

Article

Staff Stress and Interpersonal Conflict in Secondary Schools—Implications for School Leadership

Patrick Bruce ^{1,*}, Carol Bruce ¹, Victor Hrymak ² , Niamh Hickey ³  and Patricia Mannix McNamara ^{3,4} ¹ School of Surveying and Construction Innovation, Technological University, D01 K822 Dublin, Ireland² School of Food Science and Environmental Health, Technological University, D07 ADY7 Dublin, Ireland³ School of Education, University of Limerick, V94 T9PX Limerick, Ireland⁴ Faculty of Education, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences Inndalsveien, 28, 5063 Bergen, Norway

* Correspondence: patrick.bruce@tudublin.ie

Abstract: The importance of school leadership and workplace stress is a recurring theme in education-based research. The literature reports that workplace stress in teaching is a difficult matter to resolve, with mixed outcomes from interventions. The aim of this initial scoping study was to report on the experiences of school leaders with interpersonal conflict (IPC), a known cause of this workplace stress. Accordingly, a sample of twelve school leaders working in Irish post primary schools were recruited to participate in this study using semi-structured interviews. All twelve participants reported experiencing workplace stress and linked other people as a source of this stress. Nine out of twelve had experienced IPC as a school leader. School leaders also noted a fear of reporting workplace stress. Half of the participants reported becoming ill from workplace stress and had taken time off from work. Participants also reported ‘balkanisation’ of like-minded cliques that tried to exert control over other groups. None of the participants expressed confidence in organisational strategies to resolve workplace stress or IPC. This study demonstrates that resolutions for IPC were scant. Further research is needed to conceptualise this phenomenon in the school environment and to support school leaders to effectively manage IPC as a cause of workplace stress.

Keywords: workplace stress; conflict; school leadership



Citation: Bruce, P.; Bruce, C.; Hrymak, V.; Hickey, N.; Mannix McNamara, P. Staff Stress and Interpersonal Conflict in Secondary Schools—Implications for School Leadership. *Societies* **2022**, *12*, 186. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12060186>

Academic Editor: Sandro Serpa

Received: 27 October 2022

Accepted: 7 December 2022

Published: 9 December 2022

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on the workplace as a source of psychosocial risk factors. These factors can be defined as “things that may affect workers” psychological response to their work and workplace conditions (including working relationships with supervisors and colleagues [1] (p. 1). Eurofound and the European Agency for Occupational Safety & Health at Work [2], have identified that psychosocial risks may arise from poor work design, organisation and management, as well as poor social context of work. These factors may result in negative psychological, physical and social outcomes such as work-related stress, burnout or depression. It is now very clear that psychosocial risk is a widespread workplace safety and hazard issue affecting approximately one in four of European workers [3].

The Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI) [4], have identified that employees in the education sector in Ireland are very likely to experience workplace stress and psychosocial risks. Therefore, the teaching profession as well as school leaders, have been identified as being at particular risk for workplace stress and psychosocial hazards [5–7]. The workplace can be an intense environment for school leaders as they attempt to cope with frequent change, increased demands from parents and employing authorities, and students with complex needs and/or backgrounds [8].

The costs of workplace stress-related sick leave and premature resignations of school leaders have contributed to rising costs of the education sector as a whole [9]. It is noteworthy that there are increasing numbers of principals leaving their positions [10], resulting in

negative outcomes for their schools [11] and indirectly impacting the education sector in the wider sense [12,13].

Considering the findings from the literature cited above, the authors set out to engage in an initial scoping study to explore workplace stress and IPC from a school leaders' perspective in Ireland. In Ireland, post primary schools cater for students aged from 13 to 18 years old and the Post-leaving Certificate (PLC) sector, caters for vocational adult students from 18 years and above who are undertaking 'Quality & Qualifications Ireland' (QQI) programmes from QQI Level 3 to QQI Level 6 [14]. Given the national emphasis on distributed leadership and school leadership teams in Ireland this study was not restricted to school principals only. Participants from the school leadership team consisting of those in "formal leadership roles including teachers with posts of responsibility" [15] (p. 6) were invited to participate.

The research question formulated was as follows: How do school leaders manage workplace stress and IPC? We adopted three objectives to answer this question which comprised: to explore school leaders own experiences and observation of workplace stress and IPC; to examine the strategies school leaders use to address workplace stress and IPC among their staff; and to detail school leaders' experiences of and attitudes to using organisational strategies to address workplace stress and IPC among their staff.

2. Literature Review

2.1. School Leaders

The relationship between leadership and workplace stress can have negative outcomes for school effectiveness and school improvement and its role in the development of positive staff relations [16]. In addition, the importance of educational leadership has recently gained more considered focus in global research and policy development. Indeed, growing recognition of the importance of teacher leadership and its intersection with school improvement and educational development [17] is evident in the growing body of literature. The type and quality of leadership in organisations has also been put forward as a significant factor in shaping workplace cultures [18]. Satisfaction with leaders' ability to resolve work-related conflict has also been found to account for the largest difference between bullied and non-bullied respondents [19].

Difficulty in resolving conflict in organisations is noted by Thirwall [20] who identifies that organisations are relatively ineffective in seeking to rectify workplace bullying with no examples of satisfactory, permanent solutions being implemented by organisations identified in this research. Yet the management of schools is of vital importance to public administration as in OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) 13% of total public expenditures is spent on education on average (OECD, 2013) [21], therefore attention to a factor with significant potential to impact culture and educational success is warranted.

