Social class, COVID-19 and care: Schools on the front line in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Schools have a duty of care to children that extends beyond educational performance to include wellbeing and welfare. Yet, research has highlighted the tensions that arise when 'care' and 'learning' are treated as binaries, especially when schools operate within unequal socio-economic conditions. Extended COVID-19 school closures brought these issues into sharp relief, highlighting the central role of schools as a front line service in the lives of poorer children. This paper provides qualitative insights into the classed experiences of extended school closure and the role and response of schools through the eyes of parents, teachers and principals in Ireland. We frame these responses in the context of the provision of a careful education, exploring the role of normative and affective relations in teaching and learning. Questions are posed in relation to schools as care regimes and the 'mission creep' between educational and welfare provision in schools serving poorer children.

Introduction

School closure was a common feature of Government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas some countries opted for a short lockdown, Ireland had one of the longest lockdowns compared to other countries in the EU (Hale et al. 2021), with school closures extending to almost four months in 2020. The desire to keep schools open during lockdowns throughout the world was recognition of the centrality of schooling to children's lives. While the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures is still unknown, we can learn from existing research on unplanned closures as well as emerging studies specific to the initial impact of COVID-19 closures.

Preliminary studies specific to COVID-19 closures indicate that school closure and introduction of distance learning disproportionately affects children from lower income backgrounds and increases the learning gap between them and their peers from more privileged families (Symonds et al. 2020; Darmody, Smyth, and Russell 2021 and Mohan et al. 2021; Beattie et al., 2021; Kim, Dundas, and Asbury 2021; Schult et al. 2022). Moss et al. (2020: 10) found that the effects of lockdown differed according to the social

circumstances of the school, maintaining that schooling was successful in more advantaged communities. Internationally, based on a survey of National Responses to Covid-19 school closures, OECD data shows that learning loss from the pandemic will amplify and accelerate social inequality in learning opportunities. Cheshmehzangi et al. (2022), whilst focusing specifically on the digital divide during the pandemic, raise a significant point about the need for context specific research and policy.

This paper contributes to this growing body of literature by providing insights into how social class is lived out during the pandemic in the context of children's school lives in Ireland, with a specific focus on the diverse roles that primary schools play in communities as they balance 'a duty of care with a duty to teach' (Moss et al, ibid). Uniquely, it provides qualitative insights into the role and response of schools to extended school closure through the eyes of parents, teachers and principals, in the context of the provision of a care*ful* education (Lynch, Baker, and Lyons 2009; Devine 2013, Luttrell 2020). In doing so, it explores how lay normativity (Sayer 2005) and affective relations (Lynch, Baker, and Lyons 2009) underpin social action, especially in challenging circumstances (Moss et al. 2020). Use of the term lay normativity (Sayer 2005), conceptually understood as the right ethical or moral action to take, is informed by the discourse of principals and teachers. Theoretically, the use of Sayer's concept of lay normativity offers additional insight into school responses during closures and meeting the educational and welfare needs of children in their care. The concept of affective relations, also evidenced in the principal and teacher narratives, builds on the work of Lynch, Baker, and Lyons (2009) in drawing attention to schools as regimes of care.

Questions are posed in relation to equality in children's learning experiences and the role of schools on the frontline as both education and care provider in a wider context of socio-economic inequality.

A Care*ful* education? Lay normativity and schools as sites of affective relations

While affective relations are predominantly equated with female morality, we know from the work of feminist theorists (Noddings, 2007; Lynch 2007) that care relations are deeply embedded within all human relations and frame the public as much as the private sphere in people's lives. Care and concern for the wellbeing, learning and welfare of students is a defining aspect of children's school lives and their relations with school staff. For this reason, schools practice affective relations as much as social, economic or power relations. Principals and teachers have concerns for the welfare of students beyond purely academic concerns (Noddings, 2012; Moss et al. 2020). Affective relations in educational spaces are also captured in children's voice research where children prioritize their relationships with friends (Devine, 2003) and attribute their school as a space of belonging which fosters caring relationships (Luttrell 2020) and nurtures their sense of safety, protection and wellbeing (Yasmin et al., 2019).

