

## **Exploring methodology for data collection for research on Teacher Resilience**

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### **Abstract**

This paper establishes the methodological approach used to examine teacher resilience in the face of systemic changes at primary school level in the five school years from 2016 – 2021 from the perspective of a novice researcher. During this time primary schools experienced a rapid introduction of curricular and policy changes and even the most experienced of staff explored new contexts during the unprecedented move to remote teaching and leading, due to public health measures introduced at the height of the Coronavirus pandemic. This paper outlines the multi-site case study favoured by the researcher which was conducted across six schools. In this study, the researcher sought career wide opinions from teachers and principals on what influenced or hindered their capacity to be resilient during the past five years of teaching and leading in primary schools. This combined a questionnaire in phase one with a semi-structured interview at phase two with a triad of participants from each of the case study schools (namely principal, special education teacher (SET) and mainstream teacher). Participant recruitment, data collection instruments and challenges faced by the researcher are discussed alongside ethical considerations.

### **Keywords**

Teacher resilience, primary school, teachers, principals, mixed-methods, methodological approach

### **Three Main Highlights**

This mixed-methods approach:

- Reached a broad cohort of principals, teachers (both mainstream and SET) in the Leinster region and examined how teacher resilience was experienced in the context of their lived experience teaching or leading.
- Elicited using quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews) methods an in-depth descriptive and statistical study.
- Considered patterns in teacher resilience, roles of participants, school types and by using open-ended questions at the interview phase allowed for additional themes and trends generated by participants to be included at the analysis phase.

### **Introduction**

This research centres on teacher resilience and how teacher resilience has been experienced by primary principals and teachers in the context of participants' lived experience over the past five school years from 2016 – 2021. The study explores the resilience of primary school teachers and principals whose working contexts have been impacted by multiple systemic level changes relating to policy development, the implementation of initiatives and the global pandemic of Covid-19. The idea of “everyday resilience” for teachers (Day and Gu, 2014), which is viewed as the ability to “teach to one’s best over time” (p. 20) throughout different career phases interests the researcher. Teachers are faced with constant intellectual and emotional challenges on a daily basis and through the different phases of their careers where various levels of competence and commitment and required (Day and Gu, 2014). How teachers and leaders sustain resilience warranted further investigation as there is a gap in the Irish context in relation to career wide resiliency. Much of the existing research in relation to teaching resilience focuses on developing resilience

within initial teacher education and for early career teachers (Mansfield et al, 2016) and the levels of resilience demonstrated by these teachers. Day and Gu (2014) outline that “promoting much needed resilience in times of change remains an overlooked and under-researched area” (p. 17). The researcher examined career wide resiliency in teaching for this study in order to develop a framework to support teachers to demonstrate and build their capacity to be resilient.

Teaching and leadership in education has changed and continues to change in response to a number of factors due to the Covid-19 pandemic and multiple systemic level changes including policy development and the implementation of initiatives. This paper begins with an exploration of the literature on teacher resilience and proceeds to explain systemic changes as understood by the researcher. Next, the mixed methods approach adopted by the researcher for data collection and the recruitment phase and data collection instruments chosen will be discussed. Finally, the article reflects on the ethical considerations and challenges experienced conducting the research. The paper concludes with some broad findings and reflections on the research design and its implementation.

## **Teacher Resilience**

Research on teacher resilience in the Irish primary school context is limited. But this is not a new phenomenon. Literature relating to teacher resilience has emerged in the past thirty years and ongoing debate around an agreed definition prevails (Boutou et al., 2017; Schussler et al., 2018). In comparison to resilience research on children, current understanding of resilience and teacher resilience specifically is still at an early stage (Gu, 2018).

Teacher resilience in this study is envisaged as the capacity to continue to maintain and sustain a sense of commitment and agency in teaching (Gu and Day, 2013) throughout different career phases and in ever changing environments. Teacher resilience concerns an

individual's capacity to "maintain positive attributes in the face of a range of challenges, pressures and demands" which are associated with their work (Danniildou and Platsidou, 2018, p.17). The notion of sustaining teachers is raised by Morgan *et al.* (2010), in a study on early career primary teachers where they focus on conceptualising everyday events with an "affective tone" (p. 192). The extent to which teachers are able to find continuing personal and professional fulfilment through their work and through these sustain their commitment to teach to their best over time, will depend to a large extent upon the opportunities they have to grow, sustain and renew their capacities to be resilient (Gu and Day, 2013). Gu (2018) lists four propositions for sustaining resilience and quality in teaching. These focus on the context of schools and school leadership to develop and nurture teachers and their capacities, mutual empowerment through collegial relationships, combining pedagogy with students' needs and subject specific knowledge and creating school wide responsibility in the "multiple-level education system" to build and sustain teachers' potential to be resilient (p. 28).

