"This is Where the Care Can Step Up": A Typology of Nurturing Pedagogies in Primary Schools Serving Low-Income Communities During COVID-19 Closures

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Abstract

All schools possess a duty of care towards their students. However, this duty of care falls unevenly across schools, with those serving low-income communities often responding to the material and psychological effects of poverty as a priority. This duty of care for such schools was placed into stark relief during the period of COVID-19 school closures, when structural inequalities in society became particularly pronounced. Previous research has drawn distinctions between different forms of caring enacted in schools serving low-income communities. These range from practices centred on children's academic learning to those more concerned with children's welfare and well-being—which, for the purposes of this paper, we term as academic nurturing and affective nurturing respectively. Others recognise the need for schools in low-income communities to perform a dual role and engage in both forms of nurturing simultaneously—which we term as critical nurturing. This paper presents findings based on case studies from three designated disadvantaged primary schools in Ireland during pandemic-related closures. It draws on interviews from the Children's School Lives longitudinal study with the teachers, principals, and families of four Junior Infant children (typically aged four to five years). Our findings suggest a typology of nurturing pedagogies, with academic and affective nurturing emphasised to varying degrees across our three schools during this period. Narratives from interviewees also demonstrate the central role of school culture and leadership in achieving critical nurturing, with significant social justice implications for the education of children in schools serving low-income communities.

Keywords Care · Nurturing pedagogies · Educational disadvantage · Socio-economic disadvantage · COVID-19

Introduction

Broadly encompassing the obligation to ensure children's welfare and well-being, it is widely accepted that all schools possess a 'duty of care' to their students (Butlin, 2021). This obligation exists alongside schools' responsibility to support children's academic progression and success. However, it has been noted that the duty of care falls unevenly across schools (Moss et al., 2020). It cannot be separated from wider structural inequalities which shape the socioeconomic context in which a school is situated. Previous research has demonstrated that it is often necessary for schools serving

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low-income communities to respond to the material and psychological effects of child poverty as a priority (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Barber, 2002; Devine & McGillicuddy, 2016; Martin & Amin, 2020). Such effects of child poverty have been documented to include adverse influences on children's cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural development, as well as on their health (Li & Chzhen, 2023; Treanor, 2020). It is in this context that Crean et al. (2023) argue that the duty of care for schools in low-income communities is informed by a knowledge of the additional and imminent, yet possibly unmet, welfare and well-being needs of children living in poverty. This duty of care for such schools became particularly pronounced during the period of COVID-19 closures (Crean et al., 2023; Moss et al., 2020), a period which threatened to widen already existing socioeconomic inequalities in education (Carroll & McCoy, 2021; Doyle, 2020). Research from this period illustrates that Irish schools endeavoured to foster a sense of community and maintain relationships with children through online contact (Mohan et al., 2020), with those in low-income communities particularly doing so in order to maintain children's engagement with remote learning (Bray et al., 2021; Donegan et al., 2023; Murphy & Devine, 2023).

In this paper, we draw on case studies from the early primary years in Ireland as an exemplar of the experiences of schools serving low-income communities during COVID-19 closures. The schools were designated as 'DEIS Band 1' status by the Department of Education and Skills, denoting their location in "communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion" (2017, p. 6). Ireland's mandated lockdown at this time was amongst the longest and most stringent internationally (Hale et al., 2021), with the first period of school closures lasting for almost four months. Research conducted in the Irish primary context during this period underscores the dual role of designated disadvantaged schools as both an education provider and a frontline service for children living in poverty (Crean et al., 2023). This dual role encompasses the complex duty of care enacted by such schools—caring for children's welfare and well-being, while simultaneously maintaining academic engagement and progression. Ireland's education system also reflects trends internationally which increasingly emphasise care-related approaches, such as trauma-informed practice, social and emotional learning, mindfulness, and restorative practice (Thomas et al., 2019). A systematic review of Irish educational legislation, policies, circulars, and curricula notes a significant shift in discourse relating to children and childhood over time (Devine, 1999). This includes the increasing positioning of care as a central dimension of education (O'Flaherty & McCormack, 2023), alongside a simultaneous emphasis on children's academic performance and the monitoring thereof (Conway & Murphy, 2013; Devine, 2013a). Against this backdrop, we seek to further examine the experiences of primary schools serving low-income communities during COVID-19 closures in realising their distinct duty of care, encompassing the dual role described above.