Dadvand and Cuervo (2020) also warn against considering two alternative moralities constituted separately within a public versus private sphere and instead to acknowledge the significance of 'moral emotions' alongside rationality and autonomy. Contextualising care beyond female morality and recognising its role in the public sphere is important for schools and provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the role and response of schools to school closures during the COVDI-19 pandemic.

Sayer (2005) contends that sociological accounts of action tend to pay little attention to its moral or ethical dimension, emphasizing habit, discourse, convention and interest instead. Yet, lay normativity, that moral and ethical dimension of social action, is people's evaluative orientation or relation of concern to the world around them (Sayer 2005 and 2011) and is deeply embedded in affective relations. People respond and attend to the care needs of others, outside of immediate family and friends, not only because of affective relations but also normative concerns in terms of doing what is proper and moral. We can infer that affective relations in schools have a moral and ethical dimension because all people, especially those dependent on others to meet their care needs, would be harmed or even at risk of injury and/or death without adequate care. Knowing how people relate together normatively is part of knowing them sociologically because people know and live in the world in an evaluative, value-laden way (Lynch, Kalaitzake, and Crean 2021: 54). Even though care and normative related values do not take priority at all times, they can and do frame social action in relational 'other-centred' ways that need to be understood sociologically, not least because it provides social theory that resonates with what matters to people in everyday practices. Sharing a 'symbiotic' sociological relationship, affective relations can be normatively driven and lay normativity can be care orientated.

Integrating ethical and moral considerations into how we understand social action would complement a more complete understanding of affective relations in schools. Crean (2018) has shown how 'care consciousness' - a commitment to the care needs of others underpinned by discontent with, and desire to challenge inequalities associated with these care needs - is an empirically observable sociological phenomenon at a primary care level within families. The necessity to meet care needs within the school system forms part of what Lynch (2007) defines as secondary relations in her three-fold taxonomy of care relations. There is less known however about the presence of care consciousness in secondary care relations and if the same level of discontent with inequality and desire for social change underpins care relations at this level. A deeper analysis of lay normativity and care relations in schools would tell us more about social action outside of purely economic, cultural and political explanations. This paper goes some way towards this task by highlighting the care concerns in the actions of school staff during closures as schools meet the dual and diverse demand of duties to care and teach.

This lack of in-depth engagement with lay normativity and with affective relations of care within sociological analysis has contributed not only to a limited analysis of social action but to an underestimation of its pivotal role in framing injustices in society (Lynch et al., ibid). This is particularly salient when understanding children's school lives because we know that poorer children's access to equal opportunity in education is regulated by affective relations in as much as it is structured by socio-economic relations in their home lives (O'Brien 2007) and school lives (Lynch et al., 2007). How schools provide for the needs of children from lower income families is informed by their knowledge of educational needs. The provision of education is also shaped by a school's duty of care to children, which is in turn informed by their knowledge of additional and imminent yet possibly unmet welfare needs in children's daily lives. Meeting additional welfare needs in schools not only facilitates children's academic learning but mitigates against harm to their emotional and material well-being. There is then a moral imperative on principals and teachers in designated disadvantaged schools to approach teaching and learning for children in a way that tries to address their welfare needs as much as their academic needs. Care consciousness is thus central.

