



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

IRISH PRIMARY SCHOOL LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19

Principals' Study Report 2020



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About This Report

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Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption over the past few months, forcing organisations globally to quickly adapt to the unprecedented shift in changing workplace demands. As a result, 3,240 primary schools in Ireland with 37,839 staff and 559,365 students have been facing immense, unforeseen challenges unlike anything previously experienced by this generation.

In order to help Irish primary schools to overcome these challenges, this national study focuses on principals as managers and leaders of school communities and the provision of digital education at Irish primary level during the lockdown. Principals are leaders who directly lead and influence staff, students, and parents during the crisis. Principals are crucial figures for establishing and fostering an environment which promotes successful practices, making them gatekeepers, to prioritise what is educationally and culturally of merit. Principals, as school leaders, play an important role in ensuring the school is running and that the school meets the educational, social and emotional needs of its students.

This crisis has forced educational systems across the globe to move online and is likely to transform what teaching and learning looks like in the coming years. This timely research project focusing on the principals in Irish primary schools plays a significant role in navigating education through the COVID-19 pandemic. It truly shows that research matters for educators and the youth of our nation.

The research team extend their gratitude to the Dean of Research at Trinity College Dublin and the Director of Research at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin for promoting this report.



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Vice President for Research/Dean of Research
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Ms. Amy Fahy is a final year doctoral scholar at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin and a practicing primary school teacher. Her research interests include leadership and management, leadership in crisis, wellbeing, digital learning, STEM education, music education, assessment and school improvement.



Dr. Colette Murphy is an Associate Professor in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, Education, Research and Communication at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. Her research interests include the life and work of Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky, sociocultural issues in science education, coteaching and cogenerative dialogue in science learning and teaching and Children's Rights-based research methodologies.



Dr. Na Fu (FCIPD, FTCD) is an Associate Professor, Director for MSc HRM at Trinity Business School and the Co-Director at the Trinity Centre for Digital Business. Her primary research interest is focused on strategic human resource management issues relevant to organisational growth and development. She has led a number of research projects in both the private and public sectors around people management relevant to organisational growth and innovation.



Ms. Tam Nguyen completed an MSc in Human Resource Management 2019/2020 at Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin. Tam is passionate about helping people to develop and reach their full potential in addition to assisting organisations to achieve business goals through talents.

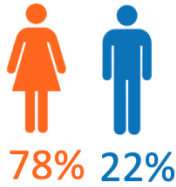
Acknowledgements

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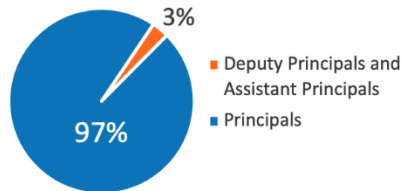
Key Findings in Numbers

PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

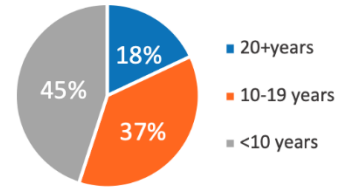
Female Male



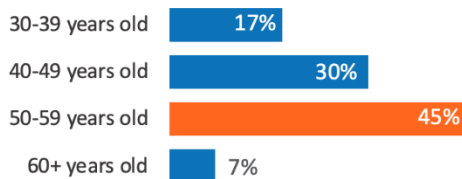
Role



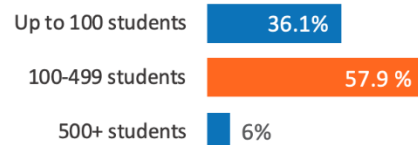
Tenure



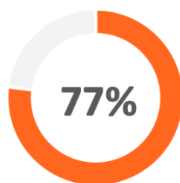
Age



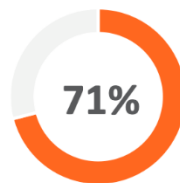
School size



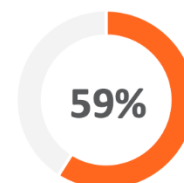
PRINCIPAL WELLBEING



overwhelmed by the crisis



emotionally exhausted



isolated and disconnected

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE



96%

agreed that their schools carried out and completed core tasks well



95% – 97%

agreed that their schools adapted well to changes during the crisis



93%

agreed that they made changes to the way their core tasks are completed



79%

agreed that they initiated better ways of doing core tasks

SUPPORT FROM STAFF MEMBERS

High human capital

90%+

reported that their staff were highly skilled, creative and experts at their particular jobs, developed new ideas and knowledge and shared insights/expertise with one another.