Schools in Low-Income Communities as Sites of Nurture and Care

Our analysis is foregrounded in Noddings' work on the 'ethic of care.' Noddings (2005) advances a vision of education which argues that academic learning, while important, "cannot be the first priority of schools" (p. 10). Rather, her work emphasises the need for schools to be responsive to social circumstances (2005), with caring characterised as a "moral orientation to teaching" (1988, p. 215). Within such an orientation, a 'caring relation' exists between the 'one-caring' and the 'cared-for' (Noddings, 2005, 2013)—between teacher and child. Caring encounters between teachers and children are described to comprise three characteristics. First, Noddings (2005) argues that it is necessary for teachers to attend to the expressed, and not assumed, needs of children. Termed as 'engrossment,' Noddings (2005) suggests that this attentiveness enables teachers to meaningfully see and feel the needs of children. Second, Noddings (2012) proposes that such engrossment leads to 'motivational displacement' for teachers. Characterised as "a tug towards helping" (Noddings, 2012, p. 772), this involves teachers directing the flow of their motive energy towards the expressed needs of children in a manner which leads to caring action. Importantly, it is this action which distinguishes the practice of 'caring for' from the abstract concept of 'caring about' (Noddings, 2013). Third, Noddings (2013) stipulates that a caring encounter must involve 'reciprocity,' emphasising that teachers and children in a caring relation are "reciprocally dependent" (p. 58). However, such reciprocity is not synonymous with equality or symmetry, but simply requires that children acknowledge the teacher's caring action in some positive manner (Noddings, 2013).

In this paper, we characterise the caring actions discussed above as 'nurturing pedagogies,' broadly encompassing practices that foster care and nurturance in education (Velasquez et al., 2013). The term, originally developed by Goodlad (1990), is used interchangeably throughout the literature, including as 'pedagogies of care' or simply as 'caring.' Hayes and Filipović (2018) argue that 'nurture' is a more appropriate term than 'care' as it provides a more engaging and active image of the process of nourishing, rearing, fostering, training, and educating a child. A review of the literature in the area highlights a pattern whereby individuals interpret their experience of nurturing pedagogies across two domains: a domain of 'academic nurturing,' centred on caring for children's academic progression and success, and a domain of 'affective nurturing,' related to caring for children's welfare and well-being. This pattern

was demonstrated in research with teachers and school leaders (Garza et al., 2014; Miller, 2021; Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016; Vogt, 2002), as well as in research with children themselves (Bass, 2019; Garza & Soto Huerta, 2014; Jeffrey et al., 2013; Tosolt, 2010). Research also indicates that children from traditionally marginalised groups, such as racial or ethnic minorities (Beneke, 2022; Tosolt, 2010) and girls (Garza & Soto Huerta, 2014), express a preference for academic forms of nurturing over those more closely related to the affective domain. In Irish schools, children have been shown not only to recognise the importance of effective teaching approaches, but also the care received from their teachers to their lives after school (O'Flaherty et al., 2018), reflecting our emphasis on academic nurturing and affective nurturing respectively. Drawing on Noddings' (2013) concept of engrossment, such understandings of children's preferences are essential in responding to their expressed, rather than assumed, needs, thereby supporting the prospect of reciprocity in a caring encounter.

Research conducted by Valenzuela (1999) in a majority-Latinx high school serving a low-income community in the United States provides a complementary conceptualisation of nurturing pedagogies. Valenzuela proposes the competing notions of 'aesthetic caring,' a commitment to ideas and practices which purportedly enhance student achievement, and 'authentic caring,' which emphasises the relations of reciprocity between teachers and children, each of which respectively align with our focus on academic nurturing and affective nurturing. This is further developed by Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) in their research with two American high schools, again with low-income majority-Latinx populations, in which they present the contrasting concepts of 'soft caring' and 'hard caring.' Soft caring, which is comparable to affective nurturing, originates from teachers' sympathy for the circumstances of children living in poverty, leading to the well-intentioned prioritisation of their welfare and well-being at the expense of academic expectations. By contrast, hard caring is presented as the combination of high expectations for academic performance with supportive relationships between teachers and children, reflecting the simultaneous enactment of academic nurturing and affective nurturing. As such, this resembles the successful realisation of the dual role of schools serving low-income communities discussed above—caring for children's welfare and well-being, while simultaneously supporting their academic progression and success (Crean et al., 2023). Research has established that schools with caring as a core value and strong leadership support are most likely to demonstrate practices reflective of such hard caring (Ryu et al., 2022; Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016; Walls, 2022).