A greater understanding of the complexity involved in affective relations in children's lives foregrounds a pedagogy that responds to the multidimensional aspects of children's school lives especially for schools that operate within unequal socio-economic conditions. The presence of lay normativity and care in schooling is therefore an inevitable part of care*ful* education (Devine 2013, Luttrell 2020) because the welfare of students matters to teachers and principals and underpins relations on a par with academic relations. However, research in the area has highlighted the tensions that arise when 'care' and 'learning' are treated as binaries, with negative consequences for children's learning in schools. An over emphasis on care and therapeutic approaches to teaching and learning can impact on academic performance for lower income children, leading to pedagogical approaches that lower intellectual demand (Lingard 2007; Lingard and Keddie 2013). Lingard, for example, maintains that 'productive' pedagogies should focus on intellectual demand, while maintaining connectedness and care of/with students, working with and valuing difference. Dadvand and Cuervo (2020) also contend that schools can and do both care and intellectually demanding pedagogy. They warn however against an instrumental ethic of care, which has a performative agenda with an emphasis on achievement and performance as indicators of 'caring' practices (ibid: 147). Similarly Devine and McGillicuddy (2016) call for pedagogy that serves children's best interests not as a matter of charity, care and therapy by teachers working in challenging circumstances, but as a matter of their rights to a socially just education, including intellectual challenge.

Extended school closures, as happened during the COVID-19 pandemic bring this dilemma between meeting educational and welfare needs into sharp relief, highlighting the central role of schools as a front line service. In such a context, schools, operating within a wider unequal socio-economic context, faced a dilemma in terms of competing demands on time and resources to address the immediate impact of structural inequalities in children's 'out of' school lives whilst also providing equal opportunities in their education (ensuring continuing work with the curriculum). As noted, the evaluative orientation of human action, our lay normativity, and the affective relations within schools, means that principals and teachers may act upon the unequal conditions in children's lives in order to facilitate their learning and challenge inequalities in learning experiences.

Following a brief overview of the CSL (Children's School Lives) study and research methods, we provide empirical data demonstrating how parents, principals and teachers understand and assert the role of schools during school closures in terms of actions and responses driven by educational and care considerations. Drawing on normative and affective theory to analyse the data, we consider the impact of these different concerns for teaching and for equality in children's experiences of learning during school closures and beyond.

Materials and methods

This paper is based on data collected during the COVID-19 school closures in 12 case study schools. These case study schools are part of a wider national longitudinal cohort study of primary schooling in Ireland, *Children's School Lives* (CSL). The CSL study uses a cross-sequential longitudinal design, producing a rich set of mixed methods data. This is generated through a nationally representative quantitative study of 189 primary schools, and in-depth case studies of a sub-sample of primary schools. The CSL case study schools represent the

full spectrum of Irish school types in terms of size, urban/rural, socio-economic status, gender and school patronage.

The CSL case study schools have one class in each school participating in the CSL study. There are two age cohorts involved in the study; those who were in second class and those in their final year of pre-school when the study commenced. Consent and ascent is attained for all children in the class in addition to case study interviews with parents and grandparents for two case study families. Children were in Junior infants and third class[1] at the time data was collected for this paper.

The Case Study Schools were contacted at the beginning of the Covid-19 related school closures (in March 2020) and invited to participate in a sub-study of the CSL study in order to examine the impact of school closures on children's school lives. Twelve of the 13 schools participated (Table 1).

Parents, grandparents, and children interviewed were selected from the case study family participants as part of the wider CSL inter-generational family study. This consists of two families from each study class. While most principals and teachers in our case study schools are represented, as with the national study data, the sample of families who participated was influenced by (remote) accessibility in addition to challenges resulting from the impact of Covid-19 on family life.[2] The total sample interviewed for this study on the impact of Covid closures is provided in Table 2.

A team of six researchers were involved in conducting the field research. Interviews were conducted using telephone and zoom. Semi-structured questions were used whilst interviewees were also encouraged to add their own reflections and thoughts during the interview process. Each interview had an average duration of one hour and interviews were transcribed and analysed using the qualitative software MAXQDA. Thematic coding was utilised to derive core themes and subthemes in line with a qualitative data dictionary developed to capture important variables related to children's school lives. This data was further reanalysed and data was collated and extracts taken that focused on socio-economic inequalities during closures, different experiences of remote learning and engagement levels of students.

Table 1. School characteristics of cohorts A and B case study school.

