Title of Thesis

Being and Becoming an Irish Primary School Principal: A View from the Inside.

Anna Mai Rooney

B Ed., MSc. (Educational Management and Leadership)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the EdD in the University of Glasgow

School of Education, College of Social Sciences

University of Glasgow

March 2025

Abstract

The prevailing negative perception of the role of the primary school Principal in Ireland set against the articulation by so many Principals of their love and enjoyment of the role was the impetus for this study. The reasons why Irish Principals appreciate their position and celebrate their achievements are explored while the benefits and the challenges of Principalship are highlighted. The study also examines the many complexities of the role and how both the benefits and challenges can be influenced by effective distributed or collaborative leadership.

With a view to understanding primary Principalship further, the circumstances of recruitment to the role are interrogated to determine the various pathways to the role and the emotional development of the person of the leader is explored with respect to their evolution as Principal. The manner in which recruitment and emotional development influences the benefits and challenges of Principalship is investigated as is the essential nature of quality professional learning and bespoke system supports. Four policy documents provide a contextual framework for the study: School Self-Evaluation DE (DE, 2022a), the Looking at our School Quality Framework for Leadership and Management (LAOS, 2022), External Evaluation (DE, 2024a) and Circular 44/19, the leadership and management framework for leadership positions in Irish schools (DES, 2019).

Framed in an interpretivist paradigm, this empirical study used fifteen semi-structured interviews to collect the data which was analysed using thematic analysis to generate the research findings. The findings suggest that the benefits of Principalship are not sufficiently showcased or explored in either the literature or the professional learning provided for Principals. Secondly, the complexities of the role are well documented, and the findings advocate for the potential of effective distributed leadership with a focus on the development of the person of the leader to manage these complexities. Through the lens of the newly appointed Principal's position, the data indicates the much-misunderstood circumstances of recruitment and their potential to significantly influence the benefits and challenges of the role. Additionally, the data points to the importance of bespoke professional learning to address the emotional development of the Principal and to guide and support newly appointed Principals, particularly in relation to shadowing, hand-over and practice-based programmes. Finally, this study's findings highlight a significant level of disconnect between the Irish education system and the day-to-day lived experiences of primary Principals. Accordingly, the study suggests that the time is right for practitioners, policy makers, and educational

stakeholders to listen more carefully to each other and to work more collaboratively together to ensure that the role of the Irish primary Principal is made more sustainable, more rewarding and, ultimately, more attractive to aspiring leaders.

Table of Contents

4

List of Tables

List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Learning to be a School Leader in Ireland

Appendix 2: Qualities of Principals

Appendix 3: My Hat Metaphor

Appendix 4: The Participants' Metaphors for School Leadership

Appendix 5: Indicative Interview Themes

Appendix 6: Ethics Approval

Appendix 7: Thematic Development Samples

Glossary

ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
BOM	Board of Management
CSL	Centre for School Leadership
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CPSMA	Catholic Primary Schools Management Association
DE	Department of Education
DEEPEN	Droichead: Exploring and Eliciting Perspectives, Experiences and Narratives
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Science
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EEPN	European Education Policy Network
ESCI	Education Support Centres of Ireland
ESHA	European School Heads Association
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals' Network
JCT	Junior Cycle for Teachers
LAOS	Looking At Our School
LDS	Leadership Development for Schools
MU	Maynooth University
NAEL	National Academy for Educational Leadership
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NIPT	National Induction Programme for Teachers
NPF	National Principals' Forum
NPQH	National Professional Qualification for Head Teachers

OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PDSL	Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PCF	Primary Curriculum Framework
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
PSI	Partnership Schools Ireland
REDI	Research for Educational Impact
SCEL	Scottish College for Educational Leadership
SEN	Special Education Needs
SET	Special Education Teacher
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey
TC	Teaching Council
TPLS	Teacher Professional Learning Section (Department of Education)
UCD	University College Dublin
UoG	University of Galway
UL	University of Limerick
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
WSE	Whole School Evaluation
WSE-MLL	Whole School Evaluation-Management, Leadership and Learning

Acknowledgements

This study and my privileged career in education would have been impossible without my husband, Éamonn, who has encouraged, supported and guided me selflessly in every possible way from the beginning. His strength of character, relaxed nature, generosity of spirit and his kindness to me has enabled this study to come to fruition.

Finally, this Dissertation is dedicated to my father John, the best of fathers and the noblest of men. You are missed every single day.

Declaration

"I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this Dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution."

 Printed Name: Anna Mai Rooney

Signature:

Chapter 1: Study Overview and Rationale

> If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader. (President John Quincy Adams in Adrain, 1997)[1]

1. Introduction

In this first chapter, the study is introduced, and the rationale presented. Thereafter, my own professional background and current professional context are detailed. This is followed by an overview of leadership policy and supports in Ireland, and how their development was influenced by the economic downturn and the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, Irish leadership policy is examined through the critical lens of a perceived neoliberal rationale but is defended for its potential to achieve a socially just educational focus for leadership policy and system supports.

1.1. Context

During the course of the pandemic, I witnessed the positive and courageous leadership of many school Principals[2] in Ireland coming to the fore. Despite unforeseen demands and never-ending challenges, many Principals continued to work as mentors, assisting newly appointed Principals to find their feet in an uncertain world. These leaders were generous with their time and knowledge, they demonstrated pride in their work, and they maintained hope and optimism for the future. Their positivity humbled me and provided me with the impetus to truly understand how the Principalship role could be perceived positively and how its benefits might be shared with others.

Firstly, my intention was to work with such positive Principals and to link the benefits and challenges of Principalship to their school contexts and their lived experiences, Secondly, I wished to investigate their engagement in distributed or collaborative or shared[3] leadership in order to explore its development and its potential link to the sustainability of Principals. Thirdly, I wanted to interrogate the systemic negativity towards the role of Principal and to understand the potential of Principals to influence learning experiences and more positive outcomes for their students through the love of their role, engagement in bespoke professional learning, and with system support and understanding. According to Leithwood and Sun (2012),

---

[1] See https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2017/may/05/ivanka-trump/book-john-quincy-adams-quote/ where the attribution for this quote is questioned.

[2] In Ireland, the Principal and Deputy Principal are the equivalent of the Head Teacher and Depute in Scotland, and the Head Teacher and Deputy Head Teacher elsewhere in the UK. For the purposes of this study, the term 'Head Teacher' is only utilised outside of the Irish context.

[3] In Ireland, distributed leadership is sometimes referred to as collaborative or shared leadership. Throughout this study, the term distributed leadership will be used.

transformational leadership is about the ability of school leadership to increase 'the commitment and effort of organisational members towards the achievement of organisational goals' (p. 388). Significantly, this approach to leadership is also about 'relational and social engagement' and a 'human-centred approach' (Wilson Heenan et al. 2023:3). This is theoretically aligned with the fourth aim of my study. I wished to examine the development of the personhood of Principals and their personal evolution over the duration of their careers to determine how the person of the Principal can be supported alongside their professional practice.

1.2. Rationale

In sum, this study explores the capacity of school Principals to remain positive and to consider the benefits of the role despite the myriad of daily demands placed on them. Spillane and Lowenhaupt (2019) contend simply that 'principals love being principals' (p. 111). The Looking at our School Quality Framework for Leadership and Management [LAOS] (2022) advocates for Principals to 'foster a positive school climate' (p. 36) and 'take positive steps to support and motivate staff' (p. 39). Although this is becoming increasingly challenging, this study examines the impetus, if any, for Principals to lead positively and asks what motivates them if they express a sense of optimism and an appreciation of the benefits of the role. Principals engaged in transformational leadership have the capacity to create positive cultures and to have a positive impact on teachers' motivation (Wilson Heenan, 2023:5), thereby increasing opportunities for the celebration of achievement and working closely and collaboratively with their staff and school community. This results in a tangible sense of belonging for teachers in their school (Quin et al. 2015). Kitt (2017) argues that collaborative leadership is 'the surest way to create a positive/effective environment' (p. 25), and that the establishment of a shared vision in a school that is reflective of the staff's collective core values can only be achieved through effective communication. Kitt (2017) maintains that effective communication is key to Principals making life easier for themselves.

This may go some way towards explaining why positive leaders are generous with their time and expertise and why they support Principals in other schools. In this sense, they become system leaders, a developing construct in leadership literature. In Ireland, the system leader is seen as somebody involved in 'school improvement within and between schools' (Centre for School Leadership [CSL], 2018:68), and a person who facilitates professional learning for other school leaders. Principals of this kind have inspired this study by their positive leadership, their work in support of their colleagues, and their participation in this research. I aim to

understand their entry into Principalship, how their leadership experiences and qualifications challenged or enhanced their progress, how they deal with on-going challenges, how they experience the benefits of the role, and how they develop their practice and their person by engagement with the system and in leadership professional learning.

From my previous position as a primary school Principal and my current position as a system leader, the study developed from both an insider and outsider positionality. My former role as Principal for fifteen years and my current position as a leadership secondee to the Oide Support Service[4] provided me with a unique view from inside and outside of the role of Principal and it enabled a continuous movement between both as suggested by Thompson and Gunter (2010). This positionality enabled me to be critically reflexive and is explored further in Chapters Five and Nine.

Against a backdrop of increasing diversity, consistent change reform, recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, and the accountability and performativity demands of what is perceived by some as a hegemonic neoliberal political agenda, the significance of the benefits of Principalship will be highlighted alongside the reported challenges. The leadership skills, personal attributes, and dispositions of school Principals will be interrogated to determine how the emotional aspects of school leadership influence effectiveness and sustainability in the role. It is my hope that this focus on the benefits of Principalship might encourage those aspiring to become a primary school Principal and reassure those newly appointed. Additionally, reading this study will hopefully provide a reflective opportunity for more established Principals and potentially inform the work of those involved in the development of leadership policy and supports. Finally, the study will highlight the ongoing need for bespoke leadership professional learning in the Irish education system and the importance of the establishment of a closer link between the daily practice of primary Principals and the demands made on them by the system.

The next section interrogates my own professional experience both as a school Principal and a system stakeholder.

---

[4] Oide, the Department of Education [DE] Support Service was inaugurated on September 1st, 2023, and brought together the four former support services: the Professional Development Service for Teachers [PDST], the Centre for School Leadership [CSL], the National Induction Programme for Teachers [NIPT] and Junior Cert for Teachers [JCT].

1.3. My Personal History of Primary School Principalship

My passion for school leadership emanates from my early years in teaching. In 1987, I was fortunate to be employed as a newly qualified teacher in a school that promoted agency[5] and the importance of listening to all voices within the school's learning community. In a group of five teachers, all teaching at Junior Infant level (the first level of primary education), I was guided, encouraged, and supported by an outstanding middle leader who endeavoured to help us reflect on our work each week and to plan collaboratively for the next. This experienced teacher expertly worked as one of us, teaching her own class while simultaneously sharing good practice, listening empathetically to our challenges, and guiding us to find solutions. The visionary Principal of this very large school placed her trust in this teacher to lead our small team. Other class groupings were similarly led, leading to a cohesive and quality education experience for our students. I was unable to articulate it at the time, but I believe myself to have been subconsciously smitten by effective collaborative and positive leadership. I was most certainly immersed in it and, looking back, I now consider myself very privileged to have had this early career opportunity.

Different approaches to leadership in a variety of schools I was employed in as a young teacher offered me the opportunity to reflect on positivity, and indeed negativity, in the Principalship role. Following thirteen years as a class teacher, a move to a different geographical location eventually led to my initiation into the role of Teaching Principal in 2000. In the Irish system, a Teaching Principal has full teaching duties in addition to leading their school community. In a multi-class context[6], the teaching and learning responsibilities of my role were my key focus. I reflected on the good leadership practices I had witnessed in my limited experience and did my best to replicate them in my new context. I craved the opportunity to network with other newly appointed Principals, but mechanisms to do so did not exist at that time in the Irish system. I began to study for a master's degree in educational management, focusing on networking as a key support for Principals, and hoping for more extensive leadership development that would support me in my new role.

---

[5] Teachers' agency is described as 'responding to children's choices by making professional decisions based on children's interests, curiosities, and prior learning, and on the curriculum and whole-school approaches'. (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2023: 25). Available at: https://ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/latest-news/2023/may/the-primary-curriculum-framework/ (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

[6] A multi-class context is one in which more than one class level is the responsibility of a teacher in a classroom. Typically, in Ireland, this can consist of two, three or four class levels together.

Leadership Development for Schools [LDS] was set up by the Department of Education and Science [DES][7] in 2002 to support the professional learning of Principals and Deputy Principals, and I became a part-time facilitator. This was a period of significant learning for me due to the high-quality training and induction provided by the organisation, and the networking and expansive learning opportunities I experienced with other Principals. Notwithstanding the demands the role placed on me as a young Principal with a young family, I felt affirmed in my practice, more confident in my decisions, and increasingly excited about the possibilities my role as school Principal afforded me. I discerned a parallel between Principals learning together to enhance their practice and school communities learning together to provide the very best learning outcomes and experiences for their students.

Just in advance of LDS, the professional organisation for primary school Principals and Deputy Principals, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), was established in 1998 to empower leaders and to support and advocate for effective leadership. With its values of respect, trust and professionalism, its high-quality professional learning events, and its local committees, I became significantly involved. I was Chairperson of a local committee, a National Council member, and eventually a member of the Board of Directors. The professional support granted to me by the IPPN through my years as a school Principal and system leader have sustained my energy and positivity and ensured my ongoing commitment to the support and encouragement of current and aspiring Principals. I now see this EdD study as a culmination of this work and a significant privilege as I approach the final phase of my leadership career. The IPPN's positive approach to leadership challenges and the influence of leadership policy in collaboration with the DES, taught me how to negotiate and how to represent my Principal colleagues in an honest and transparent manner. I continued to recognise and appreciate the broad scope of the role, the immense challenges involved, and the importance of leading with courage and optimism. Additionally, I had the honour of becoming the Chairperson of the local Irish National Teachers Organisation [INTO], the primary teachers' union, steadfast in its support of school leaders. This position impressed upon me that the relationship between teachers and their Principals underpins a school's capacity to become a successful learning community, and that recognising and acknowledging the professionalism of teachers and enabling their agency is key to achieving this.

---

[7] The Department of Education had, as its name, the Department of Education and Science [DES] from October 1997 to May 2010, the Department of Education and Skills [DES] from May 2010 to October 2020 and the Department of Education [DE] from October 2020 to presently. These acronyms will be used interchangeably throughout this study, depending on the date of the policy documents and events being discussed.

In 2008, I became the Administrative Principal of a large urban school. In the Irish system, an Administrative Principal's role is leading the school community, and they have no classroom teaching and learning responsibilities. It is worth noting, however, that their role is primarily focused on leading teaching, learning and assessment and that this focus presents significant challenges because of all of the other demands placed on them. This new role brought different challenges and opportunities but also situated me at the helm of a staff experiencing significant change because of increasing diversity among our student population. I experienced another steep learning curve, suffered consequential struggle with the workload involved, but felt significantly assisted from the system supports, professional learning, and networking opportunities available to me. In particular, I felt the contrast between the support available to me then and what had been lacking when I had become a Teaching Principal in 2000. Unfortunately, the economic downturn of 2008 brought unwelcome changes, and an alarming depletion of these leadership supports. LDS was incorporated into the Professional Development Service for Teachers [PDST]. The latter organisation continued to provide valuable and high-quality supports and professional learning for Principals and other school leaders until its incorporation into Oide in 2023.

In September 2015, I became the Primary Deputy Director of the Centre for School Leadership [CSL]. The Centre was established initially to provide mentoring for newly appointed Principals and an executive coaching support for all Principals. The mentoring support was novel in the sense that it was the first time a formal mentoring programme was developed in Ireland. The coaching support was a new and exciting departure for the DES, granting all primary and post-primary Principals the opportunity to be coached by a professional coach from outside the field of education. It demanded substantial financial investment and is still considered a flagship professional learning activity by other jurisdictions. Since 2015, the remit of CSL expanded to include a post graduate diploma in school leadership (PDSL)[8] for those aspiring to senior leadership roles. The Centre was also responsible for the endorsement of professional learning for school leaders[9], leadership research, leadership policy advice to the

---

[8] The Oide Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership [PDSL] is jointly accredited by the University of Limerick [UL], the University of Galway [UoG] and University College Dublin [UCD]. It is a part-time [18 months] blended programme based on the four domains of LAOS (2022). https://oide.ie/leadership/home/post-graduate-diploma/

[9] The Oide Endorsement Process supports the design, development, facilitation and evaluation of professional learning for school leaders. It endorses professional learning for leadership based on the CSL Model and Continuum of Professional Learning and against three criteria: Professional Learning and Facilitation, Process, Management and Administration, and Evaluation and Impact. https://oide.ie/leadership/home/endorsement/endorsement/

DES, bespoke mentoring for those in periods of challenge, a shared calendar of leadership learning, and the support of leadership projects and initiatives in the system.