Research has also shown, however, that schools in low-income communities sometimes treat academic nurturing and affective nurturing as binaries, leading them to prioritise one over the other (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Crean et al., 2023; Martin & Amin, 2020; Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016). For instance, the prioritisation of affective nurturing in schools serving low-income communities has been associated with a lowering of academic expectations for children, with detrimental effects on their learning (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesús, 2006). In the Irish context, there is some evidence to suggest the existence of a 'pedagogic drift' (Devine & McGillicuddy, 2016) in such schools, characterised by an emphasis on children's welfare and well-being over and above expectations for academic learning (Nolan & MacRuairc, 2022; Devine & McGillicuddy, 2016). Reflecting Lingard and Keddie's (2013) discussion of 'pedagogies of indifference,' characterised by a lack of intellectual demand, non-connectedness, and an absence of working with and valuing difference, such practices carry significant social justice implications for children in schools serving low-income communities.

These trends do not occur in isolation, however, and must be considered within the wider context of accountability-driven neoliberal reforms in education (Apple, 2001; Conway & Murphy, 2013; Devine & Luttrell, 2013; Reay, 2020), the logic of which is antithetical to the 'logic of care' (Lynch et al., 2021). It is a context in which teachers are expected to navigate the tensions associated with responding to children's expressed needs, as posited in Noddings' (2013) concept of engrossment, within a neoliberal education system which emphasises performance and accountability along a narrow range of measures. In such contexts, teachers' care for children and concern about their holistic development often occurs outside of the prescribed curriculum, largely arising from teacher goodwill and altruism, as noted in research in Irish schools (O'Flaherty & McCormack, 2018). Moreover, schools that place a concerted emphasis on academic outcomes to the detriment of affective nurturing have been shown to give rise to feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction from children (Lewis & Pearce, 2022). These performance-driven contexts have also been associated with a form of 'instrumental caring' (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2020), where affective nurturing is practised not as a good in and of itself, but rather as a route to improving children's academic outcomes in assessments used for accountability measures (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2020; Walls, 2022).

Crean's (2018) concept of 'care consciousness' provides a useful lens through which to perceive these tensions. The concept represents a commitment to the care needs of others arising from discontent with, and desire to challenge, the circumstances which engender those care needs, thereby giving it emancipatory potential (Crean, 2018; Crean et al., 2023). Indeed, in serving to bring about caring actions, care consciousness functions as a basis for Noddings' (2013) concept of motivational displacement. Therefore, we argue that, in order to aspire to the emancipatory ideals of care

consciousness, teachers in schools serving low-income communities must simultaneously attend to both academic nurturing and affective nurturing in their practice—what we term as 'critical nurturing.' Such critical nurturing not only focuses on children's welfare and well-being as 'beings' in the present, but also their academic progression and success in supporting their future 'becomings' (Qvortrup, 2009; Zeiher et al., 2007). Importantly, however, while we present critical nurturing as minimally essential to support flourishing for children living in poverty, we acknowledge that such pedagogies alone cannot redress structural inequalities created elsewhere (Lingard & Mills, 2007). As such, although pedagogy may indeed be transformative for children (Devine, 2013a), the ultimate realisation of social justice and emancipation must be located within the wider structural context of redistribution and equality. Nonetheless, on a micro level, we consider critical nurturing to wholly represent the practice of a care*ful* education (Devine, 2013a) in schools serving low-income communities, with transformative potential to support flourishing for children living in poverty. The remainder of this paper explores issues relating to the nurturing pedagogies presented above with respect to the following research questions:

(1) To what extent did teachers in the designated disadvantaged primary schools in this research emphasise academic nurturing and affective nurturing in their practice during COVID-19 closures?
(2) What differences, if any, existed between schools in their enactment of nurturing pedagogies during this period?
(3) What school-level factors influenced the enactment of nurturing pedagogies in our designated disadvantaged schools at this time?

Research Design and Methodology

This section introduces the Children's School Lives longitudinal study and situates the present paper within the broader project. We also detail the qualitative case studies considered, the method of data analysis employed, and the researchers' contributions to the study.