Gender	SES	Urban/Rural	Ethos
All boys	Designated disadvantaged	Urban	Catholic
All girls	Designated disadvantaged	Urban	Catholic
Co-ed	Designated disadvantaged	Urban	Catholic
All boys		Urban	Catholic
All girls		Urban	Catholic
Co-ed		Rural	Multi D.
Co-ed		Rural town	Catholic
Co-ed		Urban	COI
All boys	Designated disadvantaged	Urban	Catholic
Co-ed	Designated disadvantaged	Urban	Catholic
All girls		Rural town	Catholic
Co-ed		Rural	Catholic
Co-ed	Designated disadvantaged	Rural town	Educate Together

Table 2. Overview of interview sample.

Principals	Teachers	Parents	Grandparents	3rd class children	Total
12	14	21	7	5	59

The analysis was carried out within the context of affective and normative theory as this provided a framework that conceptualised schools as sites of affective, educational and ethical social action, thereby facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the views of principals, teachers and parents as to the response and role of schools during the pandemic. The study followed all ethical guidelines and was approved by the University ethics committee.

Findings: schools on the frontline during school closures

All 12 case-study schools that participated in the study demonstrated the considerable effort to manage and sustain remote teaching and learning in challenging circumstances during the pandemic. Most principals were working longer hours than normal as were many teachers. They all spoke about missing face-to-face interactions with children and the importance of these relationships to their professional identities. Although this highlights many shared experiences across all case study schools, the overall experience of remote schooling was not however uniform among our case study communities. In narrating these experiences, parents, teachers and principals in designated disadvantaged schools detail how schools responded to the additional welfare issues faced by students during closures. Schools not designated as disadvantaged, although mentioning individual cases, do not report the same types of additional welfare needs or responses to these needs at a whole school level.

Central to the narratives of principals, teachers and parents in designated disadvantaged schools were dilemmas in relation to care, specifically welfare based care needs such as food insecurity, and the structural conditions of social class that mediated the responses involved. The analysis is clustered under two headings: classed experiences of remote learning; and the role of schools upholding their duty of care and 'doing the right thing'.

Classed experiences of remote learning[3]

Despite describing strategies to engage children and reach out to their parents, there was an overarching narrative of lower levels of engagement and more negative experiences of remote learning for children in designated disadvantaged schools. Principals and teachers also commonly referred to less engagement from children from migrant families who may have little external/family support/resources and children in families struggling with illness such as addiction issues:

> To be honest, engagement hasn't been huge… to be honest. I think initially I got four parents connected and then it was a matter of trying to call the parents to see could I get them connected. So that was a bit of a challenge in itself. (John, Teacher, co-ed, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

> But yeah, there will be definitely an awful lot of differences. I think mainly to do with certain kind of family settings and economic backgrounds, and in terms of addiction. That would be most of what I would be worried about. (Betty, Teacher, co-ed, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

For some principals, this lower level of engagement was expected and explained by reference to 'survival' for families. As one principal explains below, lower levels of

engagement was just 'par for the course' in a disadvantaged school, so even though it is not good, it is what is expected:

> If the kids are not engaged don't worry about it, it's nothing personal. It's just where they are coming from, you know because we have a very dedicated enthusiastic staff and some of them might be disappointed that there's not a higher level of engagement, that's par for the course for disadvantaged. …only 50% came up to collect the [work] packs…because it's not a priority. Their priority is survival. (Maisy, Principal, co-ed, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

Other principals were more inclined to highlight the challenges facing parents who may not have the capacity to engage in remote schooling:

> It's unrealistic to expect that untrained parents, who are running a household, minding other children, maybe working as well, should be expected to follow a curriculum that teachers are trained to do. it's just bizarre, that we feel that this is going to happen. (Cathy, Principal, all boys, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

It was clear from parent narratives in our designated disadvantaged schools that they too were aware that their children were not fully engaging in remote learning. Yet, similar to the teacher and principal descriptions, parental justifications for their children's low level of engagement referred to structural conditions shaping supports, including the cultural know how (Bourdieu, 1986) of helping children with their remote school work.