Working in CSL provided me with the opportunity to influence leadership policy and to advocate for the provision of high-quality professional learning for leaders at all stages. CSL published *Learning to be a School Leader* in Ireland (CSL, 2018)[10] which presents a Model and Continuum of Professional Learning (Appendix 1). The Model advocates for reflective practice, experiential learning, cognitive development, flexible and sustainable learning opportunities, and individual and collaborative approaches as key elements of learning for school leaders. It advises that these key elements are underpinned by the professional standards of LAOS (2016), now updated to LAOS (2022). Significantly, the Model emphasises the impact of bespoke learning on both the practice and the person of the school leader, keeping improved learning experiences, outcomes and well-being for students and school communities at its core. The CSL Model and Continuum of Professional Learning recognises six stages of leadership - teacher, middle, aspiring, newly appointed, established and system - granting each stage its own integrity, and acknowledging that people may choose to remain at one stage until the end of their career or move through the stages to senior leadership roles.[11] This study focuses on three of these stages, aspiring, newly appointed and established, and considers the bespoke leadership professional learning available in the Irish system at all stages. The participants recall their progress towards Principalship to explore the circumstances of their becoming Principals. The study also highlights the significance of distributed leadership within which these various stages of leadership are important components.

In September 2023, I became the Cross Sectoral Leadership Coordinator of the Oide Leadership Division. The Oide Support Service brings together the former PDST, CSL, the National Induction Programme for Teachers [NIPT] and Junior Cycle for Teachers [JCT]. The main remit of Oide is to provide quality professional learning supports and services for all teachers and school leaders in Ireland. The Oide Leadership Division provides the following programmes[12]: Misneach (the Irish word for courage) for newly appointed Principals, Forbairt

---

[10] https://www.cslireland.ie/learning-to-be-a-school-leader/learning-to-be-a-school-leader-in-ireland-publication.html

[11] The CSL Model and Continuum of Professional was inspired by the work of Hamilton et al. (2018) and the work of the Scottish College for Educational Leadership [SCEL]. Inaugurated in 2014. SCEL was incorporated into Education Scotland in 2017. CSL worked closely with SCEL from 2015 to 2017 and now, as Oide, continues to work collaboratively with Education Scotland.

[12] All of the leadership programmes provided by Oide are available at the following link: https://oide.ie/leadership/home/primary/professional-learning-2/

(the Irish word for development) for established Principals, Deputy Principals and another member of the leadership team, Tánaiste (the Irish word for deputy leader) for Deputy Principals, Comhar (the Irish word for partnership) for middle leaders, Tuiscint (the Irish word for understanding) for the post appointment, pre-commencement stage of Principalship and Caidrimh (the Irish word for relationships) for Special School Principals and Deputy Principals. Additionally, Oide Leadership provides bespoke support for newly appointed Principals in schools with DEIS [Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools] status. DEIS schools need extra support as they provide education for students in areas of educational disadvantage. Newly appointed Principals in non-DEIS schools are supported in the School Self-Evaluation [SSE][13] process. Onsite school support in the areas of SSE, DEIS and leading teaching and learning is also available to schools and facilitated by Oide. Moreover, Oide Leadership continues the mentoring and coaching supports as described above, oversees the post graduate diploma in school leadership, endorses leadership provision and works closely with schools and stakeholders (national and international) to support the development of leadership capacity in Irish schools. In this sense, my former work in CSL has continued into Oide and expanded to incorporate the leadership work of the three other organisations as outlined above.

The policy backdrop to the long-term development of these leadership supports, as explained in the next section, provides the rationale and context for their inception and progress to date, and a contextual framework for this study.

1.4. The Policy Backdrop to my Professional Context

The various stages of my career were significantly impacted and underpinned by leadership policy development from the early 1990s. The Green Paper on Education (1992) acknowledges pride in the Irish education system but advocates for the need to 'constantly adapt to changing educational needs' (p. i). This publication was followed by the National Education Convention (1994)[14] and the White Paper on Education (1995) which places an emphasis on the importance of professional learning and distributed leadership to address Principal workload. There

---

[13] School Self-Evaluation [SSE] is an evidence-based approach to internal review which involves gathering information about how well things are going in a school and making collaborative judgements on the information gathered, to work towards school improvement. Circular 56/2022 (DE, 2022a) explains the process. and the steps to be taken until June 2026. Further information is available from the dedicated Department of Education website: www.schoolself-evaluation.ie

[14] The then Minister for Education, Seamus Brennan, appointed Professor John Coolahan, Education Professor in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (presently known as Maynooth University [MU]). to lead the National Education Convention. Professor Coolahan, along with six other key educationalists, steered the week-long convention. This marked a very significant departure in policy development in Ireland. It was the first occasion when policy creation was a partnership and not solely the responsibility of civil servants within the DES.

followed a series of rapid legislative and policy initiatives including the Education Act (1998) and the new Primary Curriculum in 1999 (NCCA, 1999). The Education Act clearly outlines the role of Principalship, stating that leadership is a duty of the Principal, who is expected to 'provide leadership to the teachers and other staff and students of the school' (Government of Ireland, 1998, 23:2, b). It is noteworthy that the 1998 Education Act does not pre-empt future collaborative leadership development in the Irish system and only outlines the responsibilities of the Principal without mentioning those of other school leaders.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] (2008a) included Ireland in a case study comprising 22 countries. The study concluded that the role of school Principal needed to change to prepare for 21st century education and suggested four policy levers for action on leadership. These included redefining leadership roles and responsibilities, distributing leadership tasks, developing skills for effective leadership, and making school leadership attractive to those who might aspire to it. The Irish system responded by developing a plethora of supports and initiatives to support school Principals which have been reviewed, expanded and consistently provided ever since. Although in a time of financial crisis due to the economic downturn of 2008, the same year as the OECD publication, the Irish government, with very limited capacity, continued to focus on the support of school leadership.

The main areas of policy development from this period onwards included the School Self-Evaluation [SSE] Process which was developed in 2011 and the Looking at our School [LAOS] Quality Framework for Leadership and Management published in 2016. For the first time since the 1998 Education Act, there was a remit for the role of the Principal, covering the four domains of Leading Teaching and Learning, Managing the Organisation, Leading School Development, and Developing Leadership Capacity. Consequently, Circular Letter 44/2019[15] (DES, 2019) outlined new appointment procedures and responsibilities for Deputy Principals and Assistant Principals. This Circular advocates for the strategically important work of Assistant Principals[16] in collaboration with the Principal and Deputy Principal. These policy documents comprised the focal government strategies for leadership development from the OECD recommendations and continue to be used as guidelines for evaluation, school development and improvement, and recruitment. Together with the Irish Inspectorate's

---

[15] 'A circular is a written statement that provides information and guidelines on laws and procedures'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5crz8skp
[16] Assistant Principals are also referred to as middle leaders in the Irish context. They can have an Assistant Principal 1 [AP1] or Assistant Principal 11 [AP11] position with the former entailing slightly more responsibility and renumeration than the latter. They form part of the middle leadership team in a school.

guidelines on external evaluation (DE, 2024a), these comprise the selected policy documents underpinning this study. The establishment of CSL in 2015 provided further evidence of the increasing development and focus on leadership supports in the Irish system.

This overview of the main areas of leadership policy provides evidence of the ubiquitous presence of leadership development in educational discourse in Ireland over the last two decades and beyond, in addition to the supports and professional learning designed to support that development. The link made between the quality of school leadership and the quality of student learning in Ireland (Fullan, 2006) situated leadership as integral to successful teaching and learning experiences and outcomes for students. Fullan (2006) claims that the Principal is 'the nerve centre of school improvement' (p. 1) and asked the Irish system to 'raise the bar for school leadership' (p. 1). From the 2008 OECD recommendations, leadership initiatives that followed were based on the leadership policy documents already outlined, relevant legislation including enrolment, induction, child protection and data protection, change reform in the Irish system, and educational trends over the years particularly in relation to inclusion. These initiatives relied on quality professional learning opportunities for Principals provided by educational stakeholders, particularly the Department of Education [DE] support services, the IPPN, the INTO and the various management bodies. A significant element of this professional learning was the promotion and development of distributed leadership.

Both nationally and internationally, the concept of distributed leadership is well documented. As an overall example, Spillane (2005) argues that Principals cannot lead schools single-handedly. Alongside the broader focus on the importance of quality leadership, a new era of school communities working collaboratively as a team has steadily emerged. This is mainly due to the implementation of the LAOS (2022) document and Circular 44/2019 (DES, 2019), already introduced in the abstract as two of the four key policy documents supporting this study. Additionally, DEIS (DES, 2017a) and SSE (DE, 2022a) Action Plans for Schools, also promote the development of distributed leadership as key to school improvement and effective leadership. As will be explored in Chapters Two and Three, distributed leadership is a much-contested concept in the literature. In Chapter Seven, the participants' understanding of distributed leadership and its influence on their development and practice will be explored, as will its presence in LAOS (2022). I now turn to the current development of distributed leadership in the Irish system.

1.5. The Current Situation

Harris (2014) defines distributed leadership in the following manner:

> Distributed leadership refers to both what people do (agency) and the organizational conditions in which they do it (structural aspects). Consequently, distributed leadership is a dynamic model of leadership emanating from different patterns of interaction among those in formal and informal roles (Harris, 2014:48).

Due to its dependency on the individuals involved, the context within which they work and the interactions between all teachers and school leaders in the school, distributed leadership remains at various stages of development in Irish schools, However, it is generally recognised by policy makers and school leaders as a necessary approach to potentially alleviate the perceived and increasing complexity of the Principal's role and to achieve a level of sustainability within it. For this reason, it will be explored in this study as both a potential benefit and challenge in Principalship.

This complexity was significantly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic which placed increased demands on Principals as they led their schools through acutely challenging times. During the pandemic, a survey completed by 2,808 Irish Principals reported that Principals' highest level of psychological well-being at that time, was based on their trusting relationships with others (Dempsey and Burke, 2020). This era of significant challenge brought a renewed focus to the necessary development of both the professional practice and the person of the school leader (Harris and Jones, 2020; Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou, 2023) and on the sustainability of the role of school leader through effective distribution of leadership (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020; Burke and Dempsey, 2021). Ensuring this sustainability still underpins quality teaching and learning as in Fullan's (2006) work is central to the attractiveness of the role for those aspiring to leadership and to addressing recruitment challenges. Reports about applications to Principalship signify a hesitancy in job applications with many 're-advertised multiple times' (O' Rourke in The Irish Times, 2018). McKay et al. (2022:13) argue that 'the deeply complex nature' of Principalship partly serves to explain such recruitment hesitancy. The role's sustainability is also important for those newly appointed to Principalship as they seek reassurance and affirmation from those more established within it. Kılınç and Gümüs (2021) claim that research in the area of early principalship is scant and this may well add to people becoming Principals without taking all the consequences into account. The circumstances of their deciding to apply for Principalship is examined in this study, specifically in light of the negative perception of the role as described above.

26

LAOS (2022), the updated version of LAOS (2016), provides a framework for 'effective and highly effective learning, teaching, leadership and management practices' (p. 5) and supports schools to engage with 'the six-step school self-evaluation (SSE) process' (p. 5), following Circular 56/2022 (DE, 2022a). Together with Circular 44/2019 (DES, 2019) and the inspection guidelines, (DE, 2024a), Principals are guided in the areas of reflection, recruitment, professional learning, the development of staff, and school improvement. Due to the broad remit of the primary school Principal, visible through the lens of these policy documents, being an effective Irish school leader in 2024 demands an acceptance of complexity and change, resilience, and trust in collaboration. Additionally, the toll on emotional wellbeing is increasingly becoming a feature of leadership research, an area of development 'absolutely critical to the attractiveness of the role' (McKay et al. 2022:13). This study examines how appropriate supports and professional learning impact on these complexities and the potential they have to optimise practice, develop necessary skills, support emotional development and advance sustainability in the Principalship role.

However, many researchers question this policy direction, perceiving it as a tool of accountability and global performativity, and are suspicious of its hegemonic neoliberal underpinning. They associate distributed leadership with a neoliberal agenda to achieve government goals and to ensure Ireland's education system continues to be rated highly on the global stage. Mooney Simmie (2014), looking at the then proposed reform of the Junior Certificate at post-primary level, argues that education has changed from 'a public good' to 'an audit culture of customised learning for individual competitiveness' (p. 186). Similarly, Lumby (2013) contends that distributed leadership could be perceived as an enactment of power by the government rather than a mechanism to achieve better outcomes and to provide social justice for students. Lumby's theories are upheld by Gunter et al. (2013) who claim that economic and political interests operate power relations through distributed leadership 'to ensure a strong fit between education and wealth production' (p. 572).

The potential for hegemonic neoliberalism in Irish leadership policy documents and whether the Irish government is enacting power to drive competition or genuinely attempting to achieve social justice for all students through the school improvement agenda, adds further complexity to the policy backdrop and context of this study. Indeed, the LAOS (2022) document promotes distributed leadership and collaborative practice to achieve school improvement, and the SSE process was developed with a similar approach. According to former Chief Inspector Harold Hislop (2018), the LAOS document provides the standards,

structures, and language to enable schools to reflect on their shared vision and to use the SSE process as a tool to bring about improvement (Hislop, 2018). The standards of LAOS were proposed by the DES as tools to extend and embed the practice and culture of SSE, a process deemed to be 'both powerful and challenging' (Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit, 2015:1). Throughout this study, the aforementioned policy documents (LAOS and SSE) are examined due to their underpinning by school improvement and their potential to achieve the best possible outcomes for students and school communities through a distributed approach to leadership. With Circular 44/2019 and the new DE approach to external evaluation (DE, 2024a) serving as tools provided to support the implementation of SSE and the LAOS quality framework for leadership and management, these policy documents, with their neoliberal potential, provide a contextual framework for this study. The framework is further underpinned by the 2008 economic downturn and the Covid-19 pandemic as is outlined in the study's conceptual framework in Table 5.1. I turn now to the study's research questions.

1.6. The Research Questions

This study endeavours to explore the role of the Irish primary school Principal from the perspective of experienced Principals who participated in this research as system leaders. They were invited to discuss their perceptions of the role, including for those newly appointed Principals they work alongside. Their own memories of being newly appointed add significantly to the data. Through the following four research questions, the study places an emphasis on the benefits and challenges of the role, and how both are enhanced and exacerbated by early Principalship, considering the lack of a specific Principalship preparation programme in Ireland. Additionally, the potential for support from quality and bespoke professional learning for all stages of leadership across the continuum, and the relationship between the Irish education system and Irish primary schools are highlighted to further illuminate the Principal's role.

The four research questions addressed are:

RQ1: What are the main benefits and challenges in the role of the Irish primary school Principal?

RQ2: How does becoming a Principal influence these benefits and challenges?

RQ3: How can professional learning mediate the challenges and enhance the benefits?

RQ4: What is the potential of the Irish education system to support those becoming Principals and those more established in the role?

1.7. Outline of Dissertation

Chapter Two comprises a literature review focused on international policy development and research in educational leadership. It provides a brief historic overview of leadership development outside of Ireland and how European influence has served to shape educational progress in Ireland.

Chapter Three, the second part of the literature review, examines educational policy in the Irish context through the lens of School Self-Evaluation [SSE], distributed leadership and LAOS (2022). It also references external school evaluation. The chapter interrogates the perceived neoliberal underpinning of policy development in Ireland and the position of the Principal at the intersection between policy enactment and their school community.

Chapter Four focuses on the affective domain of Principalship and its influence on the benefits and challenges of the role, through the lens of relevant literature. It examines the qualities and skills of effective leadership and how the system can support the personal development of the person of the leader through professional learning. In this chapter, I particularly draw on the work of Martha Nussbaum, with her work also featuring in the findings of Chapters Seven and Eight.

Chapter Five outlines the research methodology and presents this Dissertation as an empirical study situated in an interpretivist paradigm. It explains and presents the conceptual framework. The chapter then explains the rationale for my relativist ontological approach and my endeavours to work according to a subjective epistemological stance. It examines the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study, and the ethical considerations. Finally, it outlines the research method, the process of conducting fifteen semi-structured interviews and the approach to data analysis.

Chapter Six presents the key themes emerging from the data.

Chapter Seven focuses on the key findings which are discussed according to research question one and in relation to national and international leadership literature.

Chapter Eight presents the key findings according to research questions two, three and four, and in relation to national and international leadership literature.

Finally, Chapter Nine provides a brief overview of the data analysis, the conclusions and implications of the study and the recommendations for professional learning for leadership in Ireland, the Irish system and Irish Principals. This chapter explains how this study contributes to existing leadership knowledge and outlines the possibilities for future research, the study limitations and the significant learning I experienced as a novice researcher.

