

The Impact of Parental Complaints on Teacher Mental Health and Wellbeing

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Abstract.

This study examined the impact of parental complaints on the mental health and wellbeing of teachers within Scottish state schools during Covid-19. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, a significant proportion of teaching staff reported feeling undervalued by society (OECD, 2018) and over half of Scottish teachers reported mental ill health due to workplace stress (White, 2020). As the pandemic continued, poor mental health continued to affect UK teachers (Kim & Asbury, 2020) and a noticeable, negative rhetoric about teachers began circulating in the UK media (O'Donnell, 2020; Power, 2020; Prior, 2020; Vine, 2020; Woolcock, 2020) and via social media platforms (Chakrabarti, 2020; Education Support, 2020), with parental dissatisfaction and anxiety directed at teachers. The research was undertaken using a mixed methods sequential design consisting of an online survey followed by semi-structured interviews. The survey data was analysed using SPSS, providing descriptive and inferential statistical data about the respondent demographics, experiences of complaints, and level of wellbeing as measured through an interpretative phenomenological approach exploring how the parent – pupil – teacher – school relationship is impacted by complaints. Findings include: (i) the need for greater dialogue around the role of complaints and parental engagement in schools post-Covid, (ii) what teachers believe they are able to deliver and parental expectations of that delivery, at times resulted in unreasonable and difficult parental behaviours that impacted the parent- pupil relationship in a minority of cases, and (iii) that most interviewees felt well supported but that the complaints process could be improved.

Keywords: education, complaints, parents, mental health, Covid-19

1. Introduction

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant proportion of teachers reported feeling undervalued by society (OECD, 2018) and over half of Scottish teachers reported mental ill health due to workplace stress (White, 2020). As the Covid-19 pandemic continued to impact Scottish education, affecting pupils, parents and teachers, a noticeable, negative rhetoric about teachers began circulating in the UK media (O'Donnell, 2020; Power, 2020; Prior, 2020; Vine, 2020; Woolcock, 2020) and via social media platforms (Chakrabarti, 2020; Education Support, 2020). Parental dissatisfaction and anxiety were further exacerbated by the mismanagement of the Scottish and UK secondary school exam diet (Blackley, 2020), with teachers bearing the burden of this discontent.

Although the impact of the pandemic on teacher mental health and wellbeing has since been documented, much of this research either focused on general concerns related to wellbeing (Allen, et al., 2021; Moss et al., 2020) and/or specifically on school leaders (Fotheringham, et al., 2020; Gready et al., 2021; Beauchamp et al., 2021) and/or on education in England (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Cattan, et.al, 2020). In contrast, little research has looked specifically at parental complaints during Covid-19 and assessed their impact on teacher mental health and wellbeing. Additionally, there is a lack of data about the mental health and wellbeing of teachers in comparison to school leaders. Finally, there is a gap in knowledge about the mental health and wellbeing of Scottish teachers in relation to the rest of the UK.

Given that parental complaints are a contributing factor to teacher mental ill health (Prakke, et al., 2007), that high rates of poor mental health continue to be reported by the teachers within Scotland and throughout the UK (Kim & Asbury, 2020), and this is an ongoing priority of the Scottish Government (ScotGov, 2020), we set out to examine complaints processes within primary and secondary education. We specifically wanted to explore how complaints processes were used by parents of children within Scottish schools, ask whether teachers felt there had been an increase in parental complaints during the Covid-19 pandemic, and assess whether teacher mental health was thereby affected by any parental complaints they received during this period.

This study builds on empirical research that was conducted primarily in relation to the Health Sector and reported how complaints can result in significant negative effects on staff wellbeing (Bourne et al., 2015; Bruers et al., 2015; Cunningham, 2004). There was also evidence that complaints could lead to defensive practices and avoidance (Jain & Ogden, 1999), while also damaging relationships and thereby reducing trust and goodwill (Cunningham 2004). Additionally, further research in this field, as undertaken by the University of Glasgow and Queen Margaret University (Gill et al., 2017), examined the impact of complaints among planning and housing officials in Scotland, finding that being complained about affected their work practices and their wellbeing. The effects were more moderate than those found in the health sector, but this research also found that a significant minority found that they had been affected a great deal. While complaints were less likely to impact professional practices than personal health, there were those who reported feeling more wary of dealing with certain service users and feeling more distrustful. Their research highlighted how context matters, and that the design and operation of complaints procedures can be significant factors which impact on the likelihood of negative factors being experienced.