2.2. Interpersonal Conflict

IPC is an inevitable consequence of human interaction [22]. IPC does not necessarily imply aggressive behaviors *per se*; it arises as soon as one party feels obstructed or irritated by another party [23]. Blaine [24] noted that IPC can originate from discrepancies and/or various politics in different aspects of the workplace and are often sustained by informal groups through gossip and rumors. The literature makes it clear that organisations pay a high price if workplace conflict is not addressed quickly and effectively [25].

Elmagri & Eaton [26] suggest that identifying the factors which cause conflict in any organisation is considered the main stage in the process of conflict management. This can be managed in different ways, some focusing on interpersonal relationships and others on structural changes. Nonetheless, IPC when poorly managed, can have a range of detrimental effects [27].

The literature shows a connection between IPC and other workplace misbehaviors [28] (p. 221), and links to workplace bullying as "destructive conflicts going beyond

the point of no return” and “long-lasting and badly managed conflicts” [29] (p. 199). These scholars have advocated the importance of applying a conflict lens on bullying. Therefore, effective conflict management should take central stage in creating safer and more supportive school learning environments [30]. School leaders play an important role in the management of IPC and other workplace misbehaviors. Yet, this is often the aspect of the role they are most tentative to engage with for a range of reasons, often logical and self protective.

3. Materials and Methods

After ethical approval was granted by the first author’s institution (Ethics No. Rec 16-106), twelve school leaders (n = 12) from twelve different secondary schools and post leaving certificate colleges in Ireland were recruited and interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview approach.

3.1. Recruitment of Participants

Initial participants were recruited through convenience sampling, i.e., the authors’ contacts in the education sector in Ireland. Thereafter, snowball sampling was used to obtain further participants for the study. Interviews were conducted between April 2017 and November 2019, in locations throughout one geographical region in Ireland. Snowball sampling techniques offer real benefits for research that requires access to difficult to reach or hidden populations. These are often obscured from the view of social studies and policy makers who are keen to obtain evidence of the experiences of some of the more marginal excluded [31].

3.2. Rationale for the Data Gathering

Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) have been described as being an effective rationale for the data gathering method for small-scale research [32]. This type of interview is commonly used in qualitative research and is characterised by a dialogue between researcher and participant [33]. Semi-structured interviews are conducted conversationally with one interviewee at a time and “use a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up why or how questions” [34] (p. 493).

Many researchers have found that semi-structured interviews are an effective method for data collection when the researcher wants: (i) to collect qualitative, open-ended data; (ii) to investigate participant thoughts and beliefs about a particular topic and (iii) to delve deeply into personal or sensitive issues [35]. Elmir, Jackson, Wilkes, Schmied [36] also found semi structured interviews yield in-depth information about sensitive topics. Semi-structured interviews are regarded as a more flexible version of the structured interview which allows depth of understanding be achieved by the interviewer when probing and expanding interviewee responses [37,38]. Qualitative interviewing is, in some senses, both ‘simple and self-evident’ [39] (p. 3). Indeed, Rapley [40] notes that qualitative interviewing draws on the everyday practices of asking and answering questions and the everyday identities of questioner/answerer and interviewer/interviewee. It results in interview talk and ‘interview data’ (p. 16) and is the product of local interaction of the speakers.

3.3. Pre-Interview Activities

Once participants were identified, a participant information leaflet was e-mailed to them one week prior to the interview. The leaflet explained the purpose and content of the study and potential participants were asked to sign the consent form in the leaflet. Informed consent is considered extremely important in qualitative research that involves interviews [41], and all research that involves human participants [42]. The informed consent leaflet was either emailed to the author and signed with an electronic signature or was signed in hard copy at interview. A time and location were then established for the interview for each participant.

3.4. During the Interview

Interviews were conducted in-person. The authors asked permission to record the interview using a small voice recorder. The interviewer gave a brief introduction to the study and informed the participant that their information would be anonymised and would be transcribed from the audio recording within five days after the interview. Participants were also informed that the recording would be deleted once the transcription was complete.

3.5. Research Participants' Profile

School leaders in this post primary study are defined as principals, deputy-principals, assistant principal I's and assistant principals II's (formerly Special Duties Teaching posts). This study had representatives from all of these categories. The participants included seven males and five females. Two of the participants were principals, five were deputy principals, three were assistant principal I's, and two participants were assistant principal II's. Five of the participants worked in post-leaving certificate Colleges, (PLC), six worked in post primary schools and one participant worked in a centre that has both a PLC and post primary functions. The mean length of service as a school leader was ten years, the shortest length of service was three years, and the longest length of service was twenty years. A full breakdown of participants' profiles can be seen in Table 1. All participants worked in different schools. The names of those interviewed were anonymised by assigning pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1. Participant Profile (Anonymised).