1.8. Chapter Conclusion

This study explores the current role of the Irish primary school Principal, highlighting its benefits and developing a greater understanding of the complex challenges it entails. Explaining the concept of imperfect leadership, Munby and Bretherton (2019), argue that it is necessary to acknowledge the brutal facts before authentically embracing positivity and optimism. I seek to do this here, aware that primary schools are incredibly busy places responsible for the care and well-being of young children. Recovery from a global pandemic has exacerbated these responsibilities. The reality of daily life at the coalface often seems far removed from the world of academia, the literature, and policy development. An important element of this study is the dismantling of these gaps so that we can all, researchers and practitioners alike, become 'co-inquirers into our own communities of practice' (Humphrey, 2013:583).

Ultimately, this study aims to be realistic, cognisant of daily routines in schools, and of the many challenges that arise. Acknowledgement of potential neoliberal trends in the Irish education system adds to the authenticity of this research. The perception of the role's benefits and of people who articulate how much they love their job is grounded in criticality and balanced by the many challenges of Principalship. The research intentions include highlighting the concerns and practices of the research participants (Weaver and Olson, 2006) and keeping the voice of the participant to the fore (Mills et al. (2006). Finally, the study endeavours to bridge the academic practitioner divide and to ground this research as equidistantly as possible between theory and practice.

2. Chapter 2: Literature Review-The International Backdrop

2.1. Introduction to Literature Review

This study focuses on the role of the primary school Principal, the benefits and challenges and the impact of distributed leadership and professional learning. It provides a particular focus on those beginning in the role as newly appointed Principals. As already outlined, I have occupied this role for fifteen years and currently support others in it.

Because of this experience, I decided on a targeted or focused literature review which takes 'an in-depth but not systematic approach' (Huelin et al. 2015:2). This method is underpinned by a 'knowledgeable selection' (p. 2) of relevant literature which is utilised to identify trends and improved understandings of the field of study. Such a targeted or focused approach is also known as a narrative review which has the potential to lean 'towards a qualitative interpretation of prior knowledge' (Paré and Kitsiou, 2016: para 2). Despite potential flaws, this narrative approach offers the advantage of a comprehensive understanding of both current and new research (Paré and Kitsiou, 2016). I personally found that this approach highlighted my own gaps in knowledge and allowed me to bridge these gaps by discovering literature hitherto unknown to me. Examples[17]include the work of Kim Cameron, John B. Cavanagh and Paul Miller. A further guide was the question I consistently asked, following Levy and Ellis (2006:184): 'How is the work presented in the article I read related to my study?'.

I endeavoured to provide an overview of the extant leadership literature in Ireland and from the wider international field, to adhere to the study's rationale, highlighting the benefits and challenges of the Principal's role, the importance of its attractiveness to aspiring leaders and the significance of quality leadership professional learning. This overview also focused on newly appointed Principals, distributed leadership, transformational and instructional leadership and a consideration of leadership policy documents: SSE (DE, 2022a), LAOS (2022), Circular 44/2019 (DES, 2019) and external evaluation (DE, 2024a). I approached this literature review by firstly turning to the work of those I was already familiar with in educational leadership development outside of the Irish context. Typical examples include the work of Mel Ainscow, Christopher Day, Lawrie Drysdale, Dean Fink, Michael Fullan, Peter Gronn, David Gurr, Andy Hargreaves, Kenneth Leithwood, Steve Munby, Pamela Sammons

---

[17] I have not detailed the specific texts used or the publication dates of the authors listed throughout this section. Each author and their work I have utilised is presented again later in the Dissertation and fully referenced in the end references section.

and John West-Burnham. Familiarity with all of these scholars was developed over the years through my work as a Principal and in consultation with other educational stakeholders. This prior knowledge and 'pulling the references of the references' (Levy and Ellis, 2006:191) generated the discovery of other less familiar authors as already outlined. Chapter Two is significantly influenced by research undertaken by the OECD and the European Education Policy Network [EEPN], two organisations whose research has both underpinned and challenged my work in the Irish system since 2015.

Throughout this study, the link between the Centre for School Leadership [CSL] and the former Scottish College of Educational Leadership [SCEL] guided me towards the work of colleagues writing in the Scottish context including, for example, Christine Forde, Gillian Hamilton, John MacBeath, Margery Mc Mahon and Dee Torrance. Reading the work of these authors and using the approaches as described above, introduced me to other researchers writing on educational leadership in Scotland, such as Michael Cowie, Jim O' Brien, Glenys Woods and Philip Woods. The similarity between the Irish and Scottish contexts has been an important factor in the development of this Dissertation. From the experience of studying neo-liberalism during the early stages of the EdD, I became familiar with the works of Helen Gunter, Jackie Lumby and Geraldine Moonie Simmie. A 'backward references search' and 'forward references search' (Levy and Ellis, 2006:191), guided me to what these authors had written in advance of the articles I was reading and what they wrote at a later stage, bringing deeper insight and criticality to my engagement with the literature. Methodological approaches introduced in Chapter Five were significantly influenced by the work of Charles Kivunja and Ahmed Bawa Kuyini whose practical approaches to the interrogation of paradigms were of particular assistance. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke provided me with a clear understanding of thematic analysis.

Chapter Three focuses on Irish leadership literature. I have been privileged to work alongside and to interrogate the work of scholars such as John Coolahan, Fiona King, Patricia Mannix Mc Namara, Gerry MacRuairc, Éadaoin Mc Govern, Joe Moynihan, Gavin Murphy, Mary Nihill, Ciara O'Donnell, Margaret O' Donovan, John O'Sullivan and Ciarán Sugrue. In recent years, I have been strongly influenced by the work of Dympna Daly, Derbhile De Paor, Niamh Hickey, Niamh Lafferty, Jemma Lynch and Inez Wilson Heenan. From their work, the use of Google Scholar and the Glasgow University Library, I was pleased to be introduced to the work of many other Irish scholars including Martin Brown, Gerry Mc Namara, Joe O' Hara, Shivaun O' Brien, Michael Redmond, and Craig Skerritt. In Chapter Four, the affective

domain of leadership was shaped primarily by the work of Martha Nussbaum, whose work on the emotions has influenced my thinking since beginning the EdD. This thinking has been further influenced by Jacinta Kitt and Maureen Gaffney through my work in collaboration with the former and the latter's 2011 publication '*Flourishing'*.

Section 2.2 continues by introducing the international literature review.

2.2. Introduction

Having detailed the study's context and rationale in Chapter One, and explained the literature search strategy above, this chapter presents international policy development and leadership research. It briefly examines the influence of the OECD on policy development and how it formulated the impetus for significant change in leadership development in the Irish education system. As noted in Chapter One, the OECD's commentary on educational leadership has been integral to its development in Ireland over the past two decades and this is reflected in the main Irish policies on leadership, Looking at our School, [LAOS] (2022), School Self-Evaluation [SSE] (DE, 2022a), the work of the Inspectorate on external evaluation (DE, 2024a) and the Leadership and Management Circular (DES, 2019). This chapter briefly examines the leadership research of the European Education Policy Network [EEPN] to provide an alternative source of leadership literature. Thereafter, the chapter critically examines the international literature on distributed and instructional leadership and looks briefly at change management and the concept of transformational leadership with respect to influences on Principals' practices. This is to provide further understandings of the study's context. The chapter ends with a brief examination of the potential of distributed and system leadership to develop a more sustainable Principalship role and to highlight the significance of these constructs in the context of this research.

2.3. The Influence of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Part One

As outlined in Chapter One, the OECD (2008a) study produced four over-arching themes or policy levers which highlighted the importance of school leadership. They included a re-definition of responsibilities, distributed leadership, the development of skills for effective leadership, and ensuring school leadership as an attractive profession. The main emerging concern for the 22 countries involved, including Ireland, was a growing perception of 'overburdened roles, insufficient preparation and training, limited career prospects and inadequate support and rewards' (OECD, 2008a:9). All of these issues permeate this study as workload, preparation for Principalship, leadership development, professional learning and

system support are all key aspects of leadership development in the Irish context. This will be explicit in the literature that is examined in Chapter Three.

It is worth noting that the 2008 OECD publication advocated for a continuum of leadership development with a particular focus on those newly appointed to the role and their induction and in-service education. The situation of aspiring leaders considering the role of Principalship and those newly appointed to it is integral to this research. All of the OECD recommendations have since been operationalised to some degree in the Irish system. One example is Oide's Induction Framework (Misneach)[18] for those newly appointed to the role of Principal, already introduced in Chapter One, which reflects this advice, as does the former work of CSL and its continuum of six stages of leadership.[19] (Appendix 1). The OECD (2008) also advised on the development of leadership standards and cohesive support from the system. The standards were provided by the LAOS (2016) Quality Framework for teaching and learning, and leadership and management, and updated in LAOS (2022).

A cohesive approach to supports from the system was addressed with the amalgamation of the four Irish Department of Education support services from September 2023. Considering the attractiveness of the profession, the OECD (2008) recommended that recruitment procedures should be 'effective, transparent and consistent', and that the role of professional organisations should be acknowledged and improved (p. 13). In response, recruitment for teachers and school leaders in Ireland, the remit of the various management bodies, is guided by LAOS (2022). The primary professional body, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and its post-primary equivalent, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), formed a tripartite group with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to create CSL (since amalgamated into Oide, within which both organisations remain in partnership), and there has been significant development in professional learning for school leadership including an endorsement process for providers. In general, the OECD asked educational policy makers to 'enhance the quality of school leadership and make it sustainable' (p. 9). Ireland responded with these key leadership initiatives and policy documents.

While the Irish government, like many others worldwide, has invested significant funding in the development of school leadership, the question remains as to why the role is still, today, perceived as one of 'punishing pressures', suffering from 'the weight of administration',

---

[18] https://oide.ie/leadership/home/primary/professional-learning-2/
[19] https://www.cslireland.ie/learning-to-be-a-school-leader.html and Appendix 1

'hectares of paperwork', and 'unprecedented levels of burnout' (O'Brien in The Irish Times, 2021). Such publicity makes the notion of the pros of Principalship something of a contrariety. As Sugrue (2009:375) claims, 'Principals have had to navigate the white waters of rapid reform, while increasingly also being held to accountability'. According to these Irish Times headlines of 2021, it would seem little has changed since Sugrue's 2009 work.

2.4. The Influence of the OECD Part Two

Volume Two of the OECD (2008b) publication examines the potential of system leadership and places a strong emphasis on school improvement. According to the OECD, system leadership is about leading both within and between schools and about school leaders working towards 'the success of other schools as well as their own' (OECD, 2008b:6). Dimmock (2016:62) contends that a system leader 'must contribute to the greater good of other schools beyond their own'. However, system leaders must be 'successful school leaders' and 'systemic leadership needs to come from the Principals themselves and from agencies committed to working with them' (p. 7). There is a significant focus in Ireland on stakeholders working closely with school leaders to implement legislative and policy change. One example, already mentioned, is the tripartite arrangement with the DE, IPPN and NAPD to set up CSL in 2015 which has continued as a partnership into Oide. Other examples include the Oide Stakeholder Collaborative Forum and school leaders working as system leaders as outlined in the recommendations section of Chapter Nine. Dimmock (2016:64) describes this as 'lateral leadership', the concept of school partnerships between professionals rather than between policy makers and schools. Dimmock (2016:64) claims that teachers and school leaders are more likely to be influenced by 'fellow professionals' rather than policy makers. Significantly, Mitchell et al. (2023:2) maintain that system leadership is becoming a 'compelling objective' for school leaders but warn of its 'multiple understandings'. All of the participants in this study are involved in some aspect of such system leadership work. Their exercising of system leadership is considered in the findings in relation to how professional learning impacts on the benefits and challenges of the role.

Continuing with the school improvement theme in this OECD (2008b) publication, Richard Elmore, in Chapter Three, writes extensively on the connection between accountability and school leadership. Elmore claims that 'accountability tends to lead to an underinvestment in knowledge and skill, and an overinvestment in testing and regulatory control' (p. 39). This research links to Ball's (2016) work and his argument that this position between knowledge and regulatory control creates a possibility of refusal at the site of subjectivity, when teachers

feel pressurised from external demands. To empower schools, Elmore contends that policy needs to be focused on the development of leadership capacity to achieve school improvement and to respond to external pressure. Elmore claims that policy 'has to acknowledge the principle of reciprocity' (p. 57) so that Principals and policy makers are working together to achieve school improvement. Additionally, if this work is according to the values and beliefs of individual Principals, optimum progress can be expected (Hallinger, 2010). It is significant that Elmore was writing sixteen years ago and, currently, schools in Ireland report being under pressure from the policy environment, as is evident in work undertaken by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). The organisation's research proposes that the workload of Irish primary teachers is 'bursting at the seams' as they attempt to deal with 'a tsunami of new initiatives' (INTO, 2023: para 2). The management of continual change, the importance of shared values and beliefs, and the skills needed to communicate the rationale for effective change cannot be underestimated (Barton, 2018; Dhillon et al. 2020). This adds significantly to the demands coming from the Irish system into schools. The perceived lacuna between schools and the system will be examined in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Significantly, for the purposes of this research, the OECD (2016) report, which looks at professional learning communities and is based on a Teaching and Learning International Survey [TALIS], found that Principals who engage in professional learning are more often engaged than others in distributed leadership and that Principals who are more involved in instructional leadership 'work in schools where teachers are more engaged in collaboration' (p. 50). Ng (2019) describes instructional leadership as leadership activities that indirectly affect student learning. Daniëls et al. (2019:114) advocate for its importance as 'a core process of schools'. Instructional leadership in the OECD (2016) study, focuses on the significance of learning communities to enhance teaching and learning, and their potential to develop collaboration and a shared sense of purpose. In this sense, instructional leadership has developed into the concept of 'leadership for learning' according to Daniëls et al. (2019:117), creating leadership at all levels across the school and pursuing 'collective efficacy' to enhance student achievement.

Lingam and Lingam (2016) in their study of assessment practices in Australian schools, reported that school leaders had little confidence in their ability to guide and support teachers and to lead them in teaching and learning. This Australian research is in direct contrast to the situation of Teaching Principals in Ireland who enjoy their teaching duties despite the demands of their dual role (O' Connor, 2022). This study will examine the importance of the teaching

and learning aspect of the role to which Principals are particularly dedicated (ACER, 2018), and will interrogate how this aspect is perceived as a significant conduit for the development of distributed leadership in schools. The Australian Head Teachers in Lingham and Lingham (2016) blamed 'inadequate training' in their initial teacher education and a 'lack of subsequent in-service training' (p. 98). These Head Teachers also reported that they suffered from a deficit of analytical skills to interpret data for school improvement. Both the work of Lingham and Lingham (2016) and the 2016 OECD study go some way to exploring, as do I, in Chapters Seven and Eight, the participants' experience in relation to their instructional leadership responsibilities and the importance of key skills to its success.

2.5. The Case for Distributed Leadership

To further interrogate the potential of distributed leadership to impact positively or negatively on Principalship, an examination of how it is favourably or otherwise critiqued in the literature follows.

Harris (2003) contends that distributed leadership is conceptualised as the decentring of the leader so that everyone can demonstrate leadership to achieve a more democratic and collective approach. However, Kruse (2021) argues that research fails to prove the efficacy of distributed leadership and that it can only work 'under the right organisational conditions' (p. 44). According to Kruse, distributed leadership can also have a dark side as it 'can serve to exploit and further exacerbate organisational injustice'. Significantly, Mannix-Mc Namara et al. (2021) warn about the dark side of workplace cultures, linking it to leadership deficiencies and 'inherent power dynamics' (p. 3) while Harris and DeFlaminis (2016) argue that distributed leadership can be 'distributed unwisely and placed in the wrong hands'. (p. 143). Harris and DeFlaminis (2016) claim that there are two misconceptions in the operationalising of distributed leadership. The first is that everyone is in a leadership position, and the second is that there is a specific model of distributed leadership to be followed. They advocate for those individuals who have 'aptitude, ability and conviction to lead' (p. 144) and they suggest that specific models of distributed leadership must relate to individual school contexts and culture. The research conducted by Harris and DeFlaminis (2016) highlights the need for specific skills development to properly support effective distributed leadership in the same way as similar skills were suggested to effectively support instructional leadership above. This EdD study examines these skills, particularly in relation to the development of the person of the leader and how the Irish system has supported the development of distributed leadership, both through policy formation and enactment, and in the professional supports available to Principals.

The findings of the OECD (2016) begin by identifying leading teaching and learning as the key responsibility of school leaders. The leading of teaching and learning is explored in Chapters Six and Seven of this study as a key area of Principalship. The OECD findings emphasise the centrality of distributed leadership to the effective leader's practice and the development of key skills through access to professional learning, This study started with the premise that the development of distributed leadership provides hope for the sustainability of the role. This is based on the OECD claim that effectively leading teaching and learning through distributed leadership is key to growing a positive school climate, ultimately resulting in making the Principal's role more attractive and sustainable. The research undertaken by the European Education Policy Network [EEPN], to which I now turn, also focuses on professional learning, leading teaching and learning and distributed leadership.