Resilience in the context of the teaching profession, can be conceptualised as a capacity, process (Luthar *et al.*, 2000) and outcome (Mansfield *et al.*, 2016, p. 80). These components consider the individual teacher (role), their contexts and the specific challenges in professional life phases (Beltman, Mansfield and Harris, 2016; Day and Gu, 2014; Gu and Li, 2013). Resilient teachers use personal characteristics and contextual elements to support their management of challenges in order to develop and achieve job satisfaction and well-being in their professional career (Boon, 2021; Mansfield *et al.*, 2016). Like resilient teachers, resilient leaders are also driven by a strong sense of moral purpose. They care about and focus on the learning needs of pupils and the professional growth of teachers, and work hard to enhance the role of the school as an agent of social change (Day and Gu, 2014).

The Morgan and Nic Craith (2015) report for the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) '*Workload, Stress and Resilience of Primary Teachers: Report of a*

*Survey of INTO members* ' is one such study which examined the prevalence of stress among primary teachers, the consequences of stress and how resilience could be promoted.

However, many systemic changes have come about in the interim period since the publication of this report. The process of building, sustaining and renewing teacher resilience is very relevant. Teachers need to be committed and resilient to sustain “their sense of effectiveness” in settings that are “emotionally as well as intellectually demanding and often changing” (Day and Gu, 2014, p. 60). Many findings of the Morgan and Nic Craith (2015) report warranted further investigation in light of these changes, notably advancements in policy development, the implementation of initiatives and the global pandemic of Covid-19. They acknowledged from the outset that the level of stress experienced by teachers was interwoven with experience as well as age and gender. Their report concluded that respondents found teaching increasingly more stressful and demanding over the previous five years. The respondents' position in schools led to some discrepancy in relation to the level of stress experienced in the previous five years. Fifty percent of class teachers cited their role as stressful in comparison to almost sixty percent of SET and almost three quarters of principals who participated in the 2015 study. Time for planning, the greater need for documentation and professional development opportunities were also raised.

This research assesses the impact of the next five years on the lived experience of teachers and leaders, with the researcher having worked in both SET and mainstream settings during that time frame and implemented and introduced new initiatives in these settings. A variety of leadership styles and approaches to leadership in education were observed by the author who worked in two different schools during this time. It was necessary to understand what makes a resilient teacher, what enables resiliency to occur and assess the lived experience of participants in various roles and schools in order to compare the results of this research to the previous Morgan and Nic Craith (2015) study and indeed building resiliency

as an integral part of career wide teaching. The “intensification of teachers’ work” and the speed of changes to the working contexts of principals, class and special education teachers places them “under increasing pressure” at an accountable time (McKay and Barton, 2018, p. 356).

### **Systemic changes:**

Changes during the period from 2016-2021 include but are not limited to the following: the second cycle of School Self Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020 (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2016); the introduction of the revised ‘*Special Education Teaching Allocation*’ (DES, 2017a), more commonly known as the SET model; The Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018 (Government of Ireland, 2018); the formal school-wide rollout of the Primary Language Curriculum, (NCCA, 2019); the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 (DES, 2015), followed by the Digital Strategy Action Plan (DES, 2018a); the introduction of Droichead, the integrated induction programme for newly qualified teachers (TC, 2017); the introduction of the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2018b); and, the introduction of Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections in 2017 (DES, 2017b), updated in 2020 (DES, 2020). While different policies, guidelines, curricula and processes impact on teachers and principals with varying degrees, the introduction of so many initiatives in a short period can be a source of stress.

As well as policy developments and initiatives, unprecedented changes in education followed in 2020 as a result of the global crisis of Covid-19, where again teachers’ capacity to provide a suitable education for primary school pupils was hindered by circumstances beyond their control. Teaching and leading moved online following the closure of school

buildings in March 2020 until schools re-opened for the new school year in late August or early September 2020.