> It's just the longer it's going on, the boredom is setting in; she's missing her friends. If there's work that she needs to do and I don't know how to do it, like do you know what I mean as well? There's stuff I actually don't even know how to do myself. (Casey, Parent. Case Study 2, co-ed, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

Explanations such as 'survival' and lack of capacity to help with remote learning are further contextualised when parents, teachers and principals reflect on what they perceive as more negative experiences of remote learning for lower income students. The interview responses, rather than being narrated through a deficit model lens, were practical and specific to the everyday needs of children in low income families and the conditions and additional issues presenting for these families during the pandemic. These higher levels of socio-economic inequality in the lives of children from poorer backgrounds underpinned more negative experiences:

> And then others then are really upset, obviously with job losses and not being in stable accommodation, things like that. And kind of living, like there's some children, they wouldn't be living in proper accommodation. And then there's nowhere for the children to go, there's not even a patch of grass near them. *(Jane, Teacher, all girls, designated disadvantaged school, urban)*

While beyond the focus of this paper, our data highlighted the pressures on parents generally in coping with work related demands and remote learning for their children. However the challenge was especially pressing for parents who struggled with poor/insecure housing in addition to low income. Despite challenges presenting for all working parents, for more socio-economically advantaged families, parents, teachers and principals referred to positive gains from remote learning, such as spending more time together and doing extra activities such as baking during the 'school' day. If we understand care consciousness sociologically in terms of discontent with and action on care inequalities (Crean 2018),

then the affective relations discussed positively for more advantaged families does not require any additional action on behalf of schools in the same way that such discussions present in the school lives of poorer children.

> We are still getting plenty of schoolwork. Do you know when you live in the country, it is not, I don't think, as bad as if we were living in the town. We have somewhere to walk. We have a big garden. He can do his schoolwork and he gets out and he is growing plants, he is not doing too bad and the rest of us are not doing too bad. (Judith, Parent, CS2, all girls, urban)

> I kind of stayed away from any of the talk of it. Now, we're in a very fortunate position that I'm able to work from home. Like for me as a parent, I think for us as a family I think we will probably look back with fondness actually on this time because it's been, you know, we're lucky everyone's got good health, we still have an income coming in. You know, so we're not worrying about that. (Betty, CS1[4], co-ed, urban)

This positive experience was articulated with respect to greater levels of resources (cultural and economic capital) in the homes of children in schools that were not designated disadvantaged. There were incidences of affective relations being strengthened in more economically advantaged families, absent from the stress and worry of survival that comes with economic insecurity.

The impact of insecure tenure and inadequate housing influenced capacities to cope and engage with remote schooling for parents in our designated disadvantaged schools. Clair (2019) highlights research that maps how residential mobility may exacerbate existing disadvantage as frequent moving is more common among disadvantaged groups. Hofferth, Boisjoly, and Duncan (1998) show how it is the children of these disadvantaged groups that experience the worst outcomes when experiencing residential mobility, including lack of transfer through the education system. Among our sample, there was reference to overcrowded accommodation given the lack of rented accommodation and social housing in some areas as a result of a housing crisis in Ireland (Hearne 2020). The impact on space for remote learning was also raised in this context.

> I would say that there are children that it has impacted negatively on, definitely, beyond a shadow of a doubt…I would say the same for families who are living in the centre of the town in flats and don't have access to gardens or that sort of thing. I think it can't be good for their wellbeing. (Principal, all girls, rural town)

> We would have a few children who would be homeless or maybe living in hotels, or emergency accommodation so I can only imagine how stressful that is, especially on a small child, it must be really, really hard for them. So all those things would have huge implications for kids coming back in September, … our main priority really will be to make sure that the kids can be happy, and they settle in well, and they adjust back to routine, and things like that, and that'll take time. (Daisy, Teacher, all boys, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

Classed experiences of remote learning show how parents, teachers and principals, consistently referred to lower levels of engagement from and more negative experiences of remote learning for children in designated disadvantaged schools. This inevitably put competing levels of demand on the time and resources that these schools could allocate in meeting both the education and welfare needs of children in their care. For those schools with greater levels of welfare needs presenting for children, a lay normative analysis would expect to see more time and resources devoted to care and welfare needs. After all, schools have a duty of care to children and this extends beyond purely educational performance.