2.6. The EEPN

The EEPN is made up of policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders, and promotes educational policy development and implementation (EEPN, 2022). Coordinated by the European School Heads Association [ESHA], the organisation is focused on policy, practice and research. EEPN (2018) points to 'a struggle to attract enough candidates to become school leaders' (p. 4). Examining eligibility for the role, this publication reports that only a few countries, including Scotland, Hungary, Malta, and Spain, require leadership training in advance of taking on a leadership role. The EEPN (2018:6) report claims that the role is 'an intense job with a diverse set of challenges', and that it relies on the embedding of professional development into the work schedule of school leaders to address these challenges. Currently, the Irish recruitment system for the role of Principalship does not require pre-appointment leadership training. This often results in no compulsory professional learning in advance of entering into the role. Instead, a comprehensive induction programme called Misneach as already referred to, is provided. Sugrue (2015:56) laments on how Principals are expected to deal with the demands of the job 'in the absence of formal preparation for the role'. McGuinness and Cunningham (2015) claim that there was originally a clearly articulated plan to introduce a mandatory leadership qualification, but no steps have been taken in this direction since. Indeed, King and Nihill's (2019) work contends that the policy context for mandatory leadership qualifications have been set for over a decade but have been 'missing in subsequent policy documents' (p. 15). Murphy (2023) reminds us of the impact of the promotions moratorium in Ireland, prior to the pandemic, bringing about the demise of many middle leadership positions and adding significant challenge to the lack of formal preparation

provision. The opinions of these Irish researchers clearly indicate a cognisance in the literature of the lack of formal preparation for Principalship in Ireland and the challenges arising. Without a mandatory qualification pathway, there are also no formal opportunities for job shadowing or handover procedures from the out-going Principal to the newly appointed Principal in the Irish context. I re-visit this in the study's recommendations in Chapter Nine.

Finally, an EEPN (2020) report on collaborative practices in the digital age, claims that such practices are not common in schools with many still clinging to 'traditional learning and hierarchical leading' (p. 7). This EEPN research aligns with that of O'Donovan in Ireland (2015) who claims that Principals are not ready to relinquish their responsibilities and to share their leadership. O'Donovan's research is re-visited in Chapter Three in relation to the development of LAOS (2022) and the focus it places on distributed leadership. The EEPN (2020) report claims that collaborative learning is practised more than collaborative leadership, that this approach to leadership should be 'practised in schools without hesitation', and that, in order to achieve this, 'teachers and school leaders should be provided with relevant trainings and support' (p. 21). This study examines the links between bespoke professional learning and the development of effective distributed leadership, particularly in the case of more established Principals and those new to the role.

In summary, the EEPN advocates for professional learning for Principalship in countries where no mandatory provision is made available. It promotes autonomy for schools when responding to external demands and bespoke professional learning for all stages of leadership to achieve collaborative practice and to teach the specific skills needed. I now turn to other international research outside that of the OECD and the EEPN.

2.7. Broader International Leadership Research

As far back as 1997, Bowring-Carr and West-Burnham argue that the role of Head Teacher was one of omnicompetence with an expectation of being skilled practitioners and curriculum leaders and being 'in control of the whole mechanism all the time' (p. 118). Bowring-Carr and West-Burnham (1997) highlight the need to change the hierarchical nature of the position to one in which partnership exists between teachers and leaders to deal with an increasing culture of accountability within which school leaders are expected to have 'a finely tuned emotional intelligence' (p. 134). This substantial expectation of developed skills aligns with Fink's (2005) assertion that we must recognise that 'educational leaders are not heroic or larger than life but mere mortals' (p. 73), who, according to Byrne-Jiménez and Yoon (2019), possess a profound

belief in the potential of education. Fink (2005) proposes Saul's (2004) six interrelated qualities of reason, ethics, imagination, intuition, memory, and common sense as essential leadership qualities and presents these as a toolkit, arguing that leadership development opportunities must engage and develop all of these. Fink (2005) warns against making educational leadership 'into something beyond the capabilities of reasonably talented mortals' (p. 99). Fink's (2005) research highlights how challenging the role of Principal is and the essential nature of professional learning to scaffold it. The evolution of leadership discourse in literature over the years explains this positioning of school leaders on unrealistic pedestals as described by Fink (2005), from which they are almost certain to topple amidst the well documented and ever-increasing demands of the role. Such a discourse almost certainly adds to the negative imagining of the role which I explore in Chapter Seven.

This narrative is also present in the research undertaken by Torrance and Humes (2015), who contend that leadership was 'raised to dizzying heights' in a very short space of time during the mid-1970s with the role of Head Teacher perceived as crucial to the success of teaching and learning. This stance remained the case for the next two decades. In 1996, Peter Gronn described leadership as a form of direct or indirect influence and the leader as the 'person with whom followers (for a variety of motives) identify' (p. 9). In 2003, Gronn introduced the idea of 'designer-leadership', underpinned by 'sets of standards and competencies' (p. 17) and linked it to the rise of school accountability and performativity. Gronn (2003) argues that moral authority is imposed by the demands of outside agencies, and his research resonates with that of Jacobsson (2002) who contends that expert knowledge is stored in rules and not in people. Gronn (2003) argues that standards are aimed at securing 'relationships of conformity in every set of circumstances' (p. 19), resulting in one group of perceived experts checking up on another. He proposes some serious obstacles to the adaption of standards in the form of the disparity between the standards and the school communities they should serve, and between the profile of school leaders and the students they work with. In contrast. Forde et al. (2016) argue the potential of standards as powerful developmental tools that can be used by teachers and school leaders to reflect on and explore their own practice. Gronn's (2003) work in relation to school context and standards and the work of Forde et al. (2016) on an alternative view of standard utilisation, is significant to the interrogation of the LAOS (2022) policy document. LAOS (2022) is examined in detail in Chapter Three, in which I ask if it serves the purposes of accountability and school improvement and/or distributed leadership and social justice.

Fullan (2007) contends that Principals in the early 2000s were stuck between the old world of the Principal being able to 'run a smooth school and be responsive to all' and the new world of 'better test results and becoming a learning organisation' (p. 157). Fullan argues that Principalship is in an 'impossible position' because transforming school culture is an exceedingly complex process in which psychological change must be considered (Yilmaz and Kılıçoğlu, 2013) and leading teaching and learning effectively (instructional leadership), although core to the role, requires good knowledge and specific skills. Accordingly, a new layer of responsibility has been placed on Principals on top of what they traditionally did. Fullan (2007) calls for system change to support the role of both teacher and school leader, advising that small scale improvement will not last if not scaffolded by whole system support. System leadership, as explained in section 2.2, is important here as is collaboration between individual schools and the system. However, Mitchell et al. (2023) warn about the 'aspirational systemic transformation' (p. 13) placed on system leadership while there remains a serious lack of clarification around its functions and practice.

Gronn's (2003) work resonates with that of Gunter (2006) who argues that schools are organised around the professional labour of adults with the focus on organisational requirements and reform implementation instead of teaching and learning. In later work, Gunter (1999), in her analysis of the National Professional Qualification for Head Teachers [NPQH], established in the UK in 1997, argues that the position of school heads is about 'strategic and operational decision making'. She places Head Teachers in the unenviable position of being empowered and facilitated to pursue their vision for their school, but only those with specific skills and knowledge can 'meet the external requirements for effectiveness' (p. 254). Gunter's claims echo the work of the EEPN, and the OECD as already highlighted, and as Elmore, writing for the OECD (2008b), claims, an accountability focus detracts from the emphasis on necessary skills development. Gunter (1999) claims that 'real people become Head Teachers and criticises the NPQH for its 'formal utilitarian' premise and its lack of connection with 'the social and the moral'. (p. 263). Gunter's research has significantly influenced my own thinking on compulsory learning for Principalship, deeming it a bad fit for the many individual contexts of Irish primary schools as outlined in Chapters Three and Eight. Additionally, Grissom et al. (2018) report on the challenges of rating such Principal preparation programmes, citing the disconnect between the programmes and the outcomes for Principals beginning in the role as the main challenge. In more recent work, Gunter (2016) argues that, since the 1980s, the profession has become more business-like in its thinking and is using

strategies from the business world to improve standards and feature highly in international testing scores. These strategies include transformational, distributed and instructional leadership to ensure the implementation of reform and school improvement. Young and Crowe (2017:1992) warn against 'unintentional and undeliberate learning' from policy borrowing for leadership development and maintain the importance of 'contextual relevance'. They advocate for caution around how international leadership development is interpreted and its usefulness for school leaders. These warnings by Gunter (2016) and Young and Crowe (2017) on the potential damage of such initiatives provides a significant critical lens for this study, considering the lack of a Principalship preparation programme in Ireland.

Hargreaves (2005) points to sustainability as a solution to address the 'crisis of leadership throughout our society' (p. 173) and highlights the leadership 'optimism and innovation' of the 70's, the 'contradiction and complexity' of the 80's and the 'globalisation and standardisation' of the 1990s. Hargreaves (2005) argues that a sustainable approach to leadership creates and preserves sustained learning, and that this approach focuses on the best possible learning outcomes for students and adults in the school community. Further, Hargreaves (2005) contends that sustainable leadership supports social justice and develops learning through networking, coaching and mentoring, without seeking instant results.

Briefly relating these findings back to the Irish context, Brown et al. (2019), in their study on a disadvantaged rural primary school in Ireland, maintain that a more achievable and sustainable form of leadership is about empowering others and being 'culturally responsible' in a 'diverse school and community' (p. 461). Browne et al. (2019) contend that achieving this successfully means effectively distributing leadership so that policies and practices are embedded through the organisation and a culture of care is cultivated to meet the diverse needs of all within the school community. This, in turn, provides a conceptual framework to reflect on progress and to decide on actions. Finally, Uiterwijk-Luijk et al. (2019) maintain that 'alignment across hierarchical levels in schools is essential to successful implementation of strategic change' (p. 478). In their study on the interplay between teachers and school leaders during inquiry-based working, they found that teachers appreciated the space and time granted by school leaders to find out what works, to explore new ideas, and to work together in a safe environment without reproach or negativity. Trust was a key element in this project as was 'shared leadership, shared responsibilities and shared knowledge' (p. 489).

This EdD study focuses on this interplay to examine the potential of distributed leadership in building trust and in the creation of a shared vision. Much is expected of the Principal to achieve this. The literature in this section aligns with this study's research questions while alternatively providing a critical lens for its findings. In summary, it examines the external demands placed on Principals, questions accountability, advocates for distributed leadership appropriate to school context, and endorses a more sustainable approach to school leadership. The next section focuses on the potential impact of collaboration.

2.8. Collaborative Leadership Between Schools

Current international literature not only advocates for collaboration within the school but also between schools. McMahon (2016) examines system leadership in the Scottish context and recommendation 49 from *Teaching Scotland's Future* (Donaldson, 2010) which proposed a scheme for experienced school leaders to contribute to system-level leadership. One of the emerging initiatives in this area, according to McMahon (2016), was the Fellowship Programme developed by the former Scottish College for Educational Leadership [SCEL]. In this initiative, experienced Head Teachers worked in areas such as the development of middle leadership and the support of leadership strategies across Local Authorities. McMahon (2016) quotes Angela Constance, the then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, who advocated for the advantages of collaboration in the system with teachers, school leaders, system stakeholders and government all working together to strengthen leadership development and to ensure that all parts of the education system worked together to deliver shared ambitions (Scottish Government, 2016:22). In a similar manner to the SCEL Fellowship scheme, the National Academy for Educational Leadership in Wales (NAEL)[20] works with Associates who are Head Teachers, using their expertise and practical knowledge to inform the work of the Academy, lead in a variety of initiatives, help other leaders develop their capabilities, endorse professional learning, and support design of provision and leadership research. Critically, Mitchell et al. (2023) warn against the influence of a minority of 'elite head teachers' (p. 14) on national policy while Dimmock (2016) claims that system leaders need resilience, self-efficacy, confidence, optimism and reflective qualities to assist in building leadership capacity across the system. Additionally, Harris et al. (2021) claim they need to be thought leaders in addition to being practical and with the status and recognition to 'positively influence others' (p. 402). Significantly, Mitchell et al. (2023) draw attention to the developmental capacity of system leadership to improve leadership practices and approaches.

All of the participants in this study are involved in some aspect of system leadership or the support of schools beyond their own.

While system leadership may have the potential to enhance linkage between schools and the system, school leaders believe that certain aspects of the system exacerbate the challenges they encounter. In Wales, for example, national accountability measures remain a challenge with the Welsh Inspectorate admitting that they were 'better at challenging schools about their current performance than supporting them to improve' (Estyn, 2015:7). Recommendations include the development of senior leaders to reach 'an agreed understanding' of the 'purpose and use of attainment targets' (Estyn, 2015, p. 9). Harris et al. (2021) criticise the reliance on 'grey literature' on system leadership, question the how of the concept and relate it to the variability of 'role, responsibility and level', maintaining that no real clarity yet exists regarding its benefits. Mitchell et al. (2023) propose three provocations around system leadership, that it should be about headteachers 'working conjointly' (p. 16), that it is not afforded to all school leaders and that it has the potential to undermine agency at school level as system leadership is conceptualised as existing at macro level.

On the other hand, the OECD (2022) argues that research has highlighted the value of collaboration between practitioners, researchers, and policy makers to ensure holistic, inclusive, and effective policy making' (p. 4). Although referring specifically to the plight of refugee students, the OECD advocates for a 'whole-of-society' approach and the 'importance of stakeholder engagement' (p. 4). Similarly, the European Agency (2022) posits that 'all stakeholders need to be involved and recognise the need for change' (para 1) to ensure collaboration is integral to all system levels. The OECD (2019) argues that stakeholders are key to policy implementation as policy can only be implemented by people and that involving stakeholders means better policy outcomes, better implementation, and greater trust. The effect of the Irish system and the stakeholders therein on the work of Principals is an important aspect of this study. According to Mitchell et al. (2023), system leadership is an emerging concept that warrants caution until further research becomes available.

Shaked and Schechter (2017) contend that a system's parts can only be understood in relation to the whole and that these parts are 'related through complex multiple influences' (p. 14). They advocate for holistic school leadership through systems thinking in which school leaders see the whole beyond the parts and see the parts in the context of the whole. Shaked and Schechter (2017) argue that this approach helps school leaders to 'tolerate ambiguity and work under

circumstances of uncertainty' (p. 60). Harris et al. (2021) present the difference between system leadership and systems thinking, the latter being a holistic view of the system and the former being an adaptive style of leadership that understands the complexities of educational contexts. Significantly for my study, Shaked and Schechter (2017) contend that this ability comes from management experience in advance of the role, having a good role model, academic study in preparation programmes and the natural tendency some Principals have towards high levels of systems thinking. My study examines the circumstances of becoming a Principal and queries the influence of prior management experience and Principal predecessors.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012:13) argue that teachers and school leaders have professional capital and require a 'basic platform of secure relationships' to achieve a collaborative culture in which to optimise the professional capital of all teachers and leaders. They give an example of opportunities created for classroom and special education teachers to come together with the impetus coming from the system to support this work in the schools. When collaborative cultures have the balance between the informal building of trust and relationships and the more formal structures of meetings, agendas, and protocols, they become effective professional learning communities. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) suggest that, in the USA, networks of schools 'have been less convincing in terms of their impact on student achievement' (p. 136) yet governments depend on shared practice among schools when introducing a new reform. The findings from Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) help to support the critique of LAOS (2022) in Chapter Three.

A 2013 study by Aston et al. on the role of the middle tier[21] in England maintains that strategic middle tier partnerships facilitate the bringing together of stakeholders to carry out long-term planning for 'robust school to school support' (p. 2). Miller (2017) contends that school leaders operate in 'dynamic educational environments' (p. 3), requiring them both to lead change in their own schools and to engage with opportunities in the wider environment. This means that governments have to find ways of developing education systems to 'make education more responsive to the needs of citizens' (p. 4). Miller reflects on the significance of the role of government and school leaders when he quotes the former Schools Minister for Education in England, Ed Miliband, who said that 'the government and school leaders can be described at

---

[21] In the research of Aston et al. (2013), the middle tier is defined 'as the diverse range of bodies that operate between schools and central government to support school-led improvement' Available at: https://lgiu.org/briefing/what-works-in-enabling-school-improvement-the-role-of-the-middle-tier/ (Last accessed 17 March 2024).

some point in time as either the motor of progress or its handbrake' (Miller, 2017:7). Ainscow (2015), in his work on school improvement in Manchester between 2007 and 2011, concludes that policy makers need to be cognisant of the usefulness of collaboration in both school equity and improvement but must also be aware that policy implementation is 'not amenable to central regulation' with local context and culture being key to success (p. 169). This link between schools and system stakeholders, my participants' engagement in system leadership, and the provision of leadership support and professional learning transcends this study.