The Children's School Lives Longitudinal Study

This research draws on data from Ireland's national longitudinal study of primary schooling, Children's School Lives[1] (CSL). The study employs a longitudinal cross-sequential design conducted over five years from 2018 to 2023,

following two nationally representative cohorts of children from 189 primary schools, reflecting the full range of school types in relation to size, patronage, socioeconomic status, gender profile, and location (i.e., urban/rural). The study also incorporates a sub-sample of thirteen schools in which in-depth case studies are conducted each year. These case studies involve qualitative ethnographies in each school, including field notes based on classroom and schoolyard observations, interviews and focus groups with children, families, teachers, principals, and other school personnel, and participatory research methods with children (see Donegan et al., 2023). In this paper, we draw on data from three such case study schools, selected due to their designated disadvantaged status as 'DEIS Band 1' (Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

Owing to COVID-19 school closures commencing in March 2020, it was necessary to adapt the research methods for the coinciding wave of CSL data collection (see Symonds et al., 2020). With schools closed, ethnographic case studies were not viable as intended. Instead, semi-structured interviews were conducted with adult stakeholders from each case study school, including teachers, principals, parents, and grandparents. Interviews were facilitated using the video conferencing platform, Zoom. Participants were asked questions about their experience of the pandemic and remote learning, as well as their perceptions of children's engagement and well-being during this period. Each interview was voice recorded and transcribed using a professional transcription service.

This paper draws on interviews conducted with adult stakeholders from the three designated disadvantaged case study schools, provided with the pseudonyms Ardnakinna, Cashla, and Poolbeg. All three focus schools were located in urban areas. Two schools were single-sex, with Ardnakinna serving girls only and Poolbeg serving boys only. Cashla was co-educational. During this wave of CSL data collection, the cohort being considered in these schools were in Junior Infants (typically aged four to five years), the first year of primary schooling in Ireland. Interviewees included principals, teachers, and home-school-community liaison (HSCL) coordinators at the three schools, as well as the parents and grandparents of a number of children in each school. Table 1 overviews the participants from each interviewee category across the three focus schools. The study followed appropriate ethical guidelines and was approved by the University ethics committee. Pseudonyms for participants and schools are used throughout.

Data Analysis

Each researcher made individual contributions to this paper, including conceptualisation and the preparation of the manuscript, as well as the design of interview schedules

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Table 1 Participants by interviewee category across schools

	Principal	Junior infant teacher	HSCL coordinator	Junior infant parent	Junior infant grantparent	Total
Ardnakinna	1	1	–	1	–	3
Cashla	1	1	1	2	2	7
Poolbeg	1	1	–	1	–	3
Total	3	3	1	4	2	13

and the process of data collection. The first author engaged in the analysis of interviews from the three focus schools. Interviews were, first, inductively coded using MAXQDA software, generating 61 unique codes. Appendix 1 details the twelve most frequently applied codes across the thirteen interviews, along with the frequency of their application. Subsequently, adhering to the iterative principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), clusters of related codes were created, and emergent themes identified as a 'conceptual glue' to hold them together (Mihas, 2023), ultimately leading to the identification of two themes relating to the domains of academic nurturing and affective nurturing presented above. Throughout this process, the positioning of the first author as a former teacher in a school serving a low-income community during the period of pandemic-related closures was reflexively acknowledged, ensuring the continuous identification and consideration of any potential biases or assumptions which may have arisen (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Findings

During the period of COVID-19 closures, interviewees across the three focus schools spoke about academic nurturing and affective nurturing to varying degrees. They all discussed concerns related to maintaining academic engagement and progression during the closures, along with the manner in which these concerns were addressed. However, while interviewees from each school also spoke about supporting children's welfare and well-being, the degree to which it was emphasised varied starkly across schools. Here, we examine some of the contextual differences which may explain such variation. Our analysis is presented under two main themes: universal concern for academic nurturing and differing emphasis on affective nurturing.

Universal Concern for Academic Nurturing

In all three schools, school personnel expressed concern for the negative impact of closures on children's academic learning, often associating their concern with the low-income communities in which the schools were situated. As such, maintaining children's engagement in remote learning was a priority, with school personnel identifying the need to maintain communication with families, particularly those who became increasingly difficult to reach without the daily in-person contact of school:

> Our concern is that, without the structure of school and the focus on education, maybe pre-existing family attitudes towards education that are negative might assert themselves to a greater extent than they would have had the school been opened. (Ciarán, principal, Cashla, co-ed)
> Communicating… was really to the forefront in our thinking, and the context obviously would be that we would really need to mind our parents and try and keep the levels of engagement up hugely. (Áine, principal, Ardnakinna, all girls)
> Some say they don't have an email address… So, I don't know whether it is a lack of interest in engaging or is it more grief to be making them do work every day. Where do you draw the line as regards a balance? (Paula, principal, Poolbeg, all boys)