A return to the online learning platforms was experienced in January 2021 for a number of weeks depending on the class level. The Department of Education (DE) directed return to school in the Irish context saw classes gradually return to the school building from February 2021. Teachers and leaders once again re-engaged with remote teaching with their classes which ceased once the class groupings returned to in-school provision. The systemic changes experienced by teachers during the past five years are only one of the levels of change experienced during this time and while it would be remiss to focus solely on the impact of Covid-19 on teachers' resilience, questions pertaining to the pandemic should be included to see the impact the pandemic had on teacher resilience. The next part of the paper outlines the research journey and looking at the approach taken by the researcher and describing the recruitment phase as well as justifying the school types that participated as case study schools in the project.

## **Research Approach**

The approach favoured was a multi-site case study across six school types. To echo Yin - the essence is that it is enquiry in a real-life, everyday context. The need for "case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena" (Yin, 2018, p. 5). Case studies permit in-depth analysis such as in studying life cycles, processes, performance, change etc whilst retaining "a holistic and real-world perspective" (Yin, 2018, p. 5). Data triangulation from questionnaires and interviews provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon (teacher resilience) and strengthen the construct validity of the multi-site case study (Yin, 2018). This study uses multiple-case study designs. Although the research is a multi-site case study, each school involved (six), is considered as a single-case initially and then comparative findings and conclusions are drawn across each school or case collectively.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) report that the mixed methods case study design involves the use of one or more core designs.

The study followed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design approach. This was a two phase data collection process that followed a deductive approach. The cases were established by the researcher at the outset of the study and the researcher documented “the differences in the cases through the qualitative and quantitative data” (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 230). The initial questionnaire (quantitative data) established teachers’ attitudes around the topic of teacher resilience, while the individual interviews (qualitative data), provided a “deeper understanding” in relation to teacher resilience among a range of teachers with varying levels of experience in different school contexts (Biesta, 2017). Yin (2018) describes the design procedure when considering case selection suitability in multiple-case studies.

The design of multiple-case studies follows an analogous logic. Each case must be carefully selected so that the individual case studies either (a) predict similar results (a literal replication) or (b) predict contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons (a theoretical replication)

(Yin, 2018, p. 55)

The replication approach followed in this study is shown in Figure 1 below. This is based on figure 2.5 *Multiple-Case Study Procedure* (Yin, 2018, p. 58) with the questions used in the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview constructed from previous literature in this field for the most part and additional questions relevant to teachers and leaders professional lives during the Covid-19 pandemic and on the return to school. Cases are analysed individually and then cross-case comparison and interpretation occurs.