2.9. A Summary of the International Literature Review

From the highlighted international literature, I am concluding that essential elements of successful leadership practice and as a consequence, sustainable leadership, include effectively leading teaching and learning with a focus on instructional leadership, using distributive leadership approaches and remaining cognisant of individual context, culture and local situations. It is not 'about "what works" but "what works in different settings" (Clarke and O' Donoghue, 2017:178). The literature also highlights the hegemonic nature of these approaches regarding accountability and performativity. Also, from the aforementioned literature, and particularly that of the OECD (2019; 2022), it is suggested that these elements need to be supported by system innovation, both locally and nationally, and most importantly, accepted, acknowledged, and supported at government and policy making levels. This theoretical conceptualisation is advanced but its enactment in practice lags significantly behind. Schools working collaboratively have resulted in school improvement and well-being in individual contexts (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) but examples of real collaboration between governments, system stakeholders and school leaders remain thin on the ground.

The literature proposes that system support, distributed leadership, attractiveness of the role and sustainability within the role are important for both practitioners and education partners but there is a sense of much work yet to be achieved. Torrance and Humes (2015) highlight the lack of clarity around educational leadership and its true meaning, citing confusion for aspirant leaders, and challenges around the development of pathways for leadership learning. Torrance and Humes (2015) emphasise the importance of 'specific leadership and management expectations for different roles' (p. 805) addressing the core issue they identify as a lack of clarity around policy discourse. Middle leadership standards were published in Scotland in 2014, but one set of standards exist for all school leaders in Ireland in the form of LAOS (2022). As has been previously pointed out, Principals are challenged in the utilisation of these standards, as their work entails developing effective practice to achieve distributed leadership.

Woods et al. (2021) provide a very interesting analysis of the current constructions of leadership in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They present four constructs of leadership; relational, institutional, 'masking' which removes the emphasis on problematic elements of policymaking, and 'space-making' which endeavours to create spaces for thinking and acting towards 'wider system change' (p. 16). These constructs, according to Woods et al, (2021) need 'coherent conceptualisation of services beyond education at national and local levels' (p. 16). Woods et al. (2021) contend that leadership needs the support and understanding of the system to thrive and be effective. This study suggests that the system and schools need to move closer together and work more collaboratively to empower a more sustainable approach to leadership.

2.10.   Chapter Conclusion

The literature clearly expects a lot from a school Principal. In fact, one possible interpretation might be that Principals feel rather inadequate and unprepared for the complexity of the role and perhaps deem Principalship an unattractive proposition for career progression. Another might be the embracing of the complexity of Principalship and a belief that the role is achievable and sustainable with bespoke professional learning and leadership approaches like effective distributed leadership and the development of the person of the leader. The latter might seem a reach and a tall order for those aspiring to leadership and provides somewhat of an explanation for the current reluctance in applications to the role as explained by the newspaper headings in Chapter One. In my EdD trial study on Deputy Principals, the six participants reported being happy to remain in the role of Deputy Principal if the Principal was engaging in effective distributed leadership. They saw their progression to Principalship as only a possibility for the future. Those Deputy Principals experiencing poor or hierarchical leadership from their Principal did not aspire to the role themselves. Such a small study finding suggests the need for further exploration of the small number of Irish Deputy Principals who become Principals[22] and further examination of the reasons behind what seems to be becoming a trend. It is significant that as far back as 2005, the role was referred to as 'the €90,000 top school job nobody wants to take' (Donnolly in The Irish Independent, 2005).

Throughout this chapter, there has been a focus on key aspects of effective leadership in a bid to achieve sustainability for school leaders, to make the role more attractive to those aspiring

---

[22] According to a survey conducted by the IPPN (2023:23), only 27 per cent of Principals were former Deputy Principals and 81 per cent of the Deputy Principals surveyed said they would not apply for the role if it became available.

to senior leadership roles and ultimately, to achieve social justice by enhancing student outcomes and well-being. These key aspects include teamwork and effective distributed leadership, a focus on school culture and context, a concentration on the alignment of personal beliefs and values and the importance of the development of the person of the leader, instructional and transformational leadership, appropriate and high-quality professional learning, and strong system understanding and supports. Listed like this, these aspects of Principalship seem daunting. Summarising much of the literature on the demands of senior school leadership, Forde and Torrance (2021) refer to the 'persistent administrative demands' (p. 27) which prevent head teachers in Scotland from focusing on teaching and learning and how 'building support across the profession' is key. They advocate for the building of 'a more connected system' in which national policies are 'empowering teachers, schools, parents, pupils, and communities so that local decisions address local issues' (p.28). According to Thompson (2010), continuing in the role of Principal is as tough as beginning in the role:

> You get tired. You get frustrated. And the demands never stop. You are constantly facing new challenges, and you constantly have to find ways to improve. Thompson (2010: Introduction).

This seems to be the perceived reality of the Principal's role. Chapter Three will examine this perception of Principalship in the Irish context through the lens of Irish policy and literature.

3. Chapter 3: Irish Leadership Policy

3.1. Introduction

From the discussion in Chapter Two, it is evident that one of the critical issues, in terms of the expectations placed on their role, is the position and agency of the school Principal both within the wider education system and within their own school context. Moving from the international literature backdrop of Chapter Two and working mainly through the lens of Irish leadership literature, the aim of Chapter Three is to determine the positionality of Principals at the intersection between policy implementation and their school community, and how this impacts positively and/or negatively on the sustainability of their role. The policy initiatives outlined here lay claim to the promotion of school improvement through School Self-Evaluation [SSE], DE, 2022a), the use of LAOS (2022) and Circular 44/2019 (DES, 2019), distributed leadership, and external evaluation (DE. 2024). They promote reflection, teacher professionalism, agency, and distributed leadership, and place a significant emphasis on local culture and context. In contrast, their perceived neo-liberal underpinning is examined, as is the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the OECD on their development.

3.2. The School Improvement Agenda and Neoliberalism

Over the past two decades, educational leadership in Ireland, like other aspects of education, has developed and changed at pace. There has been a significant and consistent focus on school improvement, integral to which is the manner in which school leaders address policy initiatives and lead change to provide optimum learning opportunities and experiences. The challenges of Principalship emphasised in this study, include the pace of change and how it has been met with resistance from schools. The news headlines discussed in previous chapters indicate that they are feeling overwhelmed by the situation. I also question whether the challenges in managing change are intensified by a neoliberal environment.

Birch (2015) maintains that neoliberalism is broadly defined as 'the extension and installation of competitive markets into all areas of life' (p. 572). Accordingly, neoliberalism supports a government's reduction in spending on public services by the promotion of accountability and performativity. As mentioned in Chapter One, with the research of Lumby (2013) and Gunter et al. (2013), Mooney Simmie (2014) argues that the specialist language of the economy has introduced a new vocabulary to Irish education which includes words like 'quality', 'excellence', 'best practice' and 'accountability', According to Mooney Simmie (2014), this leaves teachers and school leaders with sole responsibility for improvement in teaching and learning outcomes. The Department of Education [DE] seeks to actively promote school

improvement rather than accountability and places a focus on providing better learning opportunities for students according to the culture, vision, and ethos of their own school context (Hislop, 2013). However, Hislop (2013) also acknowledges the inevitable accountability focus of external school inspections.

This study presents neoliberalism as part of the contextual framework for examining the reality of becoming and being a primary school Principal in Ireland. The literature points to the Irish government allegedly promoting hegemonic neoliberalism and a perception that elements of neoliberalism pervade all educational initiatives and policy. For example, Skerritt (2019) argues that the national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy standards is very much reflective of neoliberal principles with its focus on 'skills, standards and the economy' (pp. 265-266) while Holland et al. (2016) claim that the economic downturn 'mobilised neo-liberal agendas … valuing what can be readily measured rather than measuring what should be valued' (p. 1041). However, there is some evidence of the potential to resist such a neoliberal emphasis with Donnelly and McKevitt (2016) arguing that social justice can be achieved if the effects of neoliberalism are mediated at local level by a school with a strong commitment to social inclusion. Similarly, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) contend that schools with strong collaborative cultures have the ability to build 'dedication, collective responsibility and pride' (p. 113). I contend that both of these approaches to school culture can solidly defend any potential neoliberal intent. In addition to noting the presence of neoliberalism in the Irish education agenda, mediating its effects towards social justice might be considered another challenge in the Principalship role. It is significant that educational discourse turned to the manner in which the Covid-19 pandemic showed the 'economic shortcomings and moral emptiness of neoliberalism' (McCloskey, 2020:175). McCloskey (2020) argues that occupations involving high levels of social cohesiveness were critical to surviving this challenging period. Covid-19 permeates this study as the data was collected mid-way through 2022 when the world was re-emerging and adjusting to a new normal.

3.3. The Covid-19 Pandemic

For the duration of the pandemic, school leaders faced longer days, 'heightened uncertainty' and numerous incidents of inequity in infrastructure (Murphy and Devine, 2023:136). Teachers and school leaders were impacted by the inequitable situation in which they found themselves, with research showing that children living in disadvantage, those with additional educational needs, and migrant children, suffered significant educational compromise during school closures (Darmody et al. 2021). Similarly, research points to the extra challenges on school

staff members, particularly Principals. Fahy et al. (2020) confirm the 'significant increase in job demands' (p. 1) placed on school Principals during the pandemic, noting how challenging it was to maintain any element of a work-life balance and how this increase in workload seriously impacted on Teaching Principals. Dempsey and Burke (2020) report on the social aspect of teaching being decimated, and how participants in their study missed the collaborative aspects of their work. In Dempsey and Burke's (2020) study, seven out of ten teachers said they were more stressed than before the pandemic and six out of ten reported that their well-being had deteriorated. Participants called for new measures to support education in post-pandemic times, active supports to alleviate stress, and more open communication between all parties involved in education. This study draws attention to the extent to which Principals were adversely affected as a result of the pandemic.

O'Brien in The Irish Times (2021) reports that the pandemic has taught us 'the limits of one-size-fits-all schooling'. This Irish Times article quotes Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education and Skills at the OECD, who advises that Irish education is 'very much 20th century' and that students should be encouraged to 'think out of the box' and across subject boundaries. Looking towards the future, many see the pandemic as a lever for change and an opportunity to reflect on educational trends. Hall et al. (2021) argue that there are potentially 'new possibilities' to design 'a more engaging and inclusive educational futures for all' (p. 147). According to McAleavy et al. (2021), the pandemic has reminded us of the 'pivotal role of school leaders' in addressing equity and inclusion. Szot (2021) warns of the need to commit to incremental change as we embrace a new educational future and advises a deeper commitment to making decisions through the lens of schools' own values and beliefs.

In the Irish context specifically, Murphy and Devine (2023) endeavour to focus on the challenges of sensemaking for school leaders during this turbulent period and they prevail on the Irish system to learn from this crisis so that there is a renewed emphasis on wellbeing in preparation and development programmes. These literature references suggest that the pandemic has changed the educational narrative and brought distance between schools and neoliberal influences. In the context of this study and the attempt to further understand Irish primary school Principalship, it is also worth considering that the pandemic impacted schools after two decades of significant policy change and implementation as outlined in Chapter One. While Covid-19 introduced 'unpredictability and uncertainty' (Harris and Jones, 2020:244), schools, and especially Teaching Principals, had already been grappling with significant challenges in change management long before the pandemic. As former IPPN President,

Damian White, stated: 'Teaching Principals are not oranges, they cannot be squeezed until the pips come out' (White, 2020:26). This chapter will examine these policy changes in relation to SSE and external evaluation to interrogate evidence of neoliberal underpinnings. It will also endeavour to illuminate the current reality of Principalship in Ireland's primary schools and how educational policy impacts the challenges and benefits of the role, both for those newly appointed and for those more established in Principalship.

3.4. External Evaluation and School Self-Evaluation

The following Table, 3.1., outlines, in chronological order, the Irish policy documents and relevant legislation that are mentioned in this chapter. The focus of this Dissertation is primarily on SSE and LAOS, external evaluation and Circular 44/2019 (DES, 2019) but this table serves to situate these policies against a backdrop of the main educational policy developments in Ireland since 1998. Please note that this list is not exhaustive; it includes only the documents most pertinent to this study.

Table 3.1. Irish Legislation and Policy Documents (1998-2022)

Policy Document/Legislation	Date Published
Education Act (Government of Ireland) (1998)	1998
Children Act (Government of Ireland) (2001)	2001 (Revised in 2023)
Looking at our School: An Aid to School Self-Evaluation in Primary/Second Level Schools (DES, 2003)	2003
Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools [DEIS] An Action Plan for Education Inclusion (DES, 2005)	2005
Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers (The Teaching Council) (The Teaching Council 2007; 2012; 2016)	2007 (Updated in 2012 and 2016).
Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES, 2011))	2011
Circular 0040/2012 Implementation of School-Self-Evaluation (DES, 2012)	2012
Droichead [Irish word for 'bridge') Induction and Probation Programme for Newly Qualified Teachers (The Teaching Council, 2013)	2013
Report on the Review of DEIS (DES, 2015a)	2015
Circular 0061/2015 Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2015b; 2019b) (Infants to Second Class)	2015 (Updated from Infants to Sixth Class in 2019: Circular 0045/2019).
Looking at our School [LAOS] A Quality Framework for Primary Schools (DES, 2016)	2016
A Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools (DES, 2016a; DE, 2024a)	2016 (Updated in 2024a).
School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020 Primary (DES, 2016b)	2016
Circular 0039/2016 Continuing Implementation of School Self-Evaluation 2016-2020 (DES, 2016c))	2016
DEIS Plan (DES, 2017a)	2017
Circular 0013/2017 Special Education Teaching Allocation (DES, 2017b)	2017
Admissions to Schools Act (Government of Ireland, 2018a)	2018
Data Protection Act (Government of Ireland, 2018b)	2018
Well-being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2018c)	2018
Looking at DEIS Action Planning for Improvement in Primary and Post-Primary Schools (DE, 2022b)	2022

The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) clearly outlines the quality assurance requirements for the education system and the responsibilities of the Minister for Education in relation to school improvement. In response to this legislation, the DES developed a model of quality assurance that emphasised school development planning through internal school review and self-evaluation, alongside external evaluation carried out by the Inspectorate. The Looking at Our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary/Second-Level Schools (DES, 2003) was published. Kilroy (2020) argues that the uptake by schools was 'limited' (p. 153) while McNamara et al. (2021a) argue that schools were unfamiliar with the concept of SSE, and that inspectors rather wisely had no expectation that SSE would be embedded in the school development planning process. The Whole School Evaluation [WSE] was introduced in 2003 as the newest form of external inspection with the Inspectorate evaluating and reporting on the school's self-evaluation process.

School Self-Evaluation and the external inspection framework underpin this study as key areas of educational policy that significantly impact on the role of Principalship. Kilroy (2020) proposes that the DE learned considerably about SSE and external inspection from the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools [DEIS] Action Plan of 2005 (DES, 2005)[23] which sought to support the needs of students in schools situated in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. These schools were supported to develop individual development plans for their schools with the staff engaging in self-reflective, evidence-based planning (Kilroy, 2020:153). The DEIS Plan[24] (DES, 2017a) aimed to improve learning experiences and outcomes in DEIS schools and the DEIS Plan[25] (DE, 2022b) focuses specifically on school leadership and the impact it has on teaching, learning and professional learning. Five of the fifteen participants in this study work in a DEIS context and cognisance of their specific context along with those of the other participants was maintained throughout the study.

3.5. School Self-Evaluation Phase Two

In 2012, the DES published the second School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Primary Schools. These guidelines promoted collaborative leadership, school self-reflection and evidenced-based decision making, and placed a focus on the importance of school context, teacher agency and the reporting of progress to the entire school community. These guidelines were practical, succinct, and complete with relevant resources and check lists but their implementation in

---

[23] DEIS Plan (2005) https://tinyurl.com/myn47n98
[24] DEIS Plan (2017a) https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/#deis-plan-2017
[25] DEIS Action Plan (2022b) https://tinyurl.com/4wk2fzy5

schools was slow and protracted. This was most likely as a result of the decimation of middle leadership positions in schools due to the recession (Barry et al. 2022). Significantly, Coolahan et al. (2017) claim that school leadership has to be invested in 'visionary educational ideas' (p. 101) to avoid resistance to change. They made the point that where leadership is not working effectively to bring about change reform in teaching and learning, resistance is often characterised in the phrase: 'If not broken, why fix it?'. Such resistance must be addressed as the NCCA (2009) argues that change happens most effectively when supported by those in leadership positions.