This was noted to be particularly important in the context of the early primary years, wherein it was necessary for parents to play an intermediary role between teachers and children to ensure engagement with remote learning:

> We're not allowed to link directly with the kids yet. We have been going through the parents as the intermediaries. (Ciarán, principal, Cashla, co-ed)
> Our children are so small. We're really relying on the adults to engage for them. (Clara, class teacher, Cashla, co-ed)
> They need the parents to download the app for them and to do the things for them. Whereas if you're in Third, Fourth, Fifth, or Sixth [Class], the kids kind of go about it themselves. (Pamela, class teacher, Poolbeg, all boys)
> My class actually has really high engagement, I think, in comparison to a lot of the classes in the school… Usually parents are more enthusiastic in Junior Infants - and then they get less enthusiastic as the schooling goes on. (Alice, class teacher, Ardnakinna, all girls)

However, despite the best efforts of school personnel to maintain engagement, some families remained difficult to

reach, particularly as the period of closures progressed. This required schools to respond in increasingly creative ways in order to encourage engagement with remote learning. For instance, as the delivery of food packs represented an element of designated disadvantaged schools' role at that time, school personnel in two of our focus schools described using such occasions as opportunities to check in on families with poor engagement:

> We've been sneaking check-ins in other ways… We've been dropping books to people's doors, we've been dropping food to doors… We have been getting covert info on how families are doing. (Ciarán, principal, Cashla, co-ed)
> I was slightly concerned when I spoke to parents just about the situation and I just used—I kind of grabbed—one of the food deliveries… So it was kind of an excuse for me to just check up and see how things were. (Caroline, HSCL coordinator, Cashla, co-ed)
> When they hand out the food parcels they get to chat to them and ask if they need anything or if they're alright. (Paula, principal, Poolbeg, all boys)

Nonetheless, while school personnel strove to maintain levels of engagement, they also expressed concerns about the quality of learning experiences achieved through remote learning:

> We have realised that technology cannot replace good teaching and good people… just good old-fashioned proper teaching is more effective than any tech can be. As great and all as tech is, there is a time and a place for it, and there is a limit to its usefulness. (Áine, principal, Ardnakinna, all girls)
> You try and do it in the same way as you would in a face-to-face classroom, so of course there are going to be challenges. (Ciarán, principal, Cashla, co-ed)

These concerns led to the creation of a curriculum hierarchy in two of our schools, with teachers prioritising particular subjects in which to maximise children's learning:

> We have chosen the core subjects and a lot of it has gone to the wayside outside of that. So, we have decided for us their phonics, their Maths, and their Irish are what we're going to really set things to. (Clara, class teacher, Cashla, co-ed)
> A lot of what comes up in Junior Infants is just reinforced in Senior Infants, whereas for the core subjects it really builds all the time. So, we're trying to just focus on what builds. (Clara, class teacher, Cashla, co-ed)
> We would really be focusing on Maths and English at the moment, just because you need the parents at home to help the kids… A lot of our parents would be afraid

of Irish, or they would find it very difficult, or they just would be very apprehensive to even try it… I'd say Irish isn't being done at all. (Pamela, class teacher, Poolbeg, all boys)

In addition to school personnel, the parents of children engaging in remote learning also spoke about its value, highlighting the need to maintain academic progression, as well as its role in creating a sense of routine:

> They're kind of a little bit behind. There's certain tricky words where they should have been doing that in April. (Cathleen, parent, Cashla, co-ed)
> I need a bit of a routine… I just found it would help me get through the day because the days were very long. (Cathleen, parent, Cashla, co-ed)
> You get up. You'll have your breakfast. We'll divide your schoolwork out over the five days. (Patricia, parent, Poolbeg, all boys)
> At this stage a lot of them have built up their own routines... and they're telling you what they do and their little timetables. (Alice, class teacher, Ardnakinna, all girls)

However, despite this value placed on remote learning by parents, some expressed apprehension about their ability to support their children's learning. This apprehension was alleviated by the availability of teachers and school personnel to parents, albeit that such availability sometimes came at an emotional cost for teachers:

