1 school West Dublin, also in non-DEIS schools in Dublin
Teacher 5	+15 years teaching experience, teaching in a non-DEIS rural country school
Teacher 6	+12 years teaching experience, teaching in non-DEIS school in South Dublin
Teacher 7	+3 years teaching experience, teaching in DEIS Band 1 school North Dublin

Appendix C
Consent Form

Institiúid Oideachais MARINO Institute of Education
An Associated College of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

What are primary school teachers' perspectives on the prevalence of mental health and behavioural issues in pupils returning to school post-Covid-19?

Letter of Invitation

18/01/2022

Dear [Name],

I would like to invite you to participate in a study that I am conducting on the perspectives of primary school teachers' on the prevalence of mental health and behavioural issues in pupils returning to school post-Covid-19. I hope that the findings of the study will inform teachers and those working with pupils about this issue and the findings will be included in my research dissertation. Your participation would involve a 30 minute interview, consisting of a number of questions relevant to this topic, which I would ask you elaborate on. This research is being supervised by Fintan McCutcheon. Please take your time to read through the details of the study in the Project Information (attached) and if you agree to participate, please sign and return the attached Consent Form by email.

Your input would be very valuable to this study. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,
Brónach Gilroy
PME2
bgilroypme19@momail.mie.ie
0879982796

What are primary school teachers' perspectives on the prevalence of mental health and behavioural issues in pupils returning to school post-Covid-19?
Project Information

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

I am a final year student studying the Professional Masters in Education in Marino Institute of Education. This research will explore the perspectives of primary school teachers' on the prevalence of mental health and behavioural issues in pupils returning to school post-Covid-19 with the aim of gaining an insight into how these issues can affect pupils in their engagement in school and their social interactions. I have always been interested in learning more about children's mental health and I hope that this research will improve my practice and the practice of others by using evidence to better understand the ways in which we can support these children.

This dissertation research is being supervised by Fintan McCutcheon. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the personal data you provide. You are free to contact them should you have any questions or concerns about the study: fintan.McCutcheon@mie.ie .

PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH

Participation in this research involves one 30 minute interview in which I will ask you some questions relevant to the topic. The interview will consist of questions such as,
"In your opinion, has the COVID-19 pandemic had any impact on pupil wellbeing in your class?" "Have you felt supported in school with regards to helping these pupils? Are there adequate resources available for you to help support them?". If you allow, the interview will be recorded by audio recording to help with data analysis.

Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from this research for any or no reason, and at any time. The information you provide will only be used for the purpose of exploring the research question set out above and will not be reused. In line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legislation, only essential personal data will be collected and all identifiers will be disaggregated from the data as soon as possible after collection. MIE will be the Data Controller for GDPR purposes. With your consent, your personal data will be shared with my research supervisor but not with any other third party. Personal data will be destroyed upon completion of the research dissertation.

When reporting on the information you provide, your data will be presented using numeric identifiers and pseudonyms. Your anonymised data will be aggregated with information from other participants and documentary sources. Anonymised data will be shared in my dissertation and other research related activities e.g. presentations, journals,

conferences.

What are primary school teachers' perspectives on the prevalence of mental health and behavioural issues in pupils returning to school post-Covid-19? Consent Form

If you are happy to participate in this study, please complete the following consent form and return it to me by email (bgilroypme19@momail.mie.ie).

I understand and agree that:

I am over 18 years of age
The Project Information has been communicated to me
I am aware that I can withdraw from this project at any time up to when my data has been anonymised and amalgamated
I will participate voluntarily without incentive
My data being treated with confidentiality and anonymity
I will take part in one 30 minute interview
My interview will be recorded using an audio recorder
My personal data may be shared with the research supervisor
My anonymised data may be shared in this dissertation and via other research activities as they arise.

Name (PRINTED): _____

Name (Signature): _____

Date: _____