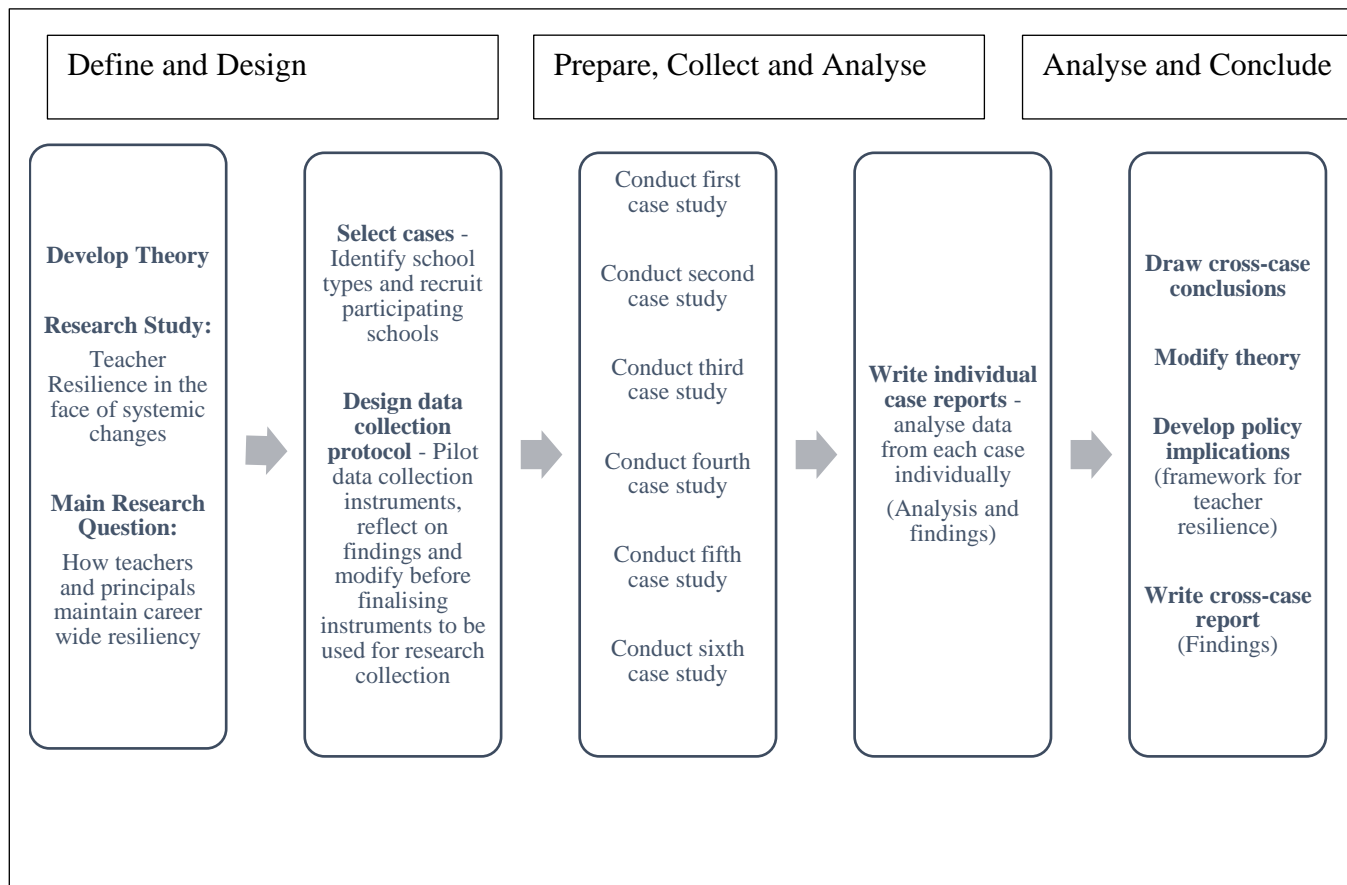


Figure 1

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was for school types in the Leinster region, this was primarily to include schools outside of Dublin as the majority of schools in the greater Dublin area are led by administrative principals. In reality over half of primary school principals nationwide are also fulltime teachers in classrooms or SET positions and juggle the same challenges as their administrative counterparts while also being responsible for educating a class or supporting multiple classes as an SET. It was an important consideration to reflect this cohort and include as broad a selection of school types as possible while being mindful that this research was to be conducted by a single researcher, also teaching fulltime. Further ethical considerations are discussed in relation to maintaining the anonymity of participants during the data collection phase.

### *Recruitment phase*

The recruitment process began once ethical approval was granted on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2021. Using professional contacts initially, namely teachers and principals from the researcher's Masters and Doctoral cohorts, five schools were contacted on March 11<sup>th</sup> by email. These schools represented varied school types in terms of size, status (DEIS [Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools] or non DEIS), leadership (administrative and teaching principals), location (rural or urban) to represent each school context as equally as possible. While five was the initial target of schools set out and agreed by the researcher and supervisors, six seemed more suitable as the project progressed. This was due to the school types recruited and the option to do some cross comparison studies between school size and type. This number is in line with Creswell and Creswell (2018) who suggest between three and ten cases. Three of the six schools initially contacted participated in the case study. At this stage specific school types were identified.

Having identified ideally an Educate Together National School or a Community National School to contrast with the Church of Ireland School that was participating, the researcher downloaded the Multi-denominational school list from the DE website. As a DEIS boys school had been secured, the researcher was eager to recruit a DEIS girls school to compare school sites and as the initial three confirmed school types were small schools with under 200 pupils, the researcher was anxious to include a large school if possible to contrast with.

Almost fifty schools were contacted by the Easter holidays and this was done by a combination of calls and emails. As a class teacher, teaching sixth class at the time finding opportunities to make calls during the school day was challenging. A fourth school was secured during the Easter holidays. More than fifty additional schools were contacted on the return to school. Each school was contacted by email initially and then followed up with a

phone call after a few days. By the middle of May another fifty schools were contacted. The researcher contacted all large schools in Leinster (with 300+ pupils) as per the DE database. In total two hundred and ten schools were emailed, and follow up phone calls had been made to over one hundred and eighty schools. Eventually two more schools agreed to participate. An anonymised list of the case study schools is presented below in table 1.