> A lot of the parents who are engaging but not sending the work back. It's because they feel a little bit embarrassed [about] the quality of the work. (Ciarán, principal, Cashla, co-ed)
> When there's no teacher there to ask, and they're looking at me and I'm going, "I haven't a clue," because everything has changed since I was in school. (Patricia, parent, Poolbeg, all boys)
> I was trying to show her, today even, to do a number four but I didn't know whether the number four goes on the line or above the line… I then text her teacher and just showed her a picture and asked her which one was the right one to do. (Cathleen, parent, Cashla, co-ed)
> The problem, though, is trying to stop it… You're getting emails from parents right through to maybe seven, eight, nine [o'clock]. And it's kind of trying not to reply to them when they're buzzing up on your phone. (Alice, class teacher, Ardnakinna, all girls)

The accounts of our interviewees demonstrate universal concern for academic nurturing across our three designated disadvantaged schools. Engagement in remote learning was encouraged by maintaining communication with families

through varied and creative means, with particular concern associated with the low-income communities in which the schools were situated. This was especially important in the context of the early primary years due to the intermediary role played by parents. Despite this, the limitations of remote learning were readily acknowledged by school personnel, sometimes leading to the creation of a curriculum hierarchy to maximise children's learning in particular subjects. Despite some apprehension about their ability to support children's learning, parents valued remote learning due to the sense of routine it created.

Differing Emphasis on Affective Nurturing

While interviewees expressed universal concern for academic nurturing as outlined, the emphasis placed on affective nurturing differed starkly across schools. The high levels of care for children's welfare and well-being identified in the accounts of interviewees from Cashla greatly outweighed those expressed by interviewees in our other two case study schools. Nonetheless, all three schools highlighted the optional nature of remote learning to families, demonstrating a particular concern for the well-being of children and their families:

> It's all suggested work and they know that they can pick and choose from it. (Alice, class teacher, Ardnakinna, all girls)
> They'll say,… "There is absolutely no pressure. You do what you can. If you can't get it done, that's fine. Don't be worrying about it." (Patricia, parent, Poolbeg, all boys)
> Whatever about the kids not knowing certain sums or letters next year. We'll catch up on that… This is where the care can step up. (Ciarán, principal, Cashla, co-ed)
> It's not compulsory, you don't have to do the homework. They've asked if you possibly could do it, but they're not putting any pressure on anyone. (Cathleen, parent, Cashla, co-ed)

This demonstration of concern for the well-being of children and their families was accompanied by the direct expression of such concern by personnel from two of our case study schools, Ardnakinna and Cashla:

> They're having fun, they're happy. I think just seeing them happy is the main thing. (Alice, class teacher, Ardnakinna, all girls)
> The majority of people are really trying to make things pleasant for their kids. Like make things easier… and even parents just want their kids to be happy and I think that's the number one right of a

child is that they can be happy and carefree. (Caroline, HSCL coordinator, Cashla, co-ed)

Furthermore, accounts from personnel at the same two schools, Ardnakinna and Cashla, also highlighted the central role of maintaining positive relationships with parents and supporting their well-being:

> I keep trying to reassure them, "I'm not checking up on you doing work, I'm just checking in to make sure that everything's okay. If there's anything I can help you with." (Alice, class teacher, Ardnakinna, all girls)
> We hear what you're saying. We feel what you're going through too. We all have hard days and different days, and, today, I'm here to tell you that you did a great job. (Clara, class teacher, Cashla, co-ed)

Similarly, personnel from the two schools in question also spoke about supporting positive relationships with and between children in this regard:

> We do [call families] every two weeks, and that's really to reassure the kids that, even though they're not seeing their teacher, that she's still there. (Áine, principal, Ardnakinna, all girls)
> Some of the parents send in pictures of the kids… doing different activities and stuff. And then we pop them up on slide shows and stuff. So, they love looking through the pictures on the website and seeing each other. (Alice, class teacher, Ardnakinna, all girls)
> Some of them [teachers] have just barely put their face [camera] on now, and it's a quick check-in now. "Hello kids, I miss you," and that's huge for them. (Ciarán, principal, Cashla, co-ed)

Finally, while there was an evident emphasis on affective nurturing in Ardnakinna, and to a lesser extent in Poolbeg, only Cashla demonstrated an overarching, schoolwide culture of affective nurturing. This culture was overtly communicated by the principal of the school and was strongly embedded in his narratives about the values and mission of the school:

> If the attitude has formed that the school couldn't care less, … that will poison the relationship for years to come, but … I'm hoping, in September, we'll come back and the relationships will be stronger than ever because they'll say, "God, you … really went over and above to try and do what you can." (Ciarán, principal, Cashla, co-ed)
> We're a community hub now and we have teachers doing social care work, knocking on doors and meeting families in their front gardens doing human face-to-face check-ins. It's like, we're made for this kind of situation. (Ciarán, principal, Cashla, co-ed)