High level of staff trust

90%+

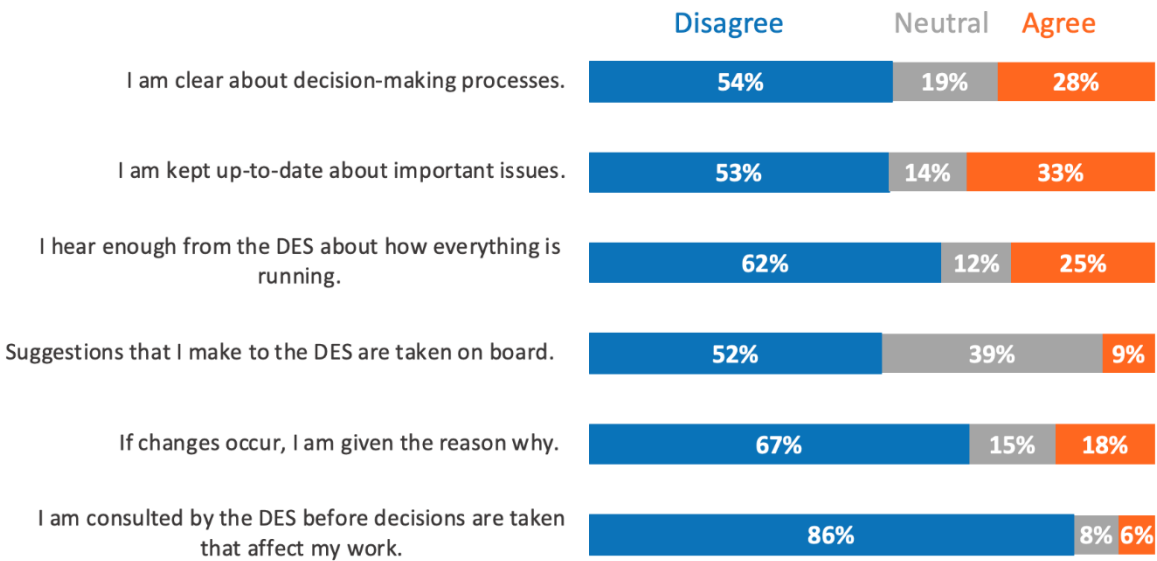
agreed that their staff members trusted them in a position of leadership and trusted each other.

High adaptivity

90%+

agreed that their staff changed quickly to adapt to new conditions, sought new ways to solve problems and quickly responded to change.

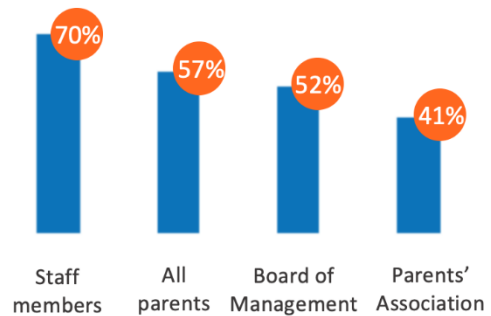
COMMUNICATION AND CONSULTATION WITH THE DES (DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS)