Affective and normative responses: a duty of care and doing the right thing

The classed experiences of remote learning among our participants reflect the fact that advantaged families can mobilise various economic, cultural and social capital to support children during school closures, contributing to a more positive experience of learning. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the boundaries between welfare and education are especially blurred, and fully intertwined in children's school lives. For some principals, care work to address welfare needs was directly connected to their commitment to social justice and equality. We see this in the view of the principal below who states:

> Now, if they're living in homes where their parents maybe didn't have the best experience in education well then, we have to help them through that ourselves. Because otherwise I think they would be suffering inequality. So, I think having a school that is proactively looking out for them and being, I suppose innovative in how we try to reach them, that's where I get, that's what equality means for me at the moment. (Frank, Principal, co-ed, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

To offset this inequality, schools with high proportions of children from lower income families go beyond meeting purely academic needs and extend their role to addressing food and material poverty. When schools closed, as the following data will show, the need for these additional supports remained and even became more time and resource intensive as schools had to deliver these same supports and resources directly to the children's homes. Our data shows how school staff expressed an awareness of, and response to, these additional welfare needs with respect to poverty; capturing a level of care consciousness present for schools with higher numbers of children from low income families.

Food poverty

Dowler and O'Connor (2012) describe a human rights approach to food insecurity that highlights how food poverty has its roots in inequality and is a symptom of a system of distribution that has failed. Similar to findings by Moss et al. (2020), each of our designated disadvantaged schools had food programmes in place, administered through the School Meals Scheme.[5] Our findings confirm the significant role of schools as a stop gap to mediate these wider structural inequalities. With the closure of schools, families dependent on them for everyday food needs (breakfast and lunch), were in extreme need and principals/teachers were acutely aware that these families were facing extra food costs unless schools continued to fill that gap:

> Not only are we involved in the DEIS School meals programme and doing it, delivering it ourselves, we have 280 children getting the meals each week.
>
> (Frank, Principal, co-ed, designated disadvantaged school, urban)
>
> And;
>
> Yeah', and she came back to me and she said, 'I just have to say to you', she said, 'it is awesome', and that's the word she used because it's not often you hear that around here. 'It is awesome what you are doing in the school', she said, 'and to have the food delivered to my house by [names teacher]. (Maisy, Principal, co-ed, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

Parents (all participants were mothers) in designated disadvantaged schools welcomed the practical support:

They deliver food to everyone on a [names day], anyone who wanted to sign up they send out a food parcel. They've also done frozen; they've done dinners that you can freeze. So, anyone who might be struggling and it's all you know, behind the scenes so nobody knows who else is getting it. It's not a list that's out there you add your name to, you go privately. So, they do, they do know it's an underprivileged area, you know, and they do know that some people need a bit of extra help and they do look out for everybody, I feel. (Mary, CS1, co-ed, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

This focus on food poverty for lower income families was a core concern for designated disadvantaged schools during closures and the provision of food, a response to this need, was also about a wider role for schools in the lives of poorer children Here, the relations between schools and poorer children and their families, although concerned with educational experiences, are affectively and normatively driven. School staff accept lower levels of engagement but do so in order to allocate time and resources to care needs as much as academic needs.