These accounts from the principal about school culture and mission evidently permeated practices at Cashla during the period of closures, as reflected in the accounts of other school personnel and parents:

> We're very fortunate to be led by somebody who has … such an overarching idea of what he wants: "Let's make sure everybody is well and let's make sure everybody is happy. Let's make sure that our families are well looked after and they have the supports they need, and everything else will follow." (Clara, class teacher, Cashla, co-ed)
>
> It's not just professional… There's a personal level with everybody in that school. (Carlos, parent, Cashla, co-ed)
>
> I would highly rate the school… I think they look after people, you know, and they check in on people. I think they're all about, you know, the community… I think it's a brilliant school. (Cathleen, parent, Cashla, co-ed)

The accounts of interviewees demonstrate differing degrees of emphasis on affective nurturing across our three designated disadvantaged schools during COVID-19 closures. Each school demonstrated concern for the well-being of children and their families by highlighting the optional nature of remote learning. School personnel from both Ardnakinna and Cashla also spoke about the importance of maintaining positive relationships with parents and children. However, practices at Cashla distinctively exhibited an overarching culture of affective nurturing, communicated by school leadership as central to the values and mission of the school and reflected in school practice as described by other school personnel and parents.

A Typology of Nurturing Pedagogies in Schools Serving Low-Income Communities

Despite serving similarly marginalised communities, the nurturing pedagogies evident in our three designated disadvantaged schools differed greatly during the period of COVID-19 closures. Our findings demonstrate high levels of concern for academic nurturing across all three schools. By contrast, the extent to which affective nurturing was emphasised differed starkly, with only interviewees at Cashla overtly identifying it as a central part of the school's culture and mission. We present these variations in terms of a typology of nurturing pedagogies, situating each of our schools along a biaxial continuum, the axes of which illustrate the extent to which academic nurturing and affective nurturing were emphasised during the period of COVID-19 closures. The placement of schools within the typology in Fig. 1 reflects the universal concern for academic nurturing
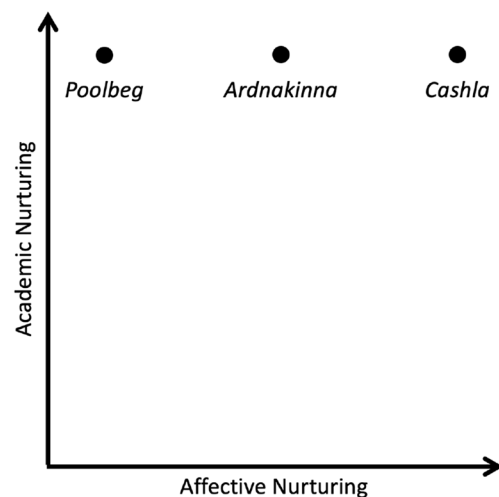

Fig. 1 Focus schools situated within a typology of nurturing pedagogies

and the differing emphasis on affective nurturing outlined above.

The universal concern for academic nurturing in our three schools during pandemic-related closures contrasts with previous research demonstrating a lowering of academic expectations and rigour in schools serving low-income communities (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Devine & McGillicuddy, 2016; Lingard & Keddie, 2013; Nolan & MacRuairc, 2022). It is important to note, however, that our findings reflect the extent to which academic nurturing was emphasised in the narratives of our interviewees, rather than direct observations of remote learning pedagogies during this period. As such, we acknowledge the potential for contradictions between how teachers may talk about their pedagogy and what they do in practice (Devine & McGillicuddy, 2016). Indeed, this is reflected in the accounts of some school personnel regarding the limitations of remote learning. Nonetheless, the high levels of concern for academic nurturing across our three schools during this period indicates an absence of soft caring (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006), characterised by a detrimental lowering of academic expectations in schools serving low-income communities in order to prioritise children's welfare and well-being. Such concern for academic nurturing is particularly evident in the existence of a curriculum hierarchy in two of our schools. Conscious of potential negative effects on standardised test scores and performative accountability (Apple, 2001; Conway & Murphy, 2013; Devine & Luttrell, 2013; Reay, 2020), teachers may have chosen to prioritise the 'core subjects' during remote learning. It is also possible that personnel in these schools, in the absence of seeing children in person each day, expected families to fulfil children's affective nurturing needs. Additionally, the value placed on academic nurturing by parents in our three schools, particularly

in relation to the sense of routine created by remote learning, may have functioned as a type of positive feedback loop for teachers engaging in such practices. Indeed, owing to the intermediary role played by parents during this period, they may have provided energy to the reciprocally dependent caring relation, as characterised by Noddings (2005). Parents' expressed appreciation for remote learning may also reflect previous research which demonstrates that individuals from traditionally marginalised groups express a preference for academic nurturing practices (Beneke, 2022; Garza & Soto Huerta, 2014; Tosolt, 2010).