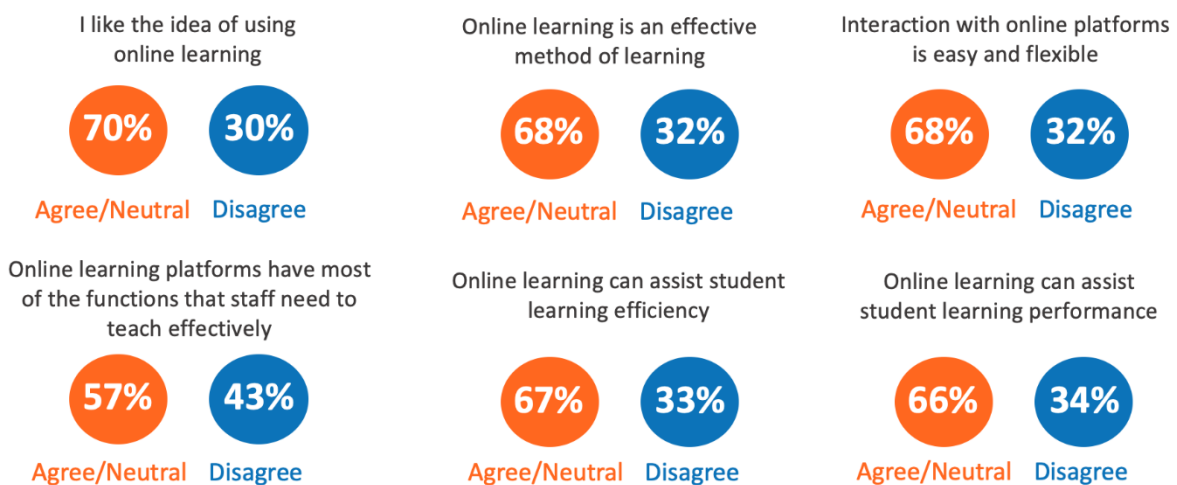
PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP



EFFECTIVE CONNECTIONS WITH MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS



ATTITUDE TOWARDS ONLINE LEARNING DURING THE LOCKDOWN



Executive Summary

This report was based on a major national study - 'School Leadership in Response to the COVID-19 Crisis'. The study is being led and conducted by a team of researchers at Trinity College Dublin and was formed in response to concerns from teaching management professionals.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures were implemented by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). Accordingly, given the changing demands and shift in the new way of working (including teaching remotely, communicating with staff via online platforms & planning for a safe return to school), many school principals have experienced a significant level of stress. This report identifies ways that principals navigated the initial stage of the pandemic and how leading during the pandemic has affected their personal wellbeing.

The purpose of this study was to explore leadership experiences in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It seeks to provide information which will inform supports that school management teams may benefit from. This report outlines a set of key themes that principals have expressed as being of importance regarding their role and demands, in addition to resources which principals feel might be of benefit to management teams going forward.

Based on an extensive literature review, a series of theoretically important factors were identified for building individual wellbeing and organisational performance during crisis. A questionnaire was designed including questions from published articles to ensure the reliability and validity of the results.

The survey examined several influential factors that potentially affect a range of principal and school outcomes including:

- Principal wellbeing
- Staff adaptivity
- School performance
- Online teaching adoption

The main drivers of these outcomes that were explored included:

- Communication and consultation from the Department of Education and Skills (DES)
- Support from staff members
- Principals' Leadership
- Effective connection with multiple stakeholders

The researchers carried out a detailed analysis of the data which involved statistical modelling to identify the drivers that have the greatest impact on these outcomes.

This executive summary provides a broad overview of the main findings from the survey. The main report provides a more in-depth overview of the findings based on the quantitative responses and comments shared by survey participants.

Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the findings are highlighted below:

- There has been a significant increase in job demands placed on school principals since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has proved challenging for many with regards to maintaining a work-life balance.
- The majority of principals have learned new skills under pressure to help them to adapt to and navigate school closures.