Providing learning resources to the home

Responding to food poverty was not the only challenge however. Our findings also highlighted substantial differences among our families in access to basic resources to support remote learning. Access to material learning resources provided advantages to children whose parents could afford such resources during closures. When parents from schools not designated as disadvantaged spoke about learning materials and resources, it was usually in positive terms:

[Names child] has been amazing. His reading - he always tells me when he has got a new book. When this lockdown came, I knew what kids should have been doing reading wise, so I got the books for the next two levels. I spent €50 on reading books for the junior infant kid but I would much prefer kids to be reading books and then donate them back to school rather than sitting on my hands and saying 'I can't get any books the libraries are closed and the school didn't give me enough'. (Lara, Parent, CS1, all boys, urban)

Parents' concerns about the pandemic lockdown for their children's learning related to the extra-curricular activities that children were missing out on rather than any concerns about academic progress:

I am sad though that she's probably losing ground with her swimming skills with her swimming lessons, because that whole thing, that's very expensive and like you see them progress to the next level and they easily slide when they don't have it every day. So, that, my neighbour brought that up to me the other day and I was reminded that, oh no, her swim skills. (Parent, CS1, all girls, urban)

In contrast to these experiences, to offset resource differentials in schools serving higher numbers of low income families, principals in designated disadvantaged schools mentioned the learning materials that they were distributing to households:

But we have bought 400 packs of playing cards, we have bought 400 sets of colouring pencils. We bought colouring notebooks, we bought footballs, we bought skipping ropes, we bought a whole load of activity type stuff for them and we have allocated a day…for the parents to come up. (Maisy, Principal, co-ed, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

And;

> We'd be worried that a lot of our kids would maybe come back eventually in September and they wouldn't have been given access to books, they wouldn't have had the learning agenda I suppose pushed. (Frank, Principal, co-ed, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

The positive narratives about learning materials and resources presented by parents in schools not designated as disadvantaged contrasts sharply with the concerns expressed by teachers and principals in designated disadvantaged schools about the lack of learning resources in the home. In order to care equally, parents need equal resources, yet we see here that parents in designated disadvantaged schools lack financial resources for learning materials hence their lack of capacity to support learning equal to their peers.

Based on teachers interviews, Beattie, Wilson, and Hendry (2022: 221) document differences in the availability and accessibility of the internet and technological resources for lower socioeconomic groups. Providing an overview of the digital divide's impacts on social exclusion and education equality issues, Cheshmehzangi et al. (2022) argue that these differences increase educational inequality and social exclusion. CSL findings contribute further evidence to this research area but frame the actions of school in providing digital and hardcopy resources as an affective response as much as a pedagogical response for children in poorer households.

> So, it's a bit difficult to get around that. And especially with two of them being in secondary school, because they've so many different subjects to get through, a lot of them are PowerPoints, and we've one laptop between the four of them. So, it can be a little bit challenging. (Joan, CS1, all boys, designated disadvantaged school, urban)

> We've one housing estate that's very disadvantaged and almost all of those have gotten packs out and they would be the sort of families who'd say oh God, I don't know the first thing about a website, I don't know how to get into that. (Principal, B4, all girls, rural town)

Interrelated with concerns about material inequality between homes, the digital divide was a core concern for designated disadvantaged schools or for families on lower incomes in schools not designated as disadvantaged.

Conclusion: structural inequality and schools on the frontline

Bradbury et al. (2022: 17) refer to crisis policy enactment in schools during the covid crisis as being '*guided by ethical and moral principles*'. They specifically state an important lesson for future crisis management, maintaining that Government guidance and regulation should be in a form that allows school leaders to make decisions in their schools' best interests (ibid: 17). This includes not only material and situated contexts but children's welfare. In this paper, this is demonstrated in how the role and response to COVID-19 school closures for schools was mediated by the level of poverty and inequality among families. It frames responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in schools in terms of care dilemmas that are strongly mediated by social class and the balance between meeting welfare and educational needs. Awareness and action on welfare and educational needs is captured in the narratives of teachers and principals in designated disadvantaged schools when they speak about low engagement and negative experiences of remote learning for children, as well as outlining the many issues that schools had to contend with in addition to meeting children's academic needs. Care consciousness, therefore, is evident in the responsiveness of principals and teachers to both educational and welfare needs in the lives of poorer children in their schools.