Table 1

<b>School</b>	<b>Ethos</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>DEIS status</b>	<b>Admin Principal</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>1</b>	COI	150-200	8	Mixed	No	No	Rural
<b>2</b>	Catholic	100-150	7	Mixed	No	No	Rural
<b>3</b>	Catholic	150-200	20	Boys	Yes	Yes	Urban
<b>4</b>	Catholic	>800	60+	Mixed	No	Yes	Urban
<b>5</b>	Catholic	100-150	16	Girls	Yes	Yes	Urban
<b>6</b>	Catholic	>400	26	Mixed	No	Yes	Urban

### *Pilot study*

A pilot study was conducted in the researcher's school prior to the Easter holidays in 2021. The questionnaire was distributed initially and interviews were conducted the following week. Several teachers volunteered to interview but the researcher chose to stick with the trio of principal, one SET and one mainstream teacher to keep it as similar as possible to each case study.

There were seventeen responses to the questionnaire which was shared with twenty-one teachers. These responses helped to modify the final questionnaire in terms of arranging

the number of years teaching into bands rather than leaving it as an open ended question. Conducting the interviews gave experience with the pacing of questions and suitable follow up probes to have ready. Some of the answers referring to continuing professional development (CPD) encouraged the researcher to separate the questions a little more in the final instrument and include additional opportunities for participants to reflect on their own practice as teachers and/or leaders. The researcher had previously only interviewed children as part of her Masters research and so the experience of the interviewing adults and their comments were useful for final instrumentation revisions. Conducting the interviews on Zoom as per the study also afforded the opportunity to test the recording and elements such as volume and internet connection speeds. Pilot testing as Creswell and Creswell (2018) comment “also provides an opportunity to assess how long the study will take” (p. 154) and it was apparent from feedback from colleagues that the questionnaire was doable within the specified time indicated on the information shared with other schools.

### *Questionnaires*

Questionnaires were used initially to elicit teachers attitudes around teacher resilience and the inclusion of unstructured questions allowed for elaboration regarding systemic changes. These were administered online using Google Forms following the DCU Data protection guidance on the use of Google Forms and took approximately fifteen minutes to complete. The link to the questionnaire was forwarded directly to the principal in each of the six case study schools. The researcher relied on the principal to share this link with their teaching staff. Follow up emails and phone calls were conducted to check that the link was shared. Some principals reported that they had forwarded the link to all their staff and others sent it in an email directly to a group of teachers they felt would respond, or chose not to send it in a group mail as there were several staff on leave. The researcher relied on the good will of principals to do this and maintained regular contact with the principals throughout the

process. Responses were anonymous. Included at the end of the questionnaire was a live link to the researcher's email address should respondents wish to express an interest to participate at the semi-structured interview phase. This maintained the anonymity of the respondents at the first phase as per ethical approval. Many participants for the second phase opted to connect in this way, while in some other cases principals asked staff directly to be involved, this was mainly due to staff shortages and a lack of substitute cover available in some rolls. In total thirty one responses were received at this phase.

### *Interviews*

Interviews provided participants with the opportunity to have their voices heard and to expand on further generalised answers to the questionnaire. In resonating a point made by Quierós, Faria and Almeida (2017), interviews as a qualitative approach capture emotions, behaviour, and changes of emotions of participants with ease. This qualitative research involved semi-structured interviews with sixteen participants, six principals, five teachers in an SET role and five mainstream teachers from the six case study schools. Each school was asked for three participants in each of the roles.

These Zoom interviews took place between the 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021 and 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021 using the researcher's DCU Zoom account. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and returned to the interviewee for checking within a week of the interview taking place. Participants were then allocated pseudonyms for the purpose of retaining the transcripts. The interviews were arranged for a date and time that suited participants. In some cases these were conducted before or straight after school and in other situations the participants elected to be interviewed in the evening time. Interviews varied in length from twenty-five minutes to one hour in duration and the dedication, commitment and love of teaching and leading was evident from all involved.