	Name (Pseudonyms)	Sex	Years Service as a School Leader	Secondary School/PLC	Role
1	Sarah	F	7	PLC	Deputy Principal
2	Mary	F	4	PLC	Principal
3	Lisa	F	3	PLC	Principal
4	Jim	M	4	Secondary School	Assistant Principal II
5	John	M	10	Secondary School	Deputy Principal
6	Tina	F	15	Secondary School	Deputy Principal
7	Patricia	F	5	PLC	Assistant Principal I
8	Peter	M	15	Secondary School	Assistant Principal I
9	Paul	M	16	PLC & Secondary School	Deputy Principal
10	Tim	M	20	Secondary School	Deputy Principal
11	Jerry	M	10	PLC	Assistant Principal II
12	Joe	M	15	Secondary School	Assistant Principal I

3.6. Data Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the method chosen to examine school leaders' own experiences of IPC and workplace stress as well as their observations of these phenomenon among teaching staff in their school. Interpretive studies are predicted on the desire for a deeper understanding of how humans experience the world through language, local and historical situations and the intersubjective actions of the people involved [43]. Interpretive phenomenological analysis facilitates recognition that different people perceive the world in very different ways, dependent on their personalities, prior life experiences and motivations [40]. It was therefore decided that interpretative phenomenological analysis would be the most effective methodology in this study.

Smith & Osborne [44] provide an eight-step cycle of analysis for interpretative phenomenological analysis, which was followed in this study. Interview data were transcribed verbatim from the participants' accounts of their lived experiences. The data were read in detail and initial notes were made, this phase involved reading the data and noting ideas or phrases into the NVivo programme. The data were then initially coded (open coding). This initial coding of the data helped familiarisation with the individual interviews and facilitated getting a sense of the data that had been collected. Subordinate categories

where then created under each code. The breaking down the subordinate categories into subcategories for more in depth understanding of data was then undertaken. The next step developed superordinate themes which consolidated codes from preceding cycles into more abstract and literature-based set of subordinate themes thereby creating a final framework. Then, the writing of analytical memos against the superordinate themes to accurately summarise the content of each category and to propose empirical findings against each finding was completed. Next, validation and revisiting the analytical memos occurred to self-audit proposed findings by seeking evidence in the data beyond textual quotes to support the findings. The final step synthesised analytical memos into coherent and cohesive findings [45].

3.7. Limitations of the Study

Despite some initial concerns about the use of snowball sampling in this study, Cohen & Arieli [38] (p. 424) note that the effectiveness of snowball sampling has been recognised as significant in a variety of cases, mainly regarding marginalised populations. Their study claims that in conflict environments, the entire population is marginalized to some degree, making it 'hidden' from and 'hard to reach' for the research populations, which in a non-conflict context would not have been difficult to do. However, the sampling strategy did produce 12 participants for this study. Given this modest sample size, caution should be taken when extrapolating from these findings. These findings are envisaged as an initial scoping study to promote further discourse and research which may provide confirmation of these findings in the wider education community.

4. Results

The research findings are presented under four main themes in response to the research question detailed previously. A section is also included which details additional, latent themes from the research data.

4.1. School Leaders' Experience

Of the twelve school leaders interviewed, all had experienced workplace stress in their role. A frequent source of workplace stress cited was variously described as being caused by "other people", "teachers" or "teaching staff". All twelve participants who described experiencing workplace stress, cited others as a source of stress. In addition, half of the respondents ($n = 6$) stated that they had experienced physical health issues such as headaches, high blood pressure, digestive issues and eczema as a result of stress in their workplace.

Sarah, a principal in a PLC explained "it was just incredibly stressful for a variety of different reasons but mainly as a result of managing people, really difficult people with a long record of being difficult". Similarly, Jim, an API in a secondary school stated that he experienced workplace stress when "colleagues would sabotage what he was trying to do . . . by not showing up when they promised to show up or by not doing what they promised to do". Workload was also perceived as a factor in workplace stress for school leaders. Participants, referred to workload as a noteworthy stressor and eight participants (67%), referred to the variety of their workload as being a source of stress for them.

The effect of different types of stress was also mentioned by school leader Paul who clarified "there's a mix of workplace stress from administrative things and collegial things but I think the administrative things are being masqueraded by the collegial thing . . . stress and harassment being covered up under tasks being given to people". It should be noted that although all 12 participants, described experiencing workplace stress in the role, the degree of workplace stress varied. Two participants said that although they experienced workplace stress it was "only a bit here and there" or "restricted".

4.1.1. Interpersonal Conflict

Nine of the twelve participants, had experienced IPC in their role as a school leader and five of those nine participants had also perceived that they were recipients of bullying as a

school leader. In addition, four of the five participants who stated that they had personal experiences of both IPC and bullying as a school leader, had ongoing physical health problem as a result. Three participants noted that they had not experienced IPC. Four of the school leaders had observed both IPC and bullying in their staff group. Of the twelve participants, two school leaders, had observed bullying occurring in their staff group.

Patricia, an API, described how “certain staff do not get on at all” while John, a deputy principal in a post primary school, described how “colleagues are terrible . . . there are lots of arguments . . . the biggest problem is keeping warring factions apart”.

School principal Mary described how trying to resolve IPC between staff members could sometimes result in her experiencing IPC herself from either, or both of the conflicting parties. “Dealing with staff and managing them is very hard. Sometimes they turn on you when you are trying to help them”. One school leader described how sometimes IPC could occur over simple things. “There are a lot of very weird staff in the school. People will not speak to you over silly things. Conflict began over something small and now we do not speak”. Paul was one of four school leaders who stated that they had experienced both IPC and bullying in their role. Paul, who was a deputy principal with teaching responsibilities, described his experience of both IPC and bullying. “Being in a management role is difficult, sometimes you become embroiled into conflict that occurs between teachers and pressure is put on you to take sides with either one party or another”.

