**Controlled Schools’ Support Council (CSSC) Award for Excellence in Educational Research**

**Introduction**

This small-scale research study was undertaken in response to the notable absence of literature, research, and policy concerning pastoral structures and the role of pastoral leads (including designated teachers for child protection) in primary schools, particularly within the context of Northern Ireland. Drawing on Nel Noddings’ ethics of care and Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory as its theoretical framework, the project sought to explore: (i) the main features and challenges associated with the pastoral lead role, (ii) the qualifications and experience required to fulfil the role effectively, and (iii) the professional and personal supports available to pastoral leads and their colleagues.

**What intervention did you implement?**

The eleven participants in this study held roles as pastoral leads or designated teachers across a range of primary schools in Northern Ireland, which varied in size, location, and demographic. Their positions ranged from a teaching principal in a small rural school to a non-teaching vice-principal in a large urban school. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to generate qualitative data, complemented by an opt-in creative, arts-based methodology. Three participants selected or wrote poems, two kept diary entries, and two others chose artefacts as stimuli for discussion. This creative component was designed to be interwoven with the interview process in order to elicit richer, more nuanced insights.

**What was the impact of the intervention?**

This study has highlighted the significant challenges faced by pastoral leads in primary schools across Northern Ireland as they work with children experiencing complex, multi-layered difficulties. A key finding was the inconsistency in how the role is resourced: some teaching principals in small rural schools balanced pastoral duties with heavy teaching commitments, while others in larger urban schools held pastoral positions with a reduced teaching timetable. The study also revealed the emotional toll of the role. While participants engaged in self-care practices such as exercise and music, few reported receiving any formal supervision or structured support from higher authorities. This gap highlights the need for systematic strategies to safeguard the wellbeing of pastoral leads themselves. Finally, the research confirmed the lack of professional qualifications or structured training routes in this area, as well as the absence of robust evaluation of existing pastoral initiatives. The findings point to both a professional development gap and the need for evidence-informed pastoral policy.

**Advice for implementing in schools**

Firstly, schools should adopt a whole-school approach to pastoral care, underpinned by clear structures and equitable resourcing of pastoral roles. Leaders should provide protected time for pastoral responsibilities and prioritise staff wellbeing to avoid burnout.Secondly, professional development should include both structured qualifications and accessible, low-cost training. A bespoke Professional Qualification in Pastoral Care, similar to the former PQH, could equip aspiring leaders with practical skills through scenario-based learning. Alongside this, schools could collaborate through existing networks (e.g. Area Learning Communities, Shared Education Partnerships) to share effective local practices at minimal cost.Finally, schools and education authorities should commit to gathering evidence on the impact of pastoral initiatives, ensuring that future practice and policy are informed by robust research and evaluation.

**Introduce the Researcher**

Adam Willis



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