The priority of the DES at this time, was to improve the standards of literacy and numeracy in light of the 'Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life' (DES, 2011)[26] document. Critically, this might be viewed as a neo-liberal attempt to ensure Ireland's place near the top of international testing league tables in a time of economic hardship. McNamara et al. (2021b:3) argue that 'Ireland is a country where the purpose of SSE is somewhat blurred' and that the process could well be perceived as being 'a potential money-maker'. Notwithstanding the controversies around the SSE process becoming a requirement in schools, school leaders, and particularly Principals, were charged with over-seeing its implementation and, for many, this was a case of too much, too soon. In his study on school Principals' attitudes and experiences of SSE, Reynolds (2020) argues that effective distributed leadership underpins the SSE process and that working together as a staff is key to its success. Principals baulked at the new responsibilities on their shoulders according to Murphy (2012) who, as IPPN President, spoke about 'doing more with less' and 'the growing frustration of workload increase' (p. 1). The second iteration of the SSE process struggled through a shaky implementation and towards a third phase in 2016. This phase of SSE brought the publication of the Looking at our School [LAOS] (2016) document. This policy document underpins and informs the work of school leadership and adds significantly to the policy backdrop of this study.

3.6. SSE Phase Three, LAOS (2016) and Further Irish Educational Change Reform

LAOS (2016), the most significant support for the SSE process, is a quality framework for primary and post-primary schools. It provides standards for two dimensions, teaching and learning, and leadership and management, with statements of effective practice and highly effective practice. Since publication, it has been utilised by inspectors as a benchmark for all

---

[26] The 'Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life' document provided the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People (2011-2020). It contained a set of key targets and actions for teaching, learning and assessment from early childhood to senior cycle. https://assets.gov.ie/24521/9e0e6e3887454197a1da1f9736c01557.pdf

models of inspections. The former model of inspection, the WSE, as mentioned previously, was now extended to incidental inspections[27], curriculum evaluation in the form of subject inspections, evaluation of provision for pupils with special educational needs, evaluation of DEIS schools, WSEs in Management, Leadership and Learning [MLLs] and follow-through inspections to evaluate how schools had 'implemented recommendations made in previous inspection reports' (DES, 2016a:5). At the same time, an updated version of SSE Guidelines was published (DES, 2016b) together with circular letter 39/2016 (DES, 2016c), constituting SSE, phase three. The guidelines explained that SSE and external inspections 'are complimentary processes', and that the inspectorate 'will take account of schools' engagement with, and the outcomes of, self-evaluation in the course of its evaluations' (DES, 2016b:4). In this third cycle of SSE (2016-2020), the focus remained on teaching and learning, and on the embedding of another new initiative, the Primary Language Curriculum [PLC], (DES, 2015b), through the SSE process. The extensive review of policy documents from this period prompts an inquiry into how heightened expectations have impacted the role of the Principal, significantly intensifying the challenges associated with Principalship.

School communities now found themselves immersed in the new SSE guidelines and the implementation of the PLC alongside emerging legislation on Child Protection [Children First Act] (Government of Ireland, 2015), Admissions Policy [Education (Admissions to Schools) Act] (Government of Ireland, 2018a), General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR] [Data Protection Act] (Government of Ireland, 2018b) and the Well-being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2018c). Irish classrooms were becoming increasingly diverse 'with a rich kaleidoscope of ages, competencies, cultures, ethnicities, family structures and backgrounds, home languages, religions, sexual identities and world views' (NCCA, 2020:3). Additionally, a revised model of allocation of resources for students with additional needs was developed by the National Council for Special Education [NCSE] and launched by the DES (2017b). This model of allocation required 'more creative approaches to ensure resources are distributed effectively' (Walsh, 2020: 5), putting added pressure on Principals, leadership teams and Special Education Teachers [SETs] to equably distribute their school's resources to students with additional needs. This is not an easy task. Allocating resources in an inclusive manner demands a deep commitment to inclusion from the Principal, an inclusive vision for their school, and the effective sharing of this vision with all members of staff (Raftery, 2021). There was also the development of the Droichead (Irish word for bridge) Programme for the

---

[27] Incidental inspections are 'unannounced one-day inspections' (DE, 2021).

induction of newly qualified teachers (The Teaching Council [TC], 2013)[28], changes to initial teacher education that impacted the work of student teachers in schools, and the publication of the Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers (TC, 2012)[29]. Compliance with this legislation, providing an inclusive leadership approach, and dealing with the varying needs of students, are all key challenges I knew would likely be encountered by the participants in this study. The key characteristic that links these challenges is the change that is necessary to enact them in schools. According to the literature, the ability to manage consistent change weighs heavily on Principals who sometimes perceive the change demands as policy overload.

3.7. The Impact of Change

This chapter has thus far, outlined the significant challenges in the role of Principalship emanating from consistent curriculum and legislative change reform. Its notable impact on Principals is substantiated by the literature. The IPPN (2022) compares the findings of Riley (2015) in his survey on the occupational health, safety and well-being of Principals and Deputy Principals to the work commissioned by the IPPN in 2022 from the Deakin University in Melbourne. Of the 831 school leaders in the 2015 report, 57.6 per cent claimed they were suffering from burnout. This statistic rose to 66.1 per cent in 2022 from over 1000 participants. 45.4 per cent of the 2015 participants reported sleeping troubles while this figure rose to 51.5 per cent in 2022. Indeed, the statistics rose in all areas of challenge from 2015 to 2022. In response to the 2015 report, Clerkin (2018) comments that Irish Principals and Deputy Principals 'score well above average on all the negative elements in the survey (burn-out, sleeping troubles, somatic and cognitive stress)' (p.142), and 'below average on positive measures (self-rated health, mental health, coping, relationships, self-worth), identifying 'the extreme demands of the job as the likely cause'. Mulconry (2018) agrees, claiming that Principals and Boards of Management [BOM][30] are overburdened by new legislation and by accountability and measurement demands and accuses the government of seeing schools as 'the one stop shop to all of society's challenges' (p. 149). Mulconry (2018) suggests 'a policy of masterly inactivity for a period, to give Principals the time to breathe . . .' (p. 149). The IPPN

---

[28] Droichead Policy has since been updated by the Teaching Council in 2016 and 2017. Available at: https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/professional-learning/droichead-induction/

[29] Originally published in 2007, the Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers were updated in 2016. Available at: https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/fitness-to-teach/updated-code-of-professional-conduct/

[30] 'The board of management/manger(s) is the body of persons, or the person(s) appointed by the patron to manage the school on behalf of the patron' (DE, 2023a: intro).

(2022), in response to the latter, report that this situation is gradually deteriorating over time and having a significantly detrimental impact on the well-being of school leaders.

The Government's attempts to build further supports for school leaders in the Irish system included the inauguration of the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) in 2015 which was charged with providing mentoring, coaching and professional learning to support school leaders at all stages of leadership. Meanwhile, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) continued to provide bespoke programmes for newly appointed Principals and Deputy Principals, and for those more experienced in the role. Management bodies, trust bodies, professional associations and teacher unions also supported school leaders. The focus remained strongly on distributed leadership, collaboration within and between schools, networking, and collective responsibility to deal with the ever-present demands of the school improvement agenda. This complexity of change, new legislation and ever-increasing economic, societal, and political demands on schools, provided the context for the promotion of distributed leadership and SSE through the lens of the 2016 LAOS document.

3.8. Distributed Leadership and SSE Using LAOS

This study examines the potential of effective distributed leadership both as a valued construct in leadership development and a potential tool towards sustainability in Principalship. Back in 2016, the LAOS document represented a change in culture for Irish schools and a move away from the idea of the Principal being solely in charge, the 'heroics of leadership' (Spillane, 2005:143). This approach to leadership, with the Principal still being perceived as the sole leader of the school, was very prominent during SSE and external inspection development, despite many interventions from the DES and educational stakeholders to promote a more collaborative or distributed approach to leadership. Significantly, in the literature, the Principal is perceived as a key influencer of effective distributed leadership (Harris, 2013). According to the research of O'Donovan (2015) as outlined below, Principals were not prepared to share leadership, and teachers were not ready to step up to leadership roles.

O' Donovan (2015) explains this by contending that Ireland lacked a tradition of 'engaging in collaborative planning and evaluation' with the Principal 'at the apex of the organisation' (p. 244). O'Donovan makes the point that coming from this hierarchical position posed challenges for schools attempting to develop as 'participatory communities'. (p. 244). Sugrue (2009) argues that distributed leadership demanded a change in nomenclature, which had been in existence since the early 1970s, a break in the seniority criterion that remained steadfastly in

use in the attainment of promoted positions, and an understanding of the concept of team effort. In contrast, and at a much later stage, Raftery (2019), in her master's research on the voices and views of practitioners at the interface between policy and practice, argues that we are presently in the era of 'the horizontal and unstratified where leadership has been levelled' (p. 62). Raftery's (2019) research maintains that the implications of distributed leadership for the role of Principal are 'many and varied' (p. 65) but, most significantly, that the Principal's workload is increased by the role. Similarly, Daly (2020), in her master's thesis on teachers' perceptions of leadership practice in large primary schools, emphasised the integral role of the Principal in 'facilitating the effective implementation of collegial practice, strengthening a bottom-up leadership approach' (p. 42). Daly's research found effective school leaders to be skilled in this area.

Regarding the development of SSE in primary schools, O'Hara et al. (2016), in a survey of 296 Principal participants, states that 41.6 per cent of their participants agreed that more resources were needed from the DES to conduct SSE, while a further 38.5 per cent strongly agreed with this statement. The autonomy-based approach to SSE was rejected with almost 50 per cent of the interviewed Principals preferring a generic set of tools provided by the DES and claiming that Principals and Deputy Principals needed more training on how to conduct SSE. 47.9 per cent of the participants believed that SSE placed a lot of stress on staff but significantly, 46.3 per cent agreed that it increased morale. These variable findings indicate a willingness to implement SSE collaboratively but a plea for help around the best way to achieve it. Mc Namara et al. (2021a:7) contend that Principals find the SSE process useful in dealing with the challenges of constant change but that, in general, teachers 'might not fully engage with' the process which reiterates the need to support its further development.

The LAOS document (since revised to LAOS, 2022) provides the framework for teaching, learning and leadership. The SSE process (since revised in Circular 56/2022) (DE, 2022a), is perceived as the tool for its implementation and is supported by the revised approach to the external evaluation of schools. The DE published Circular Letters 03/2018 (DES, 2018b) (post-primary) and 70/2018 (DES, 2018c) (primary), later revised in 44/2019 (DES, 2019) (primary) after which schools were obliged to base recruitment, promotion to leadership positions and review of leadership responsibilities on the LAOS domains and standards. As already explained, this constituted additional change and extended responsibility for schools, and their leadership and management teams. Coolahan et al. (2017) argue that significant reform in

education is 'a time-consuming process, within which felicitous timing of initiatives, the availability of supportive resources and qualitative leadership have significant impact' (p. 146).

3.9. The Reach of LAOS

LAOS (2022) is perceived as underpinning all aspects of school leadership in Ireland. As stated previously, external inspections are based on its domains and standards, and it promotes SSE as a tool for school improvement. The CSL model and continuum of professional learning for all stages of leadership has, as one of the six elements of this leadership learning, a focus on the professional standards of LAOS (2022). The Oide Endorsement Process uses the professional standards of LAOS (2022) as a benchmark for the provision of quality professional learning. The curriculum of the Oide post graduate diploma [PDSL] is based on the LAOS (2022) domains. The work of Oide is guided by the professional standards in its engagement with the inducting of newly appointed Principals and Deputy Principals, its support of more experienced Principals and their leadership teams, and its work with middle and teacher leaders. LAOS (2022) now underpins the recruitment process for all teachers and school leaders, and the review of leadership responsibilities in individual schools. All stakeholders in the system involved in school leadership base their work on the LAOS (2022) domains and standards. Indeed, the document has become the working framework for all things leadership in the Irish context and takes its place as the main component in the contextual framework of this study. Its potential to support a hegemonic neoliberalism questions its intentions within this framework.

Looking at its intention, and according to the theory of policy analysis and the Layered Policy Model (Doherty, 2011), the social and political contexts of LAOS (2022) are worthy of consideration. With its publication, the Irish government promoted school improvement to align itself with European policy and standards. According to the OECD (2020), Ireland performed above the OECD average in reading, mathematics, and science in 2018 and school leaders' engagement in leading teaching and learning was slightly higher than on average across the OECD. Furthermore, 95 per cent of schools receive external evaluations in comparison to averages of 75 per cent around the OECD. This positionality was foreseen by MacRuairc (2010), who argues that this 'increase in forms and frequency of inspections and school/programme evaluations' points to the acceptance from the DES of managerialism, as they published evaluation reports on their website, set up unannounced inspections, initiated a school improvement body to deal with under-performing schools and introduced standardised testing in primary schools (p. 230). However, Hislop (2018) states that LAOS provides the

standards, structures, and language to enable schools to reflect collaboratively on their work and to use SSE to bring about any necessary improvements, and this is now scaffolded by the recently developed Inspectorate advisory role (Hislop, 2022).

In the foreword to the original LAOS (2016), the then Minister for Education, Richard Bruton, wrote that the Irish government was 'determined to invest the benefits of economic growth in our education system' (LAOS, 2016:5). Such a seemingly neo-liberal approach to education is offset by the principles of the framework which are aimed at 'personal well-being, active citizenship and lifelong learning. (p. 6). In LAOS (2022), there is a new emphasis on national policy in areas including inclusion, child safeguarding, anti-bullying, pupil and parental participation, pupil transitions, education for sustainable development, creativity and the Cosán Framework (TC, 2016b), for teacher professional learning. Undoubtedly, LAOS (2022) openly promotes collaboration and includes in its principles that the framework 'firmly situates reflection and collaboration at its heart' (p. 9). The DE promotes the LAOS (2022) document as 'an enabler of self-reflection' rather than 'an inflexible checklist' (p.19).

This view brings the framework closer to the research of Forde et al. (2016) which suggests that standards might be utilised as reflective and planning tools, closely linked to individualised school contexts. Forde et al. (2016) contend that such use of standards has the potential to 'reify teacher agency' (p. 32). However, the LAOS framework also appears to promote the neoliberal concepts of professional accountability, and the use of SSE to achieve school improvement and to ensure Ireland remains in the global policy arena to maintain sustainable growth as a small, globalised economy. Geoghegan (2022) argues that the targets and measurable outcomes used in SSE are proof of a 'culture of performativity' (p. 192). This alternative view pulls LAOS (2022) towards the research of Gronn (2002) who argues that standards maintain control of teachers through 'a policy regime and a culture of performativity' (p. 553). Conversely, LAOS (2022) encourages a learner-centred approach, promoting 'the holistic development of each pupil' (p. 15), and actively promotes a collaborative approach in schools, advocating for professional responsibility, according to culture and context. The concept of 'professional context', presented by Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017:168), connects school values, experiences, and policy management to policy enactment. Nevertheless, Skerrit (2023) contests the idea of developing and implementing 'professional responsibility and accountability' (p. 502) claiming that the authors of the framework illustrate a fundamental misunderstanding of professional responsibility as it should be considered at odds with accountability. Skerritt (2023) argues that the SSE process is underpinned by 'accountability and economic logics',

revealing a hegemonic neoliberal agenda. Skerritt (2023) claims that schools currently have more freedom to focus on their own content 'but paradoxically, they also face greater accountability' (p. 161) so SSE can be perceived as a cheap form of quality assurance, within which schools remain accountable and improve performativity. No matter how LAOS (2022) is perceived, it is policy that demands implementation. It is the mediation of the framework to utilise it in the most productive manner in individual contexts that poses yet another challenge for Principals. This dual perception of LAOS underpins this study and highlights the challenge of such blanket policy for individual schools (Geoghegan, 2022).

The demographic of Irish primary schools adds to this complexity of reform as outlined below. This demographic is reflected in the variety of school contexts in which the participants in this study work.

3.9.1. The Demographic of Primary Schools in Ireland and the Newly Appointed Principal

There are currently 3,095 primary schools in Ireland [31] with a further 124 special schools, a total of 3,219, of which 55 per cent have full time Teaching Principals with full-time teaching duties in addition to leading their school. They are supported by Deputy Principals of whom 90 per cent are full-time class or Special Education Teachers (SETs). This means that over half of the country's Principals have full time teaching responsibilities in addition to leading their school community and 90 per cent of these (including all full-time Teaching Principals) work alongside a Deputy Principal with full time teaching duties. This level of workload challenges the concepts underpinning school improvement such as reflection and quality time to collaborate. According to King and Nihill (2019), the level of workload experienced by Teaching Principals and the reduction in leadership posts of responsibility[32] during the recession, has resulted in many small schools struggling to recruit Principals and points to the importance of preparedness for Principalship or lack thereof, in the Irish system.