4.1.2. Workplace Stress

Ten of the twelve, participants, stated that they had observed workplace stress among their teaching staff while two participants, made little if any reference to workplace stress among their staff during the interview. Respondent Patricia said that she felt that staff without contracts were often very stressed because of the financial implications or having to get enough ‘deputy hours’ (hours taken by substitute teachers). She described how resentment could arise if additional teaching hours were allocated to some teachers and not others. Several participants described their observations of workplace stress among their staff. Joe described noticing staff under workplace stress on several occasions but reported that they did not go to the school principal as they felt their concerns would not be addressed.

4.2. *Strategies School Leaders’ Use to Address Workplace Stress and Interpersonal Conflict*

Jerry said that he addressed workplace stress with new teachers by encouraging them to set boundaries for their work and encouraged them to be aware of the remit of their role. Deputy principal Paul said that he kept an eye on new teachers and if he thought they were stressed he would find a way of speaking to them to see “how they were coping and dealing with the job”. Principal John added “you had to be subtle and not mention workplace stress at all as they could get offended and also be aware that even the word ‘stress’ is a can of worms”.

Deputy principal, Tina, said that she and her principal would organise to have lunches or tea and cakes for the teachers several times a year, e.g., at the end of the school year and at Christmas “to let them relax outside the classroom and let off a bit of steam”. Tina explained that this was done under the guise of “thanking the teachers for their work” rather than helping them “deal with stress” as the latter was “too dangerous” to bring up with teachers.

Four of the twelve participants, referred to a relationship between workplace stress and administration among some staff. Tina referred to the increase in the amount of administration over the years and how she had observed some teachers being very frustrated and stressed by it. She stated that “I have worked in lots of PLC centres in my time and in every centre, staff there always have a few teachers who will not do the administration thing and have to be chased around to the bitter end to do the paperwork”. She described how it was impossible to remove this source of workplace stress as new policies required high levels of administration. Deputy Principal, Patricia described how she had observed the workplace stress experienced by staff who do not get on with other people and described occasions

where she had tried to intervene subtly to try to resolve conflicts but that it rarely worked and sometimes it “backfired on you”.

The most common strategies employed by school leaders when faced with IPC among their staff was using avoidance strategies. Three respondents specifically referred to ‘timetabling them apart’, a process whereby teacher’s timetables are set so that they are not in the building at the same time or where there is minimal likelihood of them interacting.

Two respondents described not partaking in any measures at all to address workplace stress or IPC among staff. Assistant principal II, Jerry, said that he had to “withdraw from the process of trying to sort out fights between teachers or teachers and students” while another respondent (Tim) said that “you cannot help teachers being unreasonable you have to avoid them”. Another respondent Paul described the futility of trying to use any strategy to resolve issues between groups or individuals where the conflict or workplace stress source was entrenched. Two respondents, both assistant principals, described their strategy of asking the principal for help in cases of having to address issues of workplace stress or IPC between staff members.

4.3. School Leader’s Experience of Using Organisational Strategies to Address Workplace Stress and IPC

None of the twelve school leaders, expressed confidence in existing organisational strategies being able to resolve the resulting workplace stress. Deputy principal, Sarah, described the formal processes as being there “in name only” a sentiment echoed by Tina who called existent organisational policies “window-dressing”. In her interview, Patricia described an occasion when she had experienced IPC with a colleague. On this occasion, she went to the deputy principal who was very helpful. Patricia stressed that she had insisted any remedial strategies used be informal only. She described the positive outcome of this intervention expressing confidence in the deputy principal at the time.

A more nuanced view was observed from deputy principal, Paul who referred to his own principal’s use of organisational strategies. Paul described how he had a lack of confidence in the principal to either understand or use any policies that addressed an issue of IPC in the workplace. Respondent Jerry had a similar opinion as he stated, “I don’t trust senior management or their ability to deal with conflict or issues”. Respondent John said, “I don’t trust HO (head office)” while Jerry stated that he “didn’t trust asking the higher ups for help”. School principal Mary, commented on the option of approaching her own boss in Head Office. She stated she would be very reluctant to get assistance implementing organisational strategies of IPC in her workplace stress as “the boss has no sympathy, and it could look bad for you”.

4.4. Staff Factions

Several respondents made reference to a balkanisation effect with opposing groups in the staff, referring to them variously as, ‘warring factions’, ‘camps’, ‘staff groups’, ‘cliques’ and ‘clubs’. In some cases, these opposing groups had been in existence for prolonged periods of time. Sarah described one such PLC college where “I found out after I was appointed. It was well-known that the centre, I worked in had a ‘cabal’ in it for years that controlled the staff, caused division and who had a long record of trying to out manage management”.

In many cases, the factions had originated as a result of IPC between a small number of staff caused by things like personality clashes, petty arguments or professional jealousy. The conflict then developed over time to include more staff members which resulted in divisions between large numbers of staff. Several respondents referred to the significance of the staff room as either being a source of conflict or where the rival camps could be most clearly observed. Three respondents mentioned how they actively avoided the staff room. Another theme reported was the considerable power of ‘cliques’ or ‘rival camps’ in challenging leadership. One deputy principal described how staff room cliques were often the same groups who frequently challenged school management at staff meetings and could be consistently obstructive to new measures or systems initiated by management.