- The majority of principals are confident that their staff trust them and are confident in the management of the school.
- Principals highlighted their job satisfaction for working with students and staff members, expressing that their teams had been creative and bright and had coped well to complete core tasks during the crisis.
- The most adopted leadership style by principals was transformative leadership, followed by participative and directive leadership.
- Principals expressed dedication to engaging with parents and students to ensure that online learning was carried out to the best of their ability during school closures.
- Principals expected that receiving advanced notice before public directives are issued would be beneficial in helping them to navigate inquiries from parents etc.
- Teaching Principals experienced a significant increase in job demands during school closures with regards to managerial duties in addition to setting up and monitoring the online learning of their students.
- Principals of special schools and students with additional needs encountered difficulty with regards to accessing supports to provide individual students with appropriate online learning opportunities.
- Principals feel that advice and guidance for reopening/staying open with regards to safety, hygiene and staff/student illness procedures would be of great benefit to them.
- Inadequate broadband, lack of digital knowledge, no access to devices/learning materials; lack of relevant/targeted professional development and unavailability of funding were expressed as challenges for engaging with digital learning.
- Anxiety over the incredibly high workload, impossible balancing act, demands in supporting school children, managing own children and family, uncertainty about returning to work, and uncertainty about their future role and availability were commented on by principals in relation to their wellbeing and concerns.

Conclusion and Key Recommendations

Overall, the findings highlight that principals are confident in their abilities and their staff to perform a wide range of skills in their work roles, and that they have the propensity to deal with changes that arise.

Following the analysis of the data, the research highlighted three areas in which interventions might be made to enhance a successful transition to living with COVID-19.

- **Improved communications and greater involvement of principals**

Possible interventions here include: revitalising the DES communication and consultation system and making more use of expertise from principals to enhance the effectiveness of this process. Involvement with networks is strongly encouraged to provide a platform for principals to share and exchange knowledge and information, as well as for staff members in schools. More explicit use of knowledge sharing and knowledge dissemination such as online conferences, seminars and workshops as a central activity need to be in place. The communities of practice are a necessity in order to enhance collective ability to adapt to changes; for example, through regular principal and staff surveys and focus groups.

- **Providing professional development opportunities**

It is recommended that leadership crisis management training is to be provided for principals and their management teams in order to enhance their ability to cope during this pandemic and future potential crises. Increased attention placed on shared/distributed leadership, particularly during times of crisis would help to alleviate the increase in workload placed on

the principal. Optional team-building training should also be accessible to school management teams.

- **Offering additional support**

It is recommended that adequate IT infrastructure and support needs to be put in place for principals to enable them to meet directives. This includes: ensuring that adequate WIFI is available; equipping principals with devices and providing IT professional development in the areas of digital learning and communication. It is also recommended that supplemental individualised support (e.g. SNA and/or learning support teacher) is provided for students with additional needs (economic and special educational needs), to further allow the principal to focus their efforts on managerial duties. Also recommended is an online learning platform designed specifically for students with special educational needs (SEN).

Whilst long-term recommendations are discussed above, the table below identifies recommendations for immediate action.

Recommendations for Immediate Action

Suggested Actions	Recommendations for Immediate, Specific Actions	Relevant Stakeholders
Isolating children	Clarity is required regarding quarantining/isolation.	TÚSLA
Contact tracing	Fast response to contact tracing needed (less than 24 hours after a positive case is confirmed in the school community).	Health Service Executive (HSE)
Regional helplines	To ensure that prompt advice can be accessed by principals when required.	
Sanitising equipment	Direct provision of sanitising materials to avoid delays and inconsistencies with private companies.	
Substitution	Supply panel needs to increase in size to cover high levels of staff absence.	Department of Education and Skills (DES)
Administrative duties	Additional administrative staff to assist with increase in volume of phone calls (to parents, HSE etc.)	
Postponement of new initiatives and inspections	To allow principals to focus their full attention on keeping their schools functioning during this crisis.	
Principal wellbeing	Where possible, release important information/circulars during the school working day to ensure that principals have sufficient time in the evenings to maintain a work-life balance. Avoid releasing important information/circulars both at weekends and during the October school closure period to ensure that principals have opportunity to rest and recuperate.	
Working digitally	Selection/recommendation and financing of appropriate online learning platforms to use in cases of class/school closures. Enhanced training is required to prepare for effective hybrid/remote learning.	Independent researchers, PDST, Unions, Education Centres NCSE & other relevant stakeholders
Professional development, collaborative learning & sharing communities	Continuation of provision of webinars. Organisation of online conferences on Leadership & Working Digitally run by experts in the areas of IT and Human Resources. Focus groups/surveys to report, evaluate and enhance the effectiveness of supports.	



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