In contrast, Cashla was the only school to demonstrate a simultaneous concerted emphasis on affective nurturing. This simultaneous consideration of academic and affective nurturing, which we term as critical nurturing, contrasts with previous research documenting their treatment as binaries in schools serving low-income communities (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Crean et al., 2023; Martin & Amin, 2020). Instead, narratives from interviewees at Cashla reflect the fulfilment of the dual role which such schools are expected to play in society (Crean et al., 2023). Evident was their aspiration to the emancipatory ideals of care consciousness, which not only emphasise children's welfare and well-being as 'beings' in the present, but also their academic progression and success in supporting their future 'becomings' (Qvortrup, 2009; Zeiher et al., 2007). In Cashla, affective nurturing 'stepped up' alongside academic nurturing, informed by a wider school culture which was overtly communicated by school leadership. The value-laden practices of the principal at Cashla served to shape the culture and mission of the school as an institution, informing a logic of practice centred around critical nurturing (Barber, 2002; Devine, 2013b; Kyriakides et al., 2019). This reflects previous research which established that such schools were found to have strong leadership support and caring as a core value (Ryu et al., 2022; Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016; Walls, 2022). Our extended period of research with Cashla identified the strong culture and mission of affective nurturing promoted by the school leadership team, a culture which came into sharp focus during the COVID-19 closures. By contrast, such a culture may have been more challenging to establish for leadership at both Ardnakinna and Poolbeg in the absence of in-person contact at this time. In addition, owing to both schools' high levels of concern for academic nurturing as outlined, their simultaneous emphasis on affective nurturing may have been precluded by the perceived binarism relating to nurturing pedagogies discussed above (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Crean et al., 2023; Martin & Amin, 2020). While Tichnor-Wagner and Allen (2016) demonstrated a link between the absence of affective nurturing and negative indicators of wider school culture (e.g., distrust of leadership, fragmented vision, lack of support structures), no such evidence was found in either

Ardnakinna or Poolbeg. Notably, the gender composition of our focus schools did not seem to be a distinguishing factor in their narratives on nurture and care.

Concluding Comments

This paper underscores the dual role played by schools serving low-income communities, comparing the experiences of three designated disadvantaged primary schools in realising academic nurturing and affective nurturing in their practice during COVID-19 closures. While the case study nature of this research limits the generalisability of our findings, we argue that our typology has significant transferability to schools in similar low-income contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), both in the post-pandemic educational landscape, as well as in the hypothetical context of future long-term school closures. Our typology facilitates the comparison of schools in low-income communities by situating the extent to which they emphasise academic nurturing and affective nurturing in their practice within a biaxial continuum. The universal concern for academic nurturing across the three focus schools during pandemic-related closures challenges assumptions of a pedagogic deficit in schools serving low-income communities. It may also demonstrate an extension of accountability-driven performative pressures to remote learning pedagogies. By contrast, only one of our three schools demonstrated a simultaneous emphasis on affective nurturing during this period, fulfilling the dual role of schools serving low-income communities in practices we characterise as critical nurturing. This was due to a strong sense of school culture and mission promoted by leadership that was established prior to the pandemic. Therefore, we argue that leaders of schools in low-income communities should be supported in establishing similar cultures of critical nurturing, which not only care for children's welfare and well-being, but also support their academic progression and success. We recognise such practices as minimally essential to support the flourishing of children living in poverty in the absence of wider structural reform of inequalities in the society at large.

Appendix 1: Sample of Inductively Generated Codes

Code	Frequency
Medium of communication	34

Code	Frequency
Description of pedagogy	28
Family/home circumstances	23
Monitoring/encouraging engagement	23
Identifying priorities	19
Issues relating to pedagogy	17
Well-being checks	16
Collective mentality of care	14
Providing food	13
Building relationships	12
Involving parents	12
Sneaking check-ins	12

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