4.5. Occupational Sabotage

A recurrent theme in the study was the use of disruptive behaviours of staff (both teaching and management) to try to obstruct colleagues work activities or school activities (such as administrative tasks, open day, etc.). Referred to in this study as ‘occupational sabotage’ this behaviour had many manifestations. Disruptive behaviours included staff “not showing up when they are supposed to”, “ignoring my instructions” or “making other staff look bad in front of management”. Several respondents described this behaviour increasing when promotions became available with one respondent, mentioning how colleagues would “throw you under the bus” when a post was advertised.

It was also found that “gate-keepers” to resources or knowledge could display disruptive behaviours by being selective about which staff were allowed to access resources and which were not. Examples in the study included not providing access to computer passwords, limiting distribution to substitution hours to only a few select teachers, or being deliberately slow or inefficient in providing resources (for example class materials) or services.

Some examples of occupational sabotage were more direct. Sarah described setting up a new course in the college when she had been an assistant principal. She recounted one occasion when the file containing details of interested applicants for the new course went missing. Sarah said that she had suspected this might happen and had photocopied the applicant details previously and kept a copy herself. She said that “the guidance counsellor and her friends had it in for me and she wouldn’t help with promoting the course on the website or when she went on school visits, so I had to do all that work myself”.

4.6. Reluctance to Approach Human Resources/Senior Management in Head Office

The final emerging theme identified in the study was the reluctance of school leaders or deputy principals to approach and use the services of human resources or senior management. The Human Resources (HR) function in the schools and colleges is represented by the principals and deputy principals there, i.e., HR issues can be brought to the attention of the principal and/or deputy principal. The study indicates that the majority of school leaders in schools and PLC centres are reluctant to approach the HR Department (if it exists) or senior management for assistance with cases of workplace stress or IPC in their schools. The reasons for this are very varied. Some respondents described their lack of confidence in the ability of human resources or senior management to assist, others referred to such an action as having a negative impact on perception of the school leader’s ability to manage and being seen as “weak”.

5. Discussion

5.1. Nomenclature

In this study, certain terms and phrases were associated with interpersonal conflict, (IPC). Respondents referred to “arguments” among staff, “staff not getting on”, or “staff tension” or similar phrases. This was decided because the term “interpersonal conflict” is not a common term and was not used by respondents in response to questions put to them. The term “bullying” has distinct characteristics that differentiates it from Interpersonal conflict [28].

5.2. School Leaders’ Experiences of Workplace Stress and Interpersonal Conflict

The findings from this study suggests a polarity in the role of school principals in terms of workplace stress and IPC. In some instances, they were interpreted as having a negative role, while in others, positive. It was found that they can act as facilitators of IPC by actively promoting and encouraging it between different teachers. In other cases, conflict can be facilitated through their inaction or unwillingness to get involved. One example was provided by deputy principal John who stated that “the principal is a pain . . . they pick on staff constantly”. A further salient finding from this study is the considerable widespread and detrimental effects on health from workplace stress and IPC. Unfortunately for the sufferers of workplace stress and IPC, the only response perceived by school leaders

to be effective in this study was to use timetabling in an attempt to separate sufferers away from the perpetrators.

The relationship between leadership and workplace stress is a recurring theme in the education-based literature. Dopson, Ferlie, McGivern, Fischer, Mitra, Ledger and Behrens [46] found that this relationship can have negative outcomes for school effectiveness and school improvement, and its role in the development of positive staff relations [16]. Authority is always the locus of overall organisations responsibility and legitimacy and anchors the role system of an organisation [47]. The type and quality of leadership in organisations has also been put forward as a significant factor in shaping workplace cultures [18]. Crossfield & Bourne [22], note that of all the conflicts that might exist in a school, those between the school leaders and teachers can be the most debilitating. IPC between the school leaders and teachers, can severely damage school climate, erode a good school culture, and eventually affect student achievement [48].

Conflict avoidance was also present in this study and resonates with the international literature [49]. Catana [50] has identified that teachers used avoidance behaviours to mitigate conflict with other teachers. However, Hershcovis, Cameron, Gervais, Bozeman [51] offers cautions about avoidance. They found it is an ineffective approach to preventing the reoccurrence of incivility and adversely and can lead to increased emotional exhaustion. Therefore, it is important that leadership teams are confident and competent to address work related stress and conflict in schools. Our data suggest that given the complexity of school culture, some innovative ways for school leaders to effectively deal with workplace stress and IPC is worthy of investigation in post primary schools. However, it remains that for our participants, interpersonal conflict related stress appeared normalised and was a workplace hazard.

5.3. Strategies School Leaders Use to Address Stress and Interpersonal Conflict among Their Staff

A clear sense of futility emerged among participants in terms of the efficacy of organisational strategies to resolve workplace stress and IPC. Comments such as “you can’t sort it out”, or remedial strategies being described as “window dressing”, that are “useless” were common. A school leader saying “I withdrew from the process of trying to get issues sorted or solve fights between teachers or teachers and students” evidences a lack of agency and effectiveness in dealing with the issues. Paul, a deputy principal working in an organisation that has both a PLC and a post primary school function articulated similar futility saying, “it is impossible to come up with strategies to help teachers determined not to get on with one another”. If members of the school leadership team are articulating, not only ineffectiveness in dealing with IPC, but a clear futility and detachment from seeking to address it, the implications for workplace stress and IPC are significant.