## **Challenges**

Following the researchers Annual Progress Report meeting in 2021, it was felt that circulating the questionnaire to a broader demographic of teachers in Ireland may provide for great analysis of the study and show a truer representation of teacher resilience as experienced by teachers and principals in many different school types. Contact was made with approximately thirty professional colleagues currently teaching or leading in Irish primary schools. These were known to the researcher from previous school contexts and through the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) and Dyslexia Specialists Ireland (DySI) and they were asked to circulate the link to the questionnaire where possible. Responses were monitored for a week and then shared via the social media platforms of Twitter and LinkedIn and this appeal saw the researcher exceed the target of one hundred responses by the end of June 2021.

## **Research limitations**

This study took place in the final term of the 2021 school year. This was a particularly challenging year for all schools in relation to Covid-19 and these challenges continued during the return to school after the remote learning period. It was difficult to speak with principals directly, many arranged phone calls were cancelled or re-arranged due to them covering for staff shortages or dealing with suspected Covid cases. In a number of schools due to the Government's directive at the time there were principals who were working remotely or on leave due to pregnancy related Covid leave or other illnesses. Acting principals were not always able to participate, due to other constraints. In one of the case study schools the principal interviewed was the acting principal (the deputy principal of the school), who had been acting up for two full school years. In another case study school the principal was eager

to be interviewed but no staff member elected to participate at the interview stage. This was disappointing given the size of the school.

In many schools when conducting follow up calls, several days after sending the email to the addresses on the DE website or on the school's own website, the researcher was asked to forward to the principal directly. In other cases some schools had already given a commitment to other Masters/Doctoral students for the 2020-2021 school year. Some schools acknowledged the request and looked for further information about the study but then chose not to participate. The recruitment process did take a considerable amount of time, energy and organisation for the researcher who was teaching a mainstream sixth class during the data collection period. The researcher was fortunate to have a support teacher (SET) available to come in and lead lessons in the classroom as the preferred time for phone calls to principals seemed to be at approximately ten o' clock. Given the class the researcher was teaching at the time had no fulltime Special Needs Assistant (SNA) and pupils with SEN in the class requiring support at all times this was an invaluable support, to be able to continue to teach the class and not worry about their safety and successfully recruit participants for the research stage.

Regarding the questionnaires, the researcher was hoping that by contacting a range of school sizes there would be no difficulty in succeeding in yielding three responses from each school at a minimum. Schools were recontacted in early June to ask the principal to reshare the link to the questionnaire with all teaching staff. This was in an attempt to reach the desired target minimum of thirty responses. While this target was achieved, in reality there could have been over one hundred and forty responses from the schools involved. As previously mentioned the researcher was relying on the principal to forward and bring the attention of their staff to the email containing the link to the questionnaire.

A number of interviews had to be rescheduled due to Covid-19 also, in some cases participants themselves were ill and in two other situations participants had to bring their children for tests close to their designated interview time. This resulted in three interviews being conducted on the one day in one instance. While not ideal, the researcher was grateful to have the opportunity to discuss the study with participants and elicit their on the ground experience in their context in relation to teacher and principal resilience during the past five school years.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The research discussed in this paper is situated in an evolving climate where teachers and principals are required to adapt and change practices because of policy development, the adaption and implementation of initiatives from the Department of Education and other educational stakeholders amidst the global pandemic of Covid-19. This article outlines a mixed-methods case study approach, which worked well given the time frame and the climate in which the research took place. The completion of the questionnaire online and the remote interviews facilitated participants in terms of suitability for interview schedule and ensured the research was completed within the specified time frame. Recruiting schools and participants proved challenging at times but the target number for both questionnaires and interviews was achieved. This was a steep learning curve for a novice researcher which tested resilience at every step of the journey but equally proved to be a journey of self-discovery in teaching and leading and reignited the flame to teach to the best of one's ability which as Gu and Day (2013) state, "has always required resilience" (p. 22). This study has important implications going forward for policy, practice and research in terms of supporting teachers and leaders through the researcher's proposed framework, decided upon as an outcome of the findings of the research. Given the huge and deserved focus on wellbeing promotion and



resilience in schools for pupils and teachers, the findings of the study will be of interest to all those working in primary school contexts in order to support the embedding of a School Self-Evaluation Wellbeing Promotion Process by 2023 (DES, 2018b). This paper in itself is relevant to other researchers considering a mixed-methods approach to their study, in terms of outlining the challenges faced recruiting both schools and participants and time pressures experienced. The chosen methodology yielded an abundance of information and in turn the volume of data collected from this mixed-methods case study helped to strengthen the multi-faceted view of teacher resilience.

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