The findings bring into sharp relief the tensions for schools in realising academic goals, while struggling to meet children's basic care needs. It raises questions about the role of such schools as a front line service in children's lives, and wider questions in relation to the realisation of equality in education through the actions of teachers and principals alone.

The duty of care for children within schools means that affective relations influence the cultural process of education and the minds and actions of those giving care (Crean 2018) in such a way that teachers and principals act on these affective relations as well as their normative orientation to do what is right by the children in their care. Viewed through this normative and affective lens, the different responses to remote teaching and learning across schools during school closures can be reframed as the dilemma between education as a public good and a frontline service when operating within wider unequal socio-economic conditions. A structural analysis suggests schools should be sufficiently supported in carrying out this dual role until other social systems provide greater levels of equality in children's lives. This implies moving beyond individualised notions of educational inequality to structural patterns evident between schools serving lower income children compared to schools with lesser concentrations of poorer children, We know from existing literature, there is evidence that the learning gap from planned school closures is less prevalent in countries with higher levels of socioeconomic equality and better social protection. However, if the social protection system is not functioning to the level that low-income families lack basic resources such as food security, then we have shown how schools had to fill that gap for children living in poverty during unplanned school closures. In our research, designated disadvantaged schools had to invest time and resources into providing socio-economic supports that did not present proportionately for other schools. Socio-economic inequalities in education have been brought to the fore during school closures, not because new inequalities emerged but because enduring inequalities did not go away. In fact, they became more visible as did the key role of schools in children's lives generally.

Schools are faced with a dilemma and tension between responses to the immediate care goals of/for children often at the cost of longer-term academic demands and expectations, reproducing the cycle of educational under achievement. Yet, the presence of lay normativity and care in schooling is an inevitable part of care*ful* education (Devine 2013, Lynch, 2016, Luttrell 2020) because the welfare of children matters to teachers and principals and underpins relations on a par with academic relations.

To resolve this dilemma, the data presented in this paper point to a need to focus on equality in children's lives outside of the school system so that the affective relations and normative actions can be equalised within the school system. Reay (2020) maintains that a set of theoretical and methodological disputes has led to an inward-looking sociology of education rather than a discipline that has sight of the wider context of inequality. The solution to enduring socio-economic inequalities such as less food, less access to economic resources, although impacting on educational experiences, can only be addressed by greater social protection, better employment conditions, access to food security and access to more equal economic and cultural resources. The dual role of schools as both education provider and frontline service in children's lives is reflective of the contradictory roles that schools serving working class children and lower income communities are expected to play.

The crisis that confronted principals and teachers in designated disadvantaged schools was both a health and education crisis. Outside of schools, the *health* crisis raises immediate concerns about what is reasonable to expect from schools as a frontline service within an

unequal socio-economic system whilst raising fundamental questions about the educational opportunities for children from prolonged closure. Equalising socio-economic conditions outside of schools may address the dilemma of a *careful* education in terms of competing demands on time and resources when schools are meeting welfare and educational needs. Simultaneously addressing the immediate impact of structural inequalities in children's 'out of' school lives whilst providing equal opportunities in their education. However, until such a time of greater equality in children's 'out of' school lives, understanding affective and normative social action in schools highlights the need for maintaining, and enhancing, additional supports and resources to schools serving poorer children.

Notes

1. Children in the Irish school system start school in junior infant class and follow a transition journey to senior infant class, first and second class and then third, fourth, fifth and sixth class. Junior infant pupils are aged between 4 to 5 and third class children and aged between 7 to 8.
2. Nonetheless the sample has representation of all family types.
3. All names used are pseudonyms.
4. CS denotes case study in each of the interview participant descriptors.
5. The School Meals Scheme provides funding towards provision of food services for disadvantaged school children

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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