As a result of the above study, Gill et al., (2019) recommended a therapeutic approach to complaint resolution, in order to reduce the dysfunctional effects of complaint handling and ensure that complaints processes do not cause additional harm. To build on this therapeutic model of complaints handling advocated by Gill et al., (2019), the findings of this study intend to inform the development of complaints processes, procedures or policies within Scottish Education. The goal of developing complaint resolution within education settings is to best support teacher mental health and wellbeing by responding to parental complaints through a therapeutic lens.

1.1 Research Purpose

The purpose of this research was to examine complaints processes within education, as the ongoing nature of parent-teacher relationships, and the pivotal role that education plays in

society, means there is considerable potential for negative effects to be experienced through complaints processes, particularly in our post-Covid world. This study will therefore explore what complaints processes are available to parents to report current issues within Scottish education resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic; if and how complaints processes are being used, and; whether this has affected teacher mental health. Additionally, this study intended to investigate whether complaints processes could be used to better support teacher mental health and wellbeing by repositioning parental complaints through a therapeutic lens.

1.1.1 Research Questions

The objectives of this research were to identify the range of effects (relating to health, well-being, and professional practice) arising from Scottish teachers being subject to a complaint; identify the extent to which Scottish teachers felt supported by their employer when they were complained about and the support mechanisms (if any) which were available; and identify current processes, practices, and policies used by schools in Scotland to help teachers who have been subject to a complaint. This study therefore asked:

1. What complaints processes are available to parents?
2. What type of complaints are made by parents and how do they voice them?
3. How frequently are teachers complained about?
4. How do parental complaints impact teachers?
5. Is there support for teachers responding to parental complaints?
6. How can complaint processes encourage greater learning from complaints?

This study contended that creating a therapeutic complaints process within Scottish education might help navigate any difficulties reported by research participants providing education within Scottish schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study design and methodology, outlined below, were created to provide an overview of the current state of complaints processes within the Scottish school system, as well as an in-depth understanding of the effects of these complaints on teachers and school leaders.

2. Methods

A sequential study design was chosen, consisting of two distinct research phases. Phase I of the research study consisted of an online survey. Phase II of the research study consisted of semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to examine trends shown in the survey data, helping us better understand and interpret emerging themes. We used the following terms to define the notion of ‘complaint’, ‘school leader’ and ‘parent’ within the online survey and interview questionnaires:

Term	Definition
Complaint	Any expression of dissatisfaction by a parent/carer about any aspect of education. This includes concerns/complaints at all levels, not just those that were officially recorded in any capacity.
School Leader	A teacher employed in a Scottish school during the academic year 2020-21 who has management responsibilities for a teaching colleague and / or handles complaints at a senior management level.

Parent/Carer	Any person with parental, legal guardianship or primary caring responsibilities for a child.
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Table 1: Key Terminology

Phase I: Survey of Teachers and School Leaders

Two online questionnaires were developed. The first was developed specifically for teachers. The second was specifically for teachers in promoted positions, with management and/or leadership responsibility for other members of staff. This included Principal Teachers (PTs), Deputy Head Teachers (DHTs), Department Heads (HoDs) and Head Teachers (HTs). Specifically, this survey was designed for teachers in a leadership role with line management responsibility for handling complaints escalated beyond the relationship between a class teacher and the parent/carer of a child in their class.

The original intention was to have a single questionnaire for both participant populations. However, when drafting the initial questionnaire it became clear that the interactions teaching staff had with complaints was dependent on whether they had any line management responsibilities. Due to this, the design of the survey was affected, with the length of the survey and the formulation of the questions effected. As a result, a decision was made to separate out the questionnaires between teachers without, and teachers with, line management responsibility and/or a formal leadership role. Wherever possible the survey questions remained the same, to allow for analysis across both data sets.

The questionnaires were piloted with six teachers in a variety of roles who provided feedback on the survey, resulting in some minor adjustments, including the length of the survey and the structure of the questions. There was one major adjustment, which was clarifying the definition of ‘complaint’ by adding in concern to the definition and providing this enhanced and expansive definition in the survey consent page preamble, and within the survey itself, to remind respondents that the definition of complaint was broad, and not only related to complaints that were escalated beyond the school and at the local authority level.

The online survey was distributed by the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS) through their online newsletter, sent to all registered teachers in Scotland. The research team also distributed the online survey through their professional networks and via social media. The survey was open from in May to June 2021.