In terms of the working environment, three of the twelve participants cited the staff room as a source of workplace stress, from cramped spaces to poor staffroom culture. This is an underestimated aspect of the workplace. It is assumed that leaders will know how to manage this environment intuitively, but this is not always the case. More attention is needed in the design of staffrooms with clear delineation between staff workrooms and work social spaces. Better designed and delineated workspaces would provide a preventative measure. This study found that many of the triggers for IPC reported, (such as sitting in the wrong chair or using the wrong phone charger), can be both prevented, mitigated and perhaps solved by allowing the creation of devolved and social workspaces, a promising engineering based preventative measure that seems to be overlooked in current school design. Foley [52] challenged the normative insistence that Irish post primary schools should only have one designated centralised and shared workspace for all teachers, being the staff room. This design criterion is outmoded as it has the unwanted potential consequence of germinating, incubating and sustaining workplace stress and IPC without any escape. Initial separation of teachers who are in conflict with each other may be a temporary solution for conflict management. However, the long-term separation of staff

to prevent IPC is not an acceptable solution. This strategy will only deepen the sense of divide between conflicting parties and support established cabals.

School leaders set the tone for work social behaviours. We would advocate that professional development for these leaders that pays attention to the damaging social behaviours reported in this study. The literature on work related stress interventions suggests that searching for a single univariate solution may be futile [53]. Power and organisational culture are key components for organisational inaction in terms of addressing workplace bullying [54]. Indeed, Mannix-McNamara, Hickey, MacCurtain and Blom [55] note that poor workplace behaviours are linked to interpersonal conflicts which in turn are linked to the artefacts and manifestations of school culture and to epistemological assumptions such as subject hierarchy, cliques and deficiencies in leadership.

The difficulties of dealing with workplace stress and IPC in post primary schools leaves one with a sense that no pragmatic solutions are available. We would suggest differently. Mannix-McNamara et al. [55] have found that seeking support from school leaders was ineffective and that naming the poor workplace behaviours was perceived to only exacerbate their situations. However, with professional development and leadership capacity building in the realm of IPC and difficult conversations, these matters can be effectively addressed. School leaders are an influential group of leaders [16]. Therefore, the first step is to support leaders to develop their agency in engaging with IPC and not to disassociate from it. There needs to be more open conversation about IPC and its implications within the school community. School leaders need to be supported in this, by their managerial bodies and the Department of Education.

This is because addressing it requires fortitude and an understanding that workplace culture benefits, makes this an imperative. Confidence in intervening at a much earlier stage to foster collegiality and highlight workplace dignity expectations, could prevent many small incidents from becoming entrenched and full-blown IPC. School leaders are aware that the most appropriate ways to manage teacher stress is training on stress management techniques and conflict resolution, rather than avoidance behaviours [56]. Role-specific training could be provided for them in terms of mediation, conflict-resolution techniques, assertiveness training and communication skills. The current research identifies that guidelines on dealing with workplace stress and mental health problems at work are more likely to be effective and have greater impact if accompanied by management training [57]. A further practical measure would be the preferential selection at appointment of school leaders, of those who can demonstrate better preventative and mediation skills regarding interpersonal contact. Stronger emphasis on interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence in the skill sets of leaders would also enhance ability to effectively deal with these issues.

Gmelch & Carroll [58] note that the structural, functional, and relational features of academic departments, virtually guarantees conflict in that setting. In their view, conflict is “sewn into the fabric” of many institutions (p. 110). The influence of school leaders on the successful outcome of their school is well known [59]. We would argue that there is significant underestimation of IPC in the workplace, and we would advocate for further research and recognition of IPC as a standalone challenging workplace behaviour. IPC has intrinsically different characteristics from established challenging workplace behaviours such as bullying or incivility. IPC may not be intentional or repetitive, IPC may not involve a power imbalance, a perpetrator of IPC may change their behaviour if they become aware that they are negatively impacting others. Unresolved IPC may also act as a precursor or trigger for further challenging workplace behaviours such as; incivility, bullying, mobbing and aggression.

5.4. Staff Factions

The literature evidences that teachers form into different like-minded groups (often called cliques), these groups have similar goals and show mutual support [55]. This study noted that five of the twelve participants reported teacher groups or cliques were a noteworthy stressor. One participant noted “teacher cliques are in existence in this school, they very often argue with each other and are involved in a lot of micro politics within the school, and

very often difficult to control". Lindle [60] noted in their research that the study of micro politics is absolutely a question of survival for school leaders and other educators. Indeed, most practicing school leaders are already astute, or even unwitting, students of micro politics. Not only is the study of micro politics inevitable, for most school leaders it is an inherent occupational requirement. Mannix-McNamara et al. [55] note that cliques are perceived as powerful entities, that can permeate workplace toxicity and appear to be able to garner resources, power, and leadership support. This process of clique formation in educational contexts is identified as 'Balkanisation' [61]. Mistrust in schools seems to result in teachers fragmenting into likeminded micro political groups that are mutually supportive. Micro politics refers to "the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals and influence in organisations" [62] (p. 9). Micro politics has implications for how leadership is enacted in schools [63]. School leaders must contend with these competing and micro political factions therefore it is important that leaders are equipped and confident to manage them as they conceivably affect the whole school environment.

According to Shun-Wig [64] teachers may 'Balkanise' into different cliques with different ideological demarcations, and this can influence the way schools are governed. Hargraves & MacMillan [61] note that these groups are characterised by being strongly insulated from each other and are clearly delineated with clear boundaries from each other. Membership of such groups has significant impact on the work life within the school. Cliques often have a political complexion to them, with repositories of self-interest, where promotion, status and resources are distributed among each group [55]. Rivalry between these groups, and indeed the teachers who comprise them, can result in mistrust permeating throughout the work environment and with adverse impact on workplace stress and on bullying or uncivil behaviour.

For example, Namie [65] found that nearly three quarters of all bullying occurs when the target is not a protected group member or when the harasser is a protected group member. Note that many post-primary schools are characterised by a maze of bureaucratic cubbyholes, which results in bureaucratic inflexibility, staff that are unresponsive to change, and poor outcomes for students [61]. Balkanised school cultures may have negative outcomes for both students and teachers [66]. Micro political groups may have power to influence school leaders' actions, thereby influencing school policy [55]. Therefore, school leaders need micro political awareness and careful attention to how groups form and act within their staff. They also need to be supported to develop the agency to effectively address and eradicate it at best or manage it at least to protect the psychological health of teachers. It would seem important that school leaders be aware of the existence of these groups and separate themselves from any potential influence that these groups might have in the governance of the school.

5.5. Support Seeking

The reluctance of school leaders to report workplace stress and IPC was noteworthy in the data. All twelve school leaders perceived that the reporting of workplace stress or IPC could have negative implications for them as was evidenced in comments such as "you just do not pass on many things that happen in the school to anyone above you, if you report any form of stress, it would not reflect well on your running of the school". This resonates with the work of Fahie [67] who also reported teacher reluctance in making complaints due to fear from their complaint being dismissed or being regarded as a whistleblower or troublemaker. Indeed, Mannix McNamara, Fitzpatrick, MacCurtain, O'Brien [68] have identified that the literature frequently evidences fear as a characteristic emotion in subverting attempts to seek help or redress. A fear of reporting workplace stress may manifest itself in feelings of isolation and a perception that one will not be heard. This serves only to exacerbate feelings of workplace stress among school leaders.

Schools are unique organisations because despite large numbers of people in the school organisation each day, there is no unique Human Resource personnel designated to support the organisation and its leadership. School leaders are supported in their management of

the school by their board of management. This certainly makes it more challenging to seek and gain support without disclosure to outside agencies that there are issues. Where human resource structures do exist the literature notes that that victims of bullying or conflict may lodge a formal complaint with human resources about inappropriate workplace behaviour. However, complaining is an unusual occurrence and subject to a number of uncommon facilitative conditions being met [69] that are off putting in terms of facilitating support seeking. The lack of formal mechanisms in Irish schools for dealing with interpersonal disputes reduces confidence in organisational processes to resolve workplace stress and IPC [70]. Therefore, there is a lack of confidence in methods to address workplace stress which is not surprising given the evidence that school-based interventions reported in the literature have not really been successful [68].

There may be a perception that the reporting of workplace stress and IPC may also be viewed negatively and therefore school leaders may be more reluctant to report. Evidence suggests that making a complaint can lead to reprimands and reprisals, opening teachers up to professional humiliation and criticism [68]. The wider implications of this inability of school stakeholders to report workplace stress and IPC may result in personal frustration for individuals and conversely serves only to hide the extent of the problem and worse facilitates it to continue, even flourish.

5.6. The Sense of Futility in Organisational Strategies to Resolve Workplace Stress and Interpersonal Conflict

The data in this study suggest that school leaders did not have confidence in existing strategies available to them to resolve workplace stress and IPC in their schools. This is despite there being numerous initiatives available from regulators, professional bodies or employee representatives [71]. A lack of support to effectively address IPC and workplace stress may be taking a stronger toll on school leaders. This study found that IPC takes up a considerable amount of time and workload for school leaders and that their multi-dimensional roles contribute to workplace stress and a large workload for them. This in turn often makes it difficult for them to resolve interpersonal stress issues among staff members in their school. This may be a factor in the increasing levels of workplace stress and burnout among school principals and this warrants further investigation.

Since the initial work on teacher stress in the 1970s, there have been growing demands to implement effective interventions to reduce workplace stress [72]. Where interventions have been implemented for the teaching profession, they have had little consistency in approach or type of treatment, often falling across diverse and eclectic areas [73,74]. It is therefore of some concern to note that there appears to be a paucity of interventions, thus far that will successfully resolve workplace stress in organisations [75]. Given the growing concerns regarding leader attrition and burnout this is an area requiring prompt investigation.

Beusaert et al. [12] identifies adverse psychological and physiological impact on school principals caused by both their workload and interpersonal conflicts among staff members. Given the modern day demands on school leaders, the time spent dealing with IPC can be transferred to more productive and beneficial areas of education. Currently, it appears that IPC may be ignored or become invisible in its own right due to being subsumed within overarching definitions of bullying [76]. There seems a possibility that bullying or other inappropriate workplace behaviours are being minimised as IPC which can cause confusion as to the origin and definition of these behaviours. We advocate for the need for 'conceptual clean up' of these issues as the current conflation of them is not serving workplace wellbeing well.

5.7. Distributed Leadership

The literature offers many theories and definitions of the plural approach to leadership and its key variables [77]. This approach comprises various forms of leadership that imply the interaction and combined influence of multiple leaders in specific organisational situations. Ultimately, distributed leadership is about giving leaders in schools ownership

by empowering them to lead their teams and drive forward their strategies that contribute towards the whole-school priorities.

With the unprecedented pressure of accountability within education in recent years, the tasks, roles, and responsibilities of principals have become increasingly complex and are beyond the capability of any single individual, no matter how charismatic [78]. As a result, the idea of heroic leadership has been undermined and the distribution of the leadership role among people at multiple levels of the school organization is overwhelmingly stressed in current literature [79].

Despite the evidence that distributed leadership is a vital practice for school improvement and student learning, the concept has remained relatively vague [80]. There is neither a single agreed-upon definition and set of practices nor a consistent terminology associated with it. A fundamental premise of distributed leadership is that staff, who may have no formal authority, nevertheless gain power through distributed leadership. Depending on the conceptual perspective, power may be perceived as donated or lent by those in authority roles or seen as a spontaneous result of individuals' membership of the community.

The premise of staff undertaking leadership while having no formal authority, could have implications for their instructions being followed by stakeholders in the school, thereby giving rise to micro political struggles. Spillane & Diamond [81] acknowledge that the social processes at work in distributed leadership involve give and take and that, by definition, leadership will involve not just the decisions of leaders but also those of followers, "because social influence is a two-way affair" (p. 9).

Indeed, Storey [82] identifies further micro political issues by revealing and explaining how distributed leadership "resulted in tension and conflicts between competing leaders" (p. 250), particularly between department heads and the school leader. If micropolitical conflicts are ignored in the study of school leadership, it leads to a vision of schooling that is over simplified and inaccurate [83].

Storey [82] notes that organisational participants are initially attracted to the concept of distributed leadership because it appeals to their sense of values. However, when differences arise between leadership parties, only then did they begin to try and identify what aspects of leadership that had distributed between them. This ambiguity about leadership responsibilities could also lead to IPC in schools.

Torrance [84] noted in her study on distributed leadership that a range of issues and tensions emerged specific to each school researched. They noted friction between some staff, an anxiety amongst some staff and a resistance on the part of some staff both to take on a leadership role and towards members of staff who had already done so. They also noted tensions arising from distributed leaders' personality traits and an expectation that additional time should be given for the undertaking of leadership roles.

Both nationally and internationally, distributed leadership has gained prominence in recent years, forming the popular discourse of contemporary school education literature in the search for effective models of school governance [85]. However, there is potential for IPC issues to evolve as a result of distributed leadership being introduced ineffectively in school environments. This must be navigated carefully so as to not make school leaders roles more difficult.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that for those participants in this study, resolutions for IPC are scant. Additionally, further research is needed to conceptualise IPC in school environments to support leaders to effectively manage it. At the very least, there is a moral imperative here to mitigate the suffering of those second level teachers and leaders who experience workplace stress as a result of IPC and to facilitate more life affirming educational workplaces.

Interpersonal conflicts vary in the degree of complexity involved [86], and multiple levels exist in every interpersonal conflict. Teachers seem to work in school environments that have many easily accessed, communal spaces, such as staff rooms, corridors, and

offices. This feature of the school environment may make it difficult, if not impossible for teachers to escape from conflict with other teachers. Humanistic leadership by supervisors seems imperative to ensuring the satisfaction of teachers in their working environment [87]. Stein [88] notes that, unfortunately, many school leaders are intimidated by non-performing teachers' often abrasive personalities and tough demeanor. School leaders are not only important but, they are generally taking on more and more roles [89]. The competency lists for school leaders and management can be very long [18]. The increasingly busy role of the school leader may prevent school leaders giving the required time and resources to resolve IPC related disputes among teachers.

Workplace stress and IPC in schools is not an easy problem to solve as school environments are layered with organisational complexity. It seems intuitive that school leaders would be central to the reduction or resolution of workplace behavioural issues. To assume that they have the knowledge and skill to identify it and effectively address it is to do them a disservice. This is because they are already time poor in terms of managing an organisation without a designated human resource function/support. School leaders require professional development and support of regulators, professional bodies, employee representatives and government departments when dealing with IPC. To avoid it as some school leaders, appear to be doing, appears quite a rational decision in light of the absence of support structures to aid them. Finally, this study is an initial scoping study, and the data suggest that further research in this field is warranted particularly in identification, and dissemination of practical and resolution-focussed solutions, for managing workplace stress and interpersonal contact in schools.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation of the paper was conducted by P.M.M. The methodology, formal analysis and data curation was conducted by P.B. and C.B. The literature review was conducted by all authors. The original draft preparation was conducted by P.B., C.B. and V.H. The review and editing of the paper was conducted by P.B., C.B. and N.H. C.B.'s MSc dissertation data and P.B.'s, self-funded PhD data were the original evidence form which this paper was generated. Supervision of the paper was conducted by P.M.M. and N.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was approved by the Research and Ethics committee of P.B.'s institution, approval number Ref 16-106.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data supporting reported findings can be found in the possession of the first two authors.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to acknowledge and give the warmest thanks to the participants in this research for their valuable time and contributions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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