

POLICY BRIEF: The well-being and work-related stress of senior school leaders in Wales and Northern Ireland during COVID-19 “educational leadership crisis”: A cross-sectional descriptive study.

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OVERVIEW

We are pleased to announce the publication of our peer reviewed paper, ***The well-being and work-related stress of senior school leaders in Wales and Northern Ireland during COVID-19 “educational leadership crisis”: A cross-sectional descriptive study***, led by Dr Emily Marchant [1]. The study examined the working situation, well-being and work-related stress of senior school leaders in Wales and Northern Ireland during a period of educational crisis leadership in the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was obtained through a survey completed by 172 school leaders in Wales and 151 school leaders in Northern Ireland. This survey captured work-related factors (e.g. workload), general health, well-being, perceived stress, measures of mental and physical exhaustion, and self-endangering behaviours (behaviours to cope with excessive working demands, but negatively effect health, well-being and ability to work). This policy brief summarises findings for Wales. Findings from this study contribute to the limited knowledge base understanding the impact this period of crisis leadership had on specific aspects of school leaders’ physical and mental health. This is important in order to enable the education and health systems to respond with a targeted approach and appropriate resources.

KEY FINDINGS

Workload and work-related stress: Findings suggest that senior school leaders reported high workloads, 79% of leaders in Wales were working at least 50 hours per week, 55% said their workload increased since before COVID-19.

Well-being: Senior leaders reported low well-being and depressive symptoms. In Wales, 55% of senior leaders were categorised as having low well-being, and 28% indicated depressive symptoms. The overall well-being score of senior leaders was low (average score 45/100).

Self-endangering behaviours: Senior leaders in this study were engaging in self-endangering behaviours. 72% often gave up leisure activities in favour of work, 58% sacrificed sufficient sleep and 96% waived working breaks, these were significantly higher in female senior leaders. 74% of senior leaders said this pace of work cannot be sustained in the long term.

Exhaustion: 81% of senior leaders in Wales had high/very high levels of exhaustion. Leaders also experienced physical complaints (psychosomatic complaints) including muscle pain (34%) and headaches (32%). 63% of senior leaders could not recover their energy after a working day.

Perceived stress: High work-related stress was reported, this was significantly higher in female senior leaders. 44% of female leaders reported to feel nervous or stressed at work, compared to 13% of males.

IMPLICATIONS

Workload and work-related stress: High workload has been identified as a key reason for staff considering leaving the profession and a driver in school leadership attrition. This was a concern preceding the pandemic, experts warned of an impending “crisis” in education [2]. Recent evidence suggests increasing dissatisfaction of school leadership as a career choice and fewer aspirations of those in deputy/assistant roles to progress to senior headship level [3], thus these concerns persist

Well-being: The well-being of senior leaders in Wales (average: 45/100) was lower than the general UK adult population (average: 63/100) [4]. This is important because evidence demonstrates associations between educational practitioners’ well-being and pupil-level outcomes, including health, well-being and educational attainment [5].

Self-endangering behaviours: As work-related pressures continue across the education sector in Wales, senior leaders are likely engaging in these behaviours as a mechanism to mediate working demands and high workload. This is not conducive to their health and well-being.

Exhaustion: The high mental and physical exhaustion reported by senior leaders in Wales is higher than global data [6,7]. These are core symptoms of work-related burnout, a psychological syndrome caused by chronic job stressors. Given ongoing pressures across the educational sector reported recently, this remains a concern.

Perceived stress: Higher perceived stress observed in female senior leaders in this study has been associated with other outcomes, including hormonal changes and disturbances to the menstrual cycle in women, insomnia and accessing primary care services [8–10].

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from our study are embedded within a landscape of pandemic-related and wider educational pressures. With major educational reforms underway and the Curriculum for Wales, effective leadership is more crucial than ever to ensure these reforms translate to improvements for pupils, schools and the wider education system. This study proposes five recommendations:

i. A more strategic approach to supporting the well-being of educational leaders in Wales is essential, including joint working between the health/social care and education sectors to provide mental health support to senior leaders.

ii. In the short term, the mental health and well-being supports currently available from both the education and health/social care sectors should be more explicitly highlighted to senior school leaders.

iii. Further research into what mental health support and resources are needed at individual, organisational and systems level to better support senior leaders in their role.

iv. Greater clarity on the extent and quality of leadership development provision to specifically support leaders’ well-being is needed. This is particularly important during periods of major education system-level reforms; leadership is critical to support school and system improvement and ensuring ownership by practitioners.

v. Further research charting changes over time in leaders’ experience of their well-being can contribute to strengthening the evidence base in this area. This includes longitudinal research using quantitative and qualitative methods, extending this research to include senior leaders from nursery and post-16 educational settings and capturing this across the four nations of the UK to contribute to international data.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This was part of an international study through the Global Health Literacy Research Network ([GLOBHL](#)), with the survey being administered in 17 countries to date. Findings in Wales study suggest worse outcomes for senior leaders than reported elsewhere globally. GLOBHL (previously COVID-HL) was established in 2020 to enable collaborative and cross-country health literacy research and includes more than 150 researchers, including the study lead (Dr Emily Marchant) from over 60 countries. This collaboration with GLOBHL positions Wales within the international research landscape.

This work was supported by the [National Academy for Educational Leadership Wales](#). Findings strengthen the need for the Leadership Academy's continued work towards prioritising the well-being of school leaders. This includes the development of a working group to review existing support for leaders' well-being and co-construct an All-Wales Strategy for the Well-being of Educational Leaders.

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