This study focuses on becoming and being a primary school Principal and the particular circumstances in which aspiring leaders make the decision to apply for Principalship. Murphy (2019) argues that there is a significant gap between preparation and appointment practices. Although there are numerous leadership programmes available, there is no dedicated programme made compulsory for those aspiring to Principalship. A minimum of five year's

---

[31] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_the_Republic_of_Ireland#Primary_school(2021)
[32] Posts of responsibility refer to the middle leadership positions of Assistant Principal 1 [AP1] and Assistant Principal 11 [AP11] as footnoted in Chapter One.

teaching experience is all that is needed for accession to the role (IPPN, 2015). Even this criterion is not implemented in schools of fewer than eighty pupils. In Ireland, people are not applying for the role due to the negative perception around workload and work-life balance (IPPN, 2015). As things stand currently, in a small pool of aspiring leaders with 81 per cent of Deputy Principals stating they would not apply for the role of Principalship if it became available and only 27 per cent of Principals being Deputy Principals in advance of Principalship (IPPN, 2023), many find themselves moving from the classroom on Friday evening to the Principal's office on Monday morning with limited knowledge of the role. They report 'burnout, stress and sleeping troubles' (IPPN, 2022:12) and a palpable sense of being thrown in at the deep end with workload and competing demands, as researched in the Scottish context by Crawford and Cowie (2012), thereby proliferating the negative perception of the role. With over 3,000 schools at primary level, and considering the statistics as outlined above, the development of compulsory steps to access the position would cause significant debate. This study examines what professional learning is accessed by the participants and its potential impact on their practice and sustainability.

Earley and Bubb's (2013) small-scale study of new Head Teachers in large cities finds that one of the key challenges is the transition between Head Teachers and the long hours of 'demanding, varied and complex work' (p. 784). Distributing leadership is a significant challenge for the participants in Earley and Bubb's study who feel they are not yet in a strong enough position to do this effectively. Similarly, Spillane and Lee (2014) argue that when Principals are new to the role, staff members are 'more cautious and distant with them' and that they are very often compared to the previous Principal whether they were 'a hero to live up to' or 'a bad act to follow' (p. 435). The literature suggests that newly appointed Principals in particular need bespoke support to assist them in their first year of the role and that they may experience a very challenging period at the beginning of their Principalship that has the potential for long term effects on their ability to lead positively as they progress through their career. This study emphasises the importance of support for newly appointed Principals and an understanding of their pre-appointment circumstances to determine what supports are needed to address the prevailing negative discourse.

3.10.   Positivity for Future Sustainability

Thus far, I have outlined the history of Irish educational policy that promotes development in three major areas, school improvement through SSE, external evaluation, and distributed leadership. All three areas are intrinsically connected and are significant in this study's findings.

Initiatives arising from recent educational policy have been examined for their neoliberal focus and equally defended for their focus on collaboration, agency, and individual educational contexts. The Principal remains at the intersection between accountability and a socially just and inclusive approach to education. The participants in this study also position themselves at this intersection. It is significant therefore, that McKenzie (2021) claims that Principals are 'a rare and endangered species who are fast approaching systemic cognitive overload'. McKenzie's (2021) praise of Principals is forthright, mentioning their 'fortitude, stamina and resilience' (p. 27) but at what cost to themselves, physically, emotionally, and professionally does this perception transpire? The resistance from Principals and school communities, and their struggles to cope with continuous change, has been well documented in the literature over the past two decades. Before the outset of the pandemic, Clerkin and Ruddy (2018) stated that school leaders should receive the support, resources and working conditions they need to ensure sustainability in the role and to attract quality aspiring leaders. For this to be actualised, their personal and professional learning and development needs to be scaffolded. This study examines the personal development of Principals and how it is supported in professional learning to ensure future sustainability.

Burke and Dempsey (2020) argue that system supports can inadvertently cause extra pressure for Principals despite their usefulness. In their study of 861 primary Principals on well-being in post-covid schools, participants asked for a more streamlined communication system between agencies and schools, and a mechanism for more 'effective and meaningful dialogue' (p. 57). This study asks whether or not the system has begun to listen, and I re-visit the emerging evidence for this in Chapter Nine.

3.11. Chapter Conclusion

SSE, distributed leadership, and external evaluation have undergone significant development already, but the research suggests that there is much yet to be achieved, both in learning from the pandemic and maximising these policy initiatives for the future. What is significant is Principals' positionality at the intersection between major policy developments and the effective leadership of their school communities. Having studied the literature and the policy trajectory in Ireland over the last two decades, it is becoming apparent that significant policy changes demand real investment in distributed leadership, commitment to the language and professional standards of LAOS (2022), effective utilisation of the SSE process and the successful navigation of and learning from external evaluation. The literature throughout this chapter suggests that Principals need their teams to engage in collaborative leadership to share

the load and complexity of the role (O' Donovan, 2015), they need the LAOS (2022) framework and the SSE process to guide the work of their school and to achieve the best learning experiences and outcomes for their students (Hislop, 2018, O' Hara, 2016), and they need to work in a meaningful and collegial way with the Inspectorate to engage in self-evaluation and review (DES, 2016; 2022a). The positionality of Principals in relation to these policy developments and the supports provided for their enactment, determines how they enhance the benefits of their role or indeed add to the challenges placed upon them.

Chapter Four will examine the importance of the personal development of the leader and the affective domain of school leadership to determine its impact on the navigation of policy implementation and to successfully manage change. It will explore the qualities and skills most needed not only to survive but to flourish in the position of primary school Principal. This exploration is crucial for comprehending the potential advantages of the role, which is a central focus of this study.

4. Chapter 4: The Personal Development of Principals

4.1. Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I focused on the national and international literature relevant to the role of the Irish primary school Principal. In this chapter, I will examine the personal and emotional development of people in the Principalship role, sometimes referred to as the affective domain, and its significance in addressing the challenges of the role as outlined in previous chapters. The rationale for this approach is based on the focus of this study, to better understand what enables Principals to cope with the challenges of Principalship and to understand its benefits. I am concerned that some Principals struggle significantly more than others with sustainability in Principalship and question whether or not they will be able to remain in the role for the duration of their career.

This chapter begins with an overview of conceptualisations of the affective dimension of the Principal's role, according to both international and national literature with reference to specific models of interpretation. Thereafter, it will interrogate the concept of effective leadership and how this might be enhanced by distributed leadership. It will provide an overview of how the personal and emotional development of Principals is supported in the system and how further development might serve to enable Principals to achieve sustainability in the role and to further encourage those aspiring to Principalship. The chapter concludes by examining the work of Martha Nussbaum (2001) on the emotions, selected to enable me to explore the emotional development of the participants according to their own narratives and to consider the opportunities, or lack thereof, in professional learning to support this development.

4.2. The Affective Domain of Principalship

According to Davidson et al. (2003), a person's affective style refers to the:

> … relatively stable dispositions that bias an individual toward perceiving and responding to people and objects with a particular emotional quality, emotional dimension, or mood (xiii).

Significantly, Davidson et al. claim that 'affective processes are relevant to health' and that 'differences among individuals in certain parameters of affective functioning are likely associated with differential vulnerability' (xiv). Martha Nussbaum (2001) contends that emotions reveal people as vulnerable to events they cannot control, that they represent the world from the point of view of one's own goals and interests, and that they can be underpinned by ambivalent feelings of love and hate. This is because we need other people to survive and

flourish but we are not in a position to control them. I return to Nussbaum's work on emotions in section 4.6.

Leithwood et al. (2008) argue that the most successful school leaders have certain dispositions that 'at least under challenging circumstances' help them to 'push forward when there is little reason to expect progress' (p. 36). These dispositions, some might call them traits, include open-mindedness, being willing to learn from others, flexibility, persistence, resilience, and optimism. In a series of case studies carried out on behalf of the former National College for Teaching and Leadership in England, Matthews et al. (2014) maintain that Head Teachers need to have:

> 'vision, determination, resilience, tenacity and drive, laced with the courage of their convictions and carried forward with an irresistible momentum' (p. 19).

Significantly, Matthews et al. (2014) also argue that the 'ability to inspire, develop and empower staff and-through them-pupils and parents, is paramount' (p. 4). These words and phrases are significant and match many of the descriptions of school leaders provided by this study's participants, as discussed in Chapter Eight and outlined in Appendix 2. In Chapter Eight, they underpin an interrogation of how the participants describe the qualities and practice of Principals.

Dhillon et al. (2020) contend that certain leadership traits or dispositions can 'explain why some individuals have the capacity to develop more quickly than others do' (p. 62). These characteristics include having high expectations, maximising talent, taking decisive action around poor performance, bringing the best out of people, and developing an aspirational culture. The attitude of one of the participants in a study by Ganon-Shilon and Chen (2019) is interesting. When met with the need to change and enact policy, one participant 'James' said: 'I have decided to use this national reform to such an effect as to make lemonade out of those lemons' (p. 81). James' reaction is a seemingly positive and optimistic response to a demanding external ask. A sense of optimism and positivity in school leaders and its effect on their work has intrigued me over the years. Do some Principals have more ability than others to turn the lemons into lemonade? The differences in Principals' perceptions of these challenges and expectations is an underpinning thread I sought to explore in this study.

Maslach and Leiter (1997) contend that real engagement in their work brings energy and enthusiasm to people while Hilton (2020) argues that optimistic school leaders experience the same challenges as anyone else but see 'adversity as a challenge to be overcome and [they]

may even derive satisfaction from attempting to conquer it' (p. 24). In contrast, according to Hilton (2020), pessimistic people see challenge as insurmountable and develop a 'learned helplessness' (p. 24). Hilton (2020) quotes a serving Head Teacher who says that 'we have an unswerving duty to look a four-year-old in the eye for the first time and be optimistic for their future' (p. 25). McCabe (2020) posits that it is the moral purpose of 'principled leaders' which supports their decisions, based on the 'best interest of the pupils, the school, the teachers and the community' and that he had experienced such morale purpose in Principals who 'oozed character and commitment' (p. 22). However, it would be entirely wrong to suggest that Principals who baulk at challenge do not have moral purpose. Rather, I contend that moral purpose is important in sustaining Principals as they attempt to work in the best interests of students and the school community. Murphy and Louis (2018) maintain that good leaders have positive, moral, relationship and stewardship orientation, meaning that they focus on the positives, on doing the right thing, on being supportive and caring, and on fostering both the individual and the organisation. While some view these approaches as easily achievable, others find them more difficult to manage on a personal level.

From a different perspective, Hernández-Amorós and Martínez-Ruiz (2018) substantiate many of the points already made above, contending that a Principal who perceives their role as an adventure will manage challenge much more competently than one who sees it as a nightmare. In their study, they analyse the metaphorical expressions used by 68 Principals relating to Principalship and how it makes them feel. Fewer than half of the metaphors from the study described the role as an adventure. When I asked the participants in my study about a metaphor for the role of Principal, they produced seventeen metaphors. Of these, seven were negative, nine might be interpreted either positively or negatively and only two provided clearly positive metaphors (Appendix 3). This sharing of negative metaphors by the participants or metaphors that might be interpreted either way is significant as it links to the systemic negativity towards Principalship mentioned in Chapter One and the challenges of positivity in the role. I will return to this use of metaphors in Chapter Seven to further investigate Principals' perceptions of their job. If, as the literature thus far suggests, optimism and moral purpose assist in surmounting challenge, it is important to examine what Principals bring to the role in experience, knowledge and personal development in order to achieve success and sustainability. A necessary bridge to such a focus is an examination of what successful or effective school leadership is.

4.3. Conceptualising Successful or Effective School Leadership

Pashiardis and Johansson (2021) claim that there are many aspects to an effective school including how resources are managed and distributed and how objectives and goals are set and achieved, based on quality and equality. This research sees context as the bridge between success and effectiveness and suggests that school leaders need to 'be able to understand the complexity of the system and the complexity of the self' (p. 699), to become 'contextually literate' (p. 791). Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) argue that a Principal's ability to read the complexities of their own context helps them to understand their school's priorities. Relatedly, in a study by Wang et al. (2016) of four Singapore primary schools, successful school leadership was underpinned by personal qualities, beliefs and values guiding the Principals' practice, by the empowerment of teachers through professional learning, and by partnerships with stakeholders both within and outside of the schools. The Principals who participated in that study advocated for a bottom-up approach to developing a shared vision, keeping the focus on the holistic needs of the child and building a collaborative culture with all members of the school community. For my own work, an interesting additional finding in the Wang et al. (2016) study is how the Principals involved built on the legacy of previous Principals with one stating her admiration of a former female Principal: 'It is important for me to acknowledge all the good processes, tradition and culture she had established' (p. 12). This acknowledgement of success on the part of their predecessors enabled them to add to or modify successful programmes and approaches and Wang et al. (2016:279) contend that 'this connection of Principals building on the legacy of past Principals was direct and enduring in this study'. I return to this in Chapters Six and Seven.

Day and Sammons (2016) maintain that successful school leadership is about positive impact on student outcomes and that the two best approaches to leadership are instructional/pedagogical and transformational [as outlined in Chapter Two]. In other studies, such as that by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited (Aitsl) (2020), key messages for Principals include the capacity to draw on a toolkit of reactive and proactive skills and approaches, to prioritise open communication, to be able to triage and manage threats, to leverage the skills of multiple stakeholders, to work collaboratively and to prioritise the well-being of the Principal and the school community. It is interesting to note here that Principals who are extroverts by nature are often linked to transformational leadership (Bobo and Judge, 2004), a point explored further in the findings in Chapter Seven. This literature focuses on what Principals need to do, but there is little here about the qualities and

dispositions which enable Principals to achieve these actions. The importance of distributed leadership to enable an instructional and transformational approach to the Aitsl (2020) expectations on Principals, remains a key aspect of all leadership literature and is therefore, a key area I explored in my study.

4.4. Distributed Leadership

Harris (2013), in her study on the significance of distributed leadership, argues that 'the true test of distributed leadership is in the quality of the nature and interactions between individuals' (p. 48) as 'people may be working together but with different goals or outcomes in mind' (p. 54). Harris (2013) claims that teachers in formal leadership positions must 'model reciprocal trust, responsibility and accountability' (p. 55), all essential qualities to achieve the effective distribution of leadership. This connects to the research by Psychogios and Dimitriadis (2021), which emphasizes the significance of consciousness in fostering mutually beneficial relationships and collaborative achievements. Their work highlights the role of conscious leadership in cultivating trust and collaboration. Engendering criticality, Cavanagh (2010), questions the concept of collegiality as potentially a mask to hide external demands. Harris (2013) contends that the challenge for Principals is developing their sense of security, 'a necessary ingredient in the distributed leadership formula' (p. 56) and warns against leadership as a 'negative force in the wrong hands' arising from 'a whole set of negative personality characteristics' (p. 66). These traits can greatly hinder the effective distribution of leadership. Some leaders, reluctant to relinquish power, may exploit distributed leadership to pursue their own agendas and closely monitor their colleagues' authority. O'Sullivan and MacRuairc (2023:18) contend that the DE's current approach to distributed leadership is based on hierarchy and delegation. They contend that 'context-sensitive' professional learning with both senior leaders and middle leaders is the way forward towards enacting the potential benefits of a more holistic distributed leadership. By contrast, Harris (2013) attests that exceptional leaders see people as their only asset. In order to achieve effective distributed leadership, and as a result, successful school leadership, Harris claims that Principals must be able to empower, intervene and develop a deep understanding of the barriers to distributed leadership such as time, school culture, professional reluctance and a fear of mistakes.

Elliott and Hollingsworth (2020) warn that empowering teachers and distributing leadership effectively is not a simple task and that school leadership programmes are not equipping school leaders with the skills they need while 'very few target the leaders of tomorrow' (p. 5). To this end, Elliott and Hollingsworth propose a leadership fellow programme. or an 'incubator

model', that will equip school leaders to deal with the challenges and complexities of the role. This doctoral study presents distributed leadership as a contested construct and participants were encouraged to discuss their experiences and understanding of it as outlined in Chapters Six and Seven. Elliott's and Hollingsworth's (2020) work suggests the importance of professional learning to achieve effective distributed leadership, and to move the concept towards thinking as a leader rather than being focused on the tasks involved (Hickey et al. 2023), so I turn now to the provision of professional leadership learning in Ireland.

4.5. The Significance of Quality Professional Learning in the Irish Context

In Ireland, all newly appointed Principals are provided with an experienced mentor in the first year of their Principalship and the opportunity to take part in group mentoring in their second year in the role. The Centre for School Leadership [CSL] developed the first formal mentoring programme for newly appointed Principals in 2016, trained over 800 experienced primary Principals to become CSL mentors, and has supported over 2,000 Principals in the first year of their role. This work now continues within the Oide Support Service. According to CSL evaluation reports, the mentoring support was 'very positively received and regarded' (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2020:13) and is recognised as a 'clearly beneficial model of transmitting knowledge and assistance from more experienced school leaders to those less experienced' (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2018:69). It is testament to the esteem this mentoring support is held in that 39 per cent or 52 of the 147 primary participants in the 2022 mentor training programme were former mentees themselves. Fourteen of the fifteen participants in this study were trained as Oide mentors, showcasing their role as system leaders. Critically, mentoring is not without its challenges as outlined in Chapter Nine.