Survey Design

The teacher questionnaire consisted of 34 questions. The school leader questionnaire consisted of 28 questions. The questions covered:

- demographics
- information about the complaints received
- information regarding the health and wellbeing of respondents using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)¹.
 - this scale was selected because it has been used to measure people’s wellbeing in national surveys, by governments and by the National Health Service

¹ *Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) © University of Warwick 2006, all rights reserved.*

- information about the effects of the complaint on the respondent.
 - these questions were adapted from Gill et al. 2017 who had undertaken similar research on the impact of being complained about in relation to other public sector contexts
- information about any support provided by internal line management personnel or external local authority offices during the complaint

Survey Responses

There was a total of 89 responses to the survey, with 41 responses to the teacher questionnaire and 48 responses to the school leader questionnaire. The data was analysed using SPSS, providing descriptive and inferential statistical data. The survey results reflected state sector teachers, with teachers working in either primary or secondary schools. The number of respondents from the fee-paying sector, known as the ‘independent sector’ in Scotland, as well as respondents from other education sectors, such as enhanced provision schools or secure unit schools, were too small for meaningful assessment (n = 5).

Given there are just over 77, 000 teachers registered in Scotland (GTCS, 2021) the low number of responses was disappointing and limits the generalisability of the study findings. However, other studies conducted into the health and wellbeing of teachers in Scotland have had similarly low response rates (Ravalier & Walsh, 2017; White, 2020). Therefore, it is possible that response rates from teachers invited to respond to surveys may be low in general. Furthermore, it is possible that the low response rate was due to several reasons, particularly the timing of the survey distribution.

First, the detailed questionnaires were distributed during May 2021 towards the end of the school year and shortly after schools returned to face-to-face teaching. Since the questionnaire related to the impact of complaints during the pandemic, it was timed to take place when the respondents still had a fresh memory of events. Coming towards the end of a very challenging school year, however, impacted on the willingness of teachers and school leaders to undertake and complete the survey. Furthermore, the Scottish school year ends at the end of June for the summer holiday period, curtailing the possibility of extending the call for survey participants.

Second, in secondary schools, the timing of the survey distribution coincided with an assessment period that replaced the traditional exam diet. As such, secondary school teachers were even busier than they usually are during the secondary school exam season. Finally, the survey topic was emotive, and teachers and school leaders were already contending with the impact of the pandemic on their professional practice and personal lives. This, combined with the detail and length of the questionnaire was also a likely deterrent to respondents.

Despite the limitations of our small sample size and the results not being broadly generalizable, given the exploratory nature of the research, and the difficulty of accessing individuals in schools during this time, the data are still considered useful for providing initial insights into the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on teachers and school leaders. Furthermore, the responses gathered have raised questions to be followed up in future research about complaints within primary and secondary schools, and the wider education sector.

Phase II: Semi-Structured Interviews

The second phase of the study consisted of 18 semi-structured interviews. Interviewees included teachers and school leaders located in 12 local authorities. The interviews were

conducted through June 2021 through to August 2021. The questionnaire invited teachers to provide personal and professional details if they were willing to take part in an interview. We also sought additional volunteers via the GTCS weekly online newsletter update, who also sent a subsequent invite to take part in the interview, which distributed in June 2021.

In total, 75 people responded to the call for interviewees and volunteered to take part. Eighteen teachers and school leaders agreed to be interviewed and booked an hour-long appointment with one of the research team. Interviewees were selected organically, not through a specific sampling strategy, with interviews offered to any teachers or school leaders who contacted the research team and booked an interview. Despite this informal approach to selecting interviewees, there was a wide range of teachers and school leaders working in primary and secondary schools across Scotland, and in a variety of roles, who agreed to be interviewed. Additional to teaching and management staff, two staff based at different local authority education offices, including a head of service and a quality improvement officer, agreed to be interviewed, offering an invaluable perspective on the complaints process once escalated beyond the school to local authority level. Interviews were offered to all teachers, school leaders, or local authority education officials, who responded to the call for participants. Given the length of each interview, and the breadth of positions (institutional and geographic) that was captured in the initial request for interviewees, we did not pursue any further study participants.

Interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. These were audio-visual recorded, with an automated transcript enabled for each call. To ensure clarity and coherency of the interview discussion, an audio recording of each interview was professionally transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured, with suggested wording and sequence of questions to be followed by the interviewer. Interviews lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. Initially, information on complaints during the pandemic, as well as the impact that receiving and/or responding to complaints had on the interviewee, was sought. Interviewees were also asked about what support they had received from their school management staff or local authority education officials, and whether there were potential measures that could be taken at the school or the local authority level that could improve the access to, as well as the effectiveness, of the support already offered; indeed, if any was offered at all.

Although the initial focus of the interviews was on the impact of complaints on teachers and school leaders during the pandemic, the interviewees often offered unprompted reflections on the wider impact of complaints they had been subject to before, not only during, the pandemic. Once the interviews were completed, transcripts were uploaded to Nvivo and analysed inductively using thematic analysis.

3. Results

Phase I: Survey of Teachers and School Leaders

The online survey asked respondents to reflect on their experiences in relation to complaints in the first year of the pandemic from when Scottish schools first closed due to the pandemic, up until the Easter holidays the following year (Monday 23rd March 2020 to 2nd April 2021), at which point schools were largely back in session, despite continued disruptions due to covid isolation regulations.

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The main findings from the survey included a range of information, including demographic data about the participants, their professional role and tenure, as well as whether they had caring responsibilities. Additionally, we asked participants to respond to a series of questions about their experiences of complaints and complete the WEMWBS. Captured below is a breakdown of the online survey demographics:

	Teachers	School leaders
Number of Respondents	41	48
Type of school ²	Primary schools: 27% (n=11) Secondary schools: 66% (n=27) Other: 7% (n = 3)	Primary schools: 48% (n=23) Secondary schools: 48% (n = 23) Other: 4% (n = 2)
Gender	Female: 80% (n=33) Male: 20% (n=8)	Female: 77% (n= 37) Male: 23% (n=11)
Age 18 – 34 years 35 – 44 years 45 – 54 years 55 above	29% (n=12) 27% (n=11) 22% (n=9) 22% (n=9)	6% (n=3) 27% (n=13) 45% (n=22) 21% (n=10)
Length of service	21 – 30 years 29% (n = 12)	21 – 30 years 48% (n=23)
Local authority	13 out of 32	12 out of 32
Caring responsibilities	42% (n=17)	62% (n=30)
Ethnic origin	71% White Scottish (n=29) 20% White British (n=8) 10% White other (n=4)	

Table 2: Online Survey Respondent Demographics

Key findings from the quantitative data included the number of complaints received by both the teacher and school leader sample, showing a wide range in total complaints received both within each sample and between them. Teachers reported receiving 0-28 annual complaints / concerns during the Covid-19 pandemic. The average number of annual complaints was 6 but the most frequent number of complaints reported was 1 complaint per year, accounting for 22% of the teacher sample. School leaders reported handling a much wider range of complaints, with respondents in this sample reporting anywhere from 0-760 annual complaints / concerns during the Covid-19 pandemic. The average number of complaints dealt with annually by respondents was 72, and the most common response was 76 complaints per year.

In terms of how respondents were affected by complaints, their wellbeing was measured using the 14-item validated set of questions from the WEMWBS. We asked respondents to reflect on how they felt over the past fortnight when rating their responses to the items featured

² Other options included for primary school respondents enhanced provision (n=2) and independent / fee paying sector (n=1). For subsequent analysis only primary and secondary school respondents are included as the numbers in the other two school types are too small for meaningful assessment.

in the scale, which includes: feeling optimistic, feeling useful, feeling relaxed, feeling confident, feeling cheerful, feeling good about oneself, feeling loved, being interested in other people, feeling close to others, having spare energy, dealing with problems well, thinking clearly, being able to make up one's own mind and being interested in new things. The WEMWBS has a mean score of 51.0 in general population samples in the UK with a standard deviation of 7, with the top 15% of scores range from 60-70 and the bottom 15% 14-42 (Tennant et al., 2007).

Overall wellbeing of both the teachers and senior leader samples in our study showed that senior leaders had a higher sense of wellbeing than more junior teachers. The mean wellbeing score for the teachers was 39.8 and for senior leaders was 43.3. This gives an overall average wellbeing score of 41.5 for all 89 respondents in this study. Even though the findings should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size, the results from the teacher population are 2.5 wellbeing score points below the Scottish wellbeing average of 44 reported in the 2020 Teacher Wellbeing Index (Education Scotland, 2020), and classified as 'low wellbeing' by the WEMWBS. It should, however, be noted that the senior leader wellbeing score is closer to the Scottish teacher average than the overall wellbeing average from our entire sample.

Interestingly, given the difference in each participant population regarding number of complaints received and the impact of complaints on wellbeing, was the additional difference in understanding of the complaints process between teachers and senior leaders. A slight majority of teachers (59%) disagreed that the complaints process is typically clear, yet a significant majority of senior leaders (87%) said it was clear. Senior leaders were also much more inclined to think that staff who are complained about feel able to participate in the complaints process than the teachers themselves (92% of senior leaders compared to 53% of teachers). Furthermore, more senior leaders disagreed that staff do not feel listened to during the complaints process than teachers themselves (86% of senior leaders compared to 61% of teachers). Another notable difference between both groups was their most frequently used source of support when handling a complaint, with 78% of teachers turning to family, friends or partners, whereas 94% of senior leaders approached their managers most for support.

Phase II: Semi-Structured Interviews

Initially, we structured the interviews to solicit further information on complaints as experienced by teachers and school leaders during the pandemic. We intended to utilise the interview questions to follow-up findings from the online survey. However, our interviewees also reflected widely on the impact of complaints both before and during the pandemic.

Key findings from this qualitative data included the need for greater dialogue around the role of complaints and parental engagement in schools post-Covid; how the shift to digital learning impacted on communication and participation; that school leaders tended to have more positive views on the experience of being complained about than teachers; that most interviewees felt well supported when responding to complaints, while noting that improvements could still be made; and knowledge of complaints procedures were generally low, especially among the teacher sample. Finally, and most pertinently, there was a gap between what teachers believed they were able to deliver and parental expectations. This, at times, resulted in unreasonable and difficult parental behaviours that impacted the teacher-pupil relationship in a minority of cases.

These key findings were drawn from a diverse sample. Geographically, the 18 interviewees worked across 12 local authorities, ranging from urban, semi-rural and rural and/or island

locations. In terms of professional role, the interviewees reflected a diverse range of professional positions, including a Head of Service, a regional improvement coordinator, three Head Teachers, three Depute Head Teachers, two guidance teachers, as well as classroom teachers. Overall six interviewees were employed in primary school settings, and 10 interviewees were employed in secondary school teachers.

The findings were coded and categorized according to emerging themes within the data, such as communication, community, challenges, change, and conflict. For example, one participant spoke about the effects that changing channels of communication has had on making complaining more pervasive and personal, saying *'The direct line to staff has become much more rapid and the willingness to just jump on to the phone and make a complaint is definitely much more there than it ever has been,'* which was reflected by many of the interviewees, with another commenting that, *'Colleagues can be a huge support when you have had to listen to an angry/emotional complainer. In the remote setting, receiving calls in your own home felt more intrusive and there wasn't the same opportunity to offload to a colleague and gain perspective ~ leaving me feeling more isolated and stressed for longer.'*

Another respondent spoke about the challenges of responding to complaints while still trying to build a sense of community and maintain a positive relationship with pupils and parents:

'I think it's really difficult then to get a relationship, a working relationship with parents when it's all based on complaints and this idea that you can get a resolution for this when perhaps it's actually not going to happen overnight. You've got to build a relationship with the parent, the child, the family and everybody's got to roll back a bit, teachers have to roll back, staff have to, management have to roll back, parents have to roll back and put the child right there. And if you end up in this kind of complaining, you'll get a blame and we'll say, this is terrible, you're never going to get that. You're never going to get that working relationship or, if you are, it's going to be a lot, lot harder'

Others spoke about the conflict between parental expectations and what teachers were able to do, commenting that:

'Over the past 9 months to a year, is an increase in the - I'm trying to think of the right word - but complaints that you just think, really? That's not something that you could actually ever expect of a school. It's not reasonable to expect a school to be able to support you in that. And I think some of that was partly about so many other things still not being open, families not being able to travel, get a holiday, all of those sorts of things.'

'Despite, at an intellectual level, knowing fine well that this individual is being unreasonable and unrealistic in their expectations, that we have followed all of our procedures and protocols, that we gave the individual the opportunity to be heard, to have their voice heard, ...that their expectations were unrealistic, it still becomes possible to internalise the emotional response to that. So whilst you have the intellectual response, there is still an emotional response that actually eats away at you'

These types of emotional, reflective responses about the impact of complaints on the interviewees were typical of the findings, and further illustrates the online survey data which shows in stark detail the low wellbeing experienced by both teacher and school leader respondents.

4. Discussion

Our research was interested in how complaints were experienced in schools during the Covid-19 pandemic, looking at teachers and school leaders separately, then comparing the two respondent groups. The survey data was interesting, as it showed the differences between these two groups, raising further questions. For example, teachers received less complaints than school leaders, which possibly explains why they reported the complaints process as being unclear. Also notable was that school leaders reported a slightly higher WEMWBS score, despite receiving more complaints. On the other hand, school leaders also reported being more affected overall by serious complaints than teachers, perhaps the seriousness of the complaints they dealt with explains why they sought professional instead of personal support. Interestingly, female teachers had higher wellbeing than male teachers, but male senior leaders had better wellbeing than female senior leaders. Additionally, teachers with caring responsibilities had higher wellbeing than teachers with none, yet senior leaders with no caring responsibilities had higher wellbeing than those that did. Furthermore, primary school teachers had higher wellbeing than secondary teachers, yet primary school senior leaders have worse wellbeing than secondary school counterparts.

The interview data was also thought-provoking, with interviewees reflecting that during the first lockdown (March 2020 – June 2020) that there had been a strong sense of togetherness and most felt that complaints had reduced during this period. This feeling changed, however, when interviews reflected on the ongoing nature of pandemic, highlighting an increase in the number of complaints during the subsequent lockdowns, especially in relation to the provision of online learning, which caused a great deal of stress, frustration, uncertainty, and anxiety amongst the parent body about how it was going to work. Interviewees noted that parents were also struggling with their mental health, and it was their perception that this was also driving complaining behaviour. Teachers and school leaders, however, were also struggling with their mental health. Teachers reflected they were annoyed, deeply frustrated and angry, especially when they felt they had done everything they could to avoid giving a cause for complaint and responding to the complaints that did materialise in an understanding manner.

Many of our interviewees reflected that complaints damaged not only the relationship between the teacher and the parent but with the pupil too. Similar comments were also made in our survey data. Complaints regarding school are different than other complaints areas because parents are always complaining on behalf of someone else. While other sectors such as health can include complaints made on behalf of patients (Gill et al., 2017), school complaints will always involve third party complaints, as parents/carers complain on behalf of their children. To our knowledge studies in other contexts have not reflected quite so starkly how complaints can impact on the actual user of the service when complaints are made on their behalf, with teachers and school leaders commenting on the difficulty of keeping their frustration with the parents/carers of a pupil separate from their relationship with the pupil.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study. Firstly, the small sample size of teacher and school leaders to the online survey reduces the generalisability of the survey data. That said, the responses are comparable with the recent NHS Scotland survey about teachers' mental health and wellbeing that secured 252 respondents (White, 2020), and suggests securing large response rates from Scottish teachers on this topic is challenging.

Secondly, it is possible that face-to-face interviews might have generated greater depth and quality of data. Due to the pandemic, however, this was not possible. The use of online interviews allowed for increased participation from teachers and school leaders in areas beyond a comfortable travelling distance from the research team. This allowed for greater geographical and local authority diversity among interviewees. Although interviewees were drawn from urban, semi-rural, rural, southern, northern and island communities, and representative of the geographical and demographic diversity of Scottish education, the sample size was small.

Finally, it is also possible that the survey and interview only captured the perspectives of people motivated to respond to either or both calls for study participants because they were negatively affected by complaints and therefore results were due to self-selection bias.

5. Conclusion

The objectives of this research were to identify the range of effects, relating to health, wellbeing, and professional practice, arising from Scottish teachers being subject to parental complaints during the Covid-19 pandemic. We found that parental complaints were most often made informally, and communicated directly to teachers or school leaders, and increasingly through digital platforms due to the shift to remote learning during the pandemic. We found that the types of complaints varied, with some related to teacher and school leader areas of responsibilities, such as the type and frequency of learning materials for remote learning. Parents, however, also complained about matters beyond the power of the school to address, such as accessing in-person schooling during lockdown, or parental expectations of teachers to manage the behaviour of their own children, when living at home. We discovered there was a wide range of frequency of complaints experienced by teachers and school leaders, but that those who experienced complaints were negatively impacted. We found that some schools and local authorities had clear processes in place to manage complaints, and others didn't, with teachers often feeling unclear about the complaints process relative to school leaders. Finally, we heard from survey respondents and interviewees that more could be done to develop complaints processes, procedures and policies to make responding to complaints easier.

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