In Ireland, all Principals are provided with professional coaching, which includes seven individual sessions and a chemistry check. After completing four sessions, Principals can also access team coaching for their leadership team. The 1,500 Principals who have engaged in the coaching programme to date (March 2024) speak very highly of its benefits to their practice and to their own personal and professional development. Evaluation of the coaching support stated that coaching is a 'highly rated and valued support service' (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2020: iii), and is 'generating greater personal capacity, strength, capability, effectiveness, and resilience' Fitzpatrick Associates (2018:80). However, it is also worth noting that coaching is a slow burner among Irish educators with 1,500 out of 4,000 Principals engaging in one-to-one coaching (40 per cent) and 436 leadership teams engaging in team coaching (11 per cent). According to Whitmore (2009), coaching is about raising awareness of the unique attributes of

individuals to build their ability and confidence. Whitmore (2009) describes a coaching participant with a particularly 'autocratic, dogmatic and manipulative' manner who took quite a while to be convinced that 'offering the learner more choice was one key to unlocking all kinds of hidden potential' (p. 31). This example indicates an intersectionality of personality traits, dispositions, and quality professional learning, and this was a key focus in my thinking as I designed this study.

Professional leadership learning in Ireland is guided by the CSL Model of Professional Learning (Appendix 1) as already outlined in Chapter One. Further, the learning is also guided by the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a key pedagogical approach to promote inclusion and equity in education in response to the diverse nature of our students (Flood and Banks, 2021). Similar to the experiences of mentoring and coaching in Ireland, it's important to note that much of the literature critically views Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as having a 'promising' rhetoric yet lacking published research that shows improvement in learning outcomes (Murphy, 2021:7). Both the CSL Model and the principles of UDL underpin professional learning for school leaders in the Irish context and are, therefore, intrinsically linked to this study.

Additionally, providers of leadership professional learning in Ireland submit their leadership provision to Oide for endorsement by a professional learning endorsement process and leadership provision provided by the support services undergoes a rigorous quality assurance process within the Teacher Professional Learning Section [TPLS] of the Department of Education [DE]. However, as previously suggested in Chapter Two, I started this EdD Dissertation thinking that preparation for Principalship in Ireland needs expansion to ensure better support for those beginning in the role.

From the conceptualization of successful or effective school leadership in the research of Pashiardis and Johansson (2021), Wang et al. (2016), Day and Sammons (2016), and Aitsl (2020), the core responsibility of Principals is to effectively lead teaching and learning to achieve the best possible outcomes for students. This involves working collaboratively within the school and with stakeholders, remaining cognisant of school context and personal beliefs and values, and embracing instructional and transformational leadership. Together with distributed leadership and professional learning, this study examines the impact of all of these leadership areas and their impact on the benefits and challenges of Principalship. Each of them is intrinsically linked to the personal and emotional development of the Principal.

4.6. The Personal and Emotional Development of the Principal

Barth (2006) argues that 'the relationships among the educators in a school define all relationships within that school's culture' (para 1). Barth (2006) advocates for the achievement of collegial relationships, with teachers talking about their practice, sharing their knowledge, observing one another, and being concerned about each other's success. Leadership concepts such as distributed leadership and collaborative practice by their nature, demand such collegial relationships. While these concepts are supported by educational leadership policy and leadership system supports both in Ireland and internationally, a study of current practice (Redmond, 2016; Friedman, 2020; Psychogios and Dimitriadis, 2021; Arar and Sati, 2022; Lynch et al. 2022) reveals a strong link between widely recognized concepts of successful leadership and the person of the leader. This study highlights how the leader's characteristics determine leadership styles and approaches.

Arar and Saiti (2022) situate school leadership in the challenges of our time. They recognise 'fragility' as a 'characteristic and an unavoidable aspect of everyday life' (p. 126) and blame the number of moral dilemmas Principals face continuously in their schools. Arar and Saiti (2022) focus on the concept of ethical leadership and the reality that even those Principals with high moral values will struggle with ethical dilemmas as ethical leadership is, they claim, closely linked to values and beliefs thereby needing formal training and preparation in matters of moral behaviour. This research links with Lynch et al. (2022) who advocate for authentic leadership from school leaders who are self-aware, honest and informed by their own personal morals and values. According to Friedman (2020), some people possess traits which enable them to be competent school leaders while others do not. Friedman (2020) claims that the two most important traits are the capacity to understand the demands of 'familiar and unfamiliar situations' (p. 826) and the capacity to adapt to changing situations. A Principal's intra-personal capacity, according to Friedman (2020), is about access to their own emotional life so that they can group and classify a wide range of complex emotions to understand the thoughts, feelings and intentions of others. Friedman (2020) claims that personal traits 'serve as a necessary (or at the very least desirable) basis for the creation of skills' which, added to professional knowledge and experience, can 'obtain unique performance skills' (p. 832). As I outline in Chapter Eight, my own learning from this research has prompted me to re-consider the issue of emotions. One of the intentions of this study is to explore the importance of emotions and personal development as Principals embark on and pursue their career as a school leader.

McKay et al. (2022) contend that the work of school leaders is 'emotionally intense' and link the shortage of applications to the role to this intensity, warning that 'emotions matter' as they affect relationships and have consequences for Principals' health and well-being (p. 2). McKay et al. (2022) argue that Principals extend their caring work to all members of their school communities. A recent radio report in Ireland focused on the amount of time Principals give to attaining emergency accommodation for homeless children. They could not, they stated, leave them in the hands of overstretched system supports. When considered through the lens of the work of McKay et al. (2022), this radio report provides a concrete example of the emotional intensity of Principalship.

Although based on second level Principals in Ireland, Redmond (2016) advocates for a 'holistic reconstituted approach to the person of the leader' (p. 14) and an 'emotionally engaged "leaderliness" underpinned by values' (p. 27). He found a significant connection between Principals' biographies and their approach to this aspect of their work (p. 54). Further, Principals' values combine with vision and priorities to guide their work, and their life experiences to enrich and inform emotional awareness. Interestingly, Redmond (2016) argues that 'resilience was prioritised as the foremost affective competence' (p. 75) and yet, it emerged that Principals 'rarely get the opportunity' to discuss their 'work-related emotionality' (p. 110).

In the Irish context, according to Brennan and MacRuairc (2011), the work of the Irish primary school leader is person centred, and it is challenging to separate the personal and the professional. Additionally, the impact of the emotions on leadership must be considered alongside school size in Ireland and the ever-increasing neoliberal demands of accountability placed on school leaders. Small schools, according to Brennan and MacRuairc (2011), rely heavily on interpersonal skills which in turn are negatively impacted by the demands of external accountability measures. More recently, and according to Mahfouz and Gordon (2022), leaders burn out when trying 'to cope with emotional dissonance stemming from the emotional demands' of the role as they struggle with system demands (p. 132). Brennan and MacRuairc (2011) claim that emotions have been 'regularly devalued' with people reluctant to discuss 'negative emotions and vulnerabilities' but they remind us that emotions are about hearts and minds, accentuating the essential nature of the theoretical language to articulate them (p. 133). McKay et al. (2022) criticise system expectations of Principals to look after themselves rather than ensuring the provision of structures to avoid feeling overwhelmed. Therefore, this doctoral study addresses the need to focus on emotional development in

leadership programmes and supports. To further understand the emotions, the writings of Martha Nussbaum (2001) provide additional clarity.

4.7. Martha Nussbaum's Theory on Emotions

In her seminal work, *Upheavals of Thought*, Nussbaum (2001) contends that emotions 'reveal us as vulnerable to events we do not control' (p. 12) and explains that the dignity of our agency is compromised by our emotions. Nussbaum (2001) also argues that emotions do not come from an 'impartial viewpoint' (p. 12) but from a focus on our own goals and projects becoming 'too partial or unbalanced' (p. 12-13). Thirdly, Nussbaum (2001) claims that we have a 'subversive combination of love and resentment' towards others as we need them to survive but we are unable to 'control their movements' (p. 13). Nussbaum (2001) maintains that emotions always have an object that is perceived in a particular, and not necessarily an accurate, way. Emotions embody beliefs about the object which are often very complex, and the object is invested with value or importance. To explain this, Nussbaum (2001) describes the unexpected death of her mother. She claims that beliefs and perceptions are integral to emotions and that emotions are eudaimonistic. In other words, they are connected to a person's flourishing. Nussbaum's (2001) heartbreak made her deeply disturbed, and her well-being was significantly affected, resulting in an overwhelming sense of vulnerability. Her thoughts were intrinsically shaken, and she experienced what she describes as an 'upheaval' (p. 43). She explains the difference between beliefs and emotions by contending that 'in belief, we are trying to fit our mental attitude to the world' but 'in emotion, we are trying to make the world fit our mental attitude' (p. 48). Significantly, Nussbaum (2001) points to people's values and beliefs being messy, reminding us that we often love people who have many negative qualities. Her insights serve to further illuminate personal development in leadership.

Principals are surrounded daily by people with dissimilar values and beliefs to themselves. From the literature, understanding this diversity and being aware of one's own moral purpose seems key to emotional development and maturity. Nussbaum's (2001) claim that emotions have 'heat and urgency' (p. 77) because they are connected to our most important goals is significant with respect to the role of Principal. Principals focus on providing the best learning opportunities for their students and school communities and are urged to develop a strategic vision in collaboration with their staff. It is easy to imagine how their emotions might develop this sense of heat and urgency if they perceive anyone in contravention of such a vision. People with dissimilar values and beliefs might be perceived in this way which is why an understanding of the intersectionality of values and beliefs is so important.

According to Nussbaum (2001), beliefs, values and perceptions are key to emotions and 'emotions link us to items we regard as important to our well- being, but do not fully control' (p. 43). As already stated, Nussbaum (2001) makes the point that people's sense of what is important and valuable is often messy, disorderly, and not in line with their ethical beliefs. This can be explained by the example of people loving their hometown even if is a challenging place to live. The same is true, according to Nussbaum (2001), of the love we have for those close to us, as we love irrespective of their less pleasant characteristics. Principals express love for their role although fraught with challenge and love for their school context and community despite being aware of their many imperfections. These types of connection and affection are limitations of 'eudaimonistic' emotions. Nussbaum (2001) sees emotions as 'value-laden ways of understanding the world' (p. 88). Principals use emotions as value-laden ways of understanding their school and their school community. Many love their role despite the challenges while others do not seem to have the resilience or the resources to cope with the provocations they encounter. Nussbaum (2001) argues that the emotional life of an adult is shaped by their childhood history and that deep emotions from childhood may operate in ways we do not have the capacity to understand. Being aware of Nussbaum's (2001) research can enhance our understanding of Principals' perceptions and relationships with those around them.

Nussbaum (2001) explores two emotions in detail, love and compassion. She defines compassion as a 'painful emotion, occasioned by the awareness of another person's misfortune' (p. 301). To be truly compassionate, Nussbaum (2001) proposes three criteria; that the suffering is serious and not trivial, that the person suffering does not deserve it, and that the observer feels that they could experience a similar misfortune, invoking feelings of vulnerability. This has the potential to happen daily in schools as Principals work so closely with others and have oversight of their lives. Significantly, they have no control over what other people experience, particularly in their personal lives. This connection Nussbaum (2001) makes between emotions and the things we cannot control, assists in illuminating the complexity of the role of Principalship.

Realistically, primary school Principals encounter many aspects of their role that are challenging to manage and control. The daily management and care of young children, the social and economic demands of running a school, and the ever-changing educational landscape, both in provision and accountability, are examples of this. Their situation is further exacerbated by the diversity of personalities, beliefs and values which surround them. Finally, Nussbaum's (2001) explanation of how vulnerable we are in relation to our emotions is

significant. When we experience upheavals of thought due to our emotions, we also experience vulnerability. When we feel real compassion for others, we are aware that the same misfortune has the potential to happen to us. Most Principals, particularly those newly appointed to the role, express an innate fear of showing any form of vulnerability. When I recently asked a group of new Principals what they were most worried about, they agreed it was the fear of 'being found out', 'not appearing competent', 'not fulfilling expectations', and the pressure of 'having all the answers'. A deeper understanding of our emotions and our potential to be vulnerable would therefore seem to be an essential element of leadership professional learning.

4.8. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter firstly examined the development of the person of the leader and what it is perceived to be in the literature. Generally, it is about reacting to people and events with a specific emotion or emotions. This reaction was linked to the dispositions of school leaders and their levels of positivity and optimism. It emerged from the literature that leaders with a positive disposition are more likely to lead effective or successful schools. To be perceived as effective or successful, the literature suggests that schools focus on quality and equality, and the holistic development of the child. It also suggests that they provide a strong focus on teaching and learning in a collaborative culture with a defined vision. Furthermore, they are successful in the distribution of roles and responsibilities through the building of relationships and teams both within and outside of the school. In earlier chapters of this study, all these elements of school leadership in Ireland emerged as current leadership concepts in the Irish system and they significantly permeate this study.

The chapter then explored how the person of the leader intersects with distributive leadership and quality professional learning. According to Harris (2013), effective distributed leadership depends on the Principal's sense of security but critically, it can be used for power purposes by Principals with negative qualities and dispositions. The variety of quality assured system supports in Ireland for school leaders was explored. It is obvious that the Irish government is keen to provide the most appropriate supports for Principals and other school leaders, particularly through mentoring and coaching, and that the development of the person of the leader is key to such supports. The intersectionality of the Principal and their positive dispositions and qualities with bespoke professional learning is an interesting angle and one that emerges in this study's findings as discussed in Chapters Eight and Nine.

Subsequently, the chapter reconnected the person of the Principal with effective or successful practice and examined how specific dispositions appear to give some Principals an advantage over others. It emerged from the literature that the affective domain of school leadership is central to the work of schools but is often neglected in professional learning with Principals not getting opportunities to discuss it or engage with it. The chapter finished with a brief overview of the work of Martha Nussbaum (2001) and her claim that a person's agency is compromised by their emotions as people are unable to control the actions of others and they may experience vulnerability around their misfortunes and divergent beliefs. This theory aligns with schools and the role of the Irish school Principal who is expected to lead positively and collaboratively, building the leadership capacity and agency of all members of the school community. The development of a Principal's emotions together with their qualities and dispositions is an important element of this study as the personal development of school leaders is integral to how successfully they achieve sustainable leadership within their school communities.

Reflecting on the policy backdrop and the current situation regarding Ireland's educational context, together with the study's theoretical perspectives, the conceptual framework underpinning this study will be presented in Chapter Five with the research methodology.

5. Chapter 5: Framing the Research Methodology

5.1. Introduction

This chapter begins with the presentation of the study's conceptual framework. The framework outlines the Irish educational context from which this study emerged and the leadership theories which underpin it. It provides an overview of the methodological approaches. Most importantly, it synopsises the conceptual framework into three stages of Principalship (aspiring, newly appointed and established), the ideas that guided the formulation of the research questions, and the foundational concepts that support the study's conclusions. The framework provides a linkage between context, theory, methodology and research findings. It provides this linkage in diagrammatic format to enable the reader to gather the threads of this study together and to understand its rationale and its progression towards the conclusions and recommendations in Chapter Nine.

After the conceptual framework, I then explore and reflect on the designs and methods I adopted to gather and analyse the data, and to present the findings. I also present some of the methodological issues I encountered. This begins with an account of the interpretivist paradigm and the justification for its choice. Thereafter, I provide a critically reflexive account of my role as researcher, including a description of my own principles and values through the lens of my professional context and role in the Irish system. The chapter continues with a discussion of pertinent ethical considerations, including trustworthiness and authenticity which is followed by a detailed description of my approaches to data collection. Finally, the chapter presents the data analysis process. This section explains how the process began, my systematic approach to coding and how the themes were generated.

5.2. Conceptual Framework

Table 5.2. Conceptual Framework

Contextual Framework
SSE/External Evaluation | 44/2019 | LAOS | COVID-19 | 2008 Downturn
← NEOLIBERALISM →

Conceptual Framework

Principal
- Aspiring
- Newly Appointed
- Established

Context/Culture
Skills/Dispositions
Learning/Experience
Benefits/Challenges
System Support
Person of the Leader

Sustainability
School Improvement
Effective Leadership
Social Justice
Role Attractiveness
System Collaboration
Professional Learning

Theoretical Perspective
Distributed | Transformational | Collaborative | System | Authentic | Sustainable
LEADERSHIP

Methodological Approach
Relativist | Subjectivist | Balanced |
Semi-structured interviews | Thematic Analysis
INTERPRETIVISM

5.3. An Empirical Study in an Interpretivist Paradigm

This Dissertation is an empirical study situated in an interpretivist paradigm. As I wished to highlight the benefits and challenges of Irish Principalship, to explore solutions to address the challenges and illuminate the disposition of those deciding to apply for the role, the 'what' of this study led me directly to the experience of the participants. For me, as a researcher, everything was dependent on and emanating from the participants' responses to the questions posed, providing a strong rationale for the empirical nature of the study.

In an endeavour to understand the concept of a paradigm, I was guided by Kivunja and Bawa Kuyini (2017) who conceptualise it as a lens through which the researcher views their world to guide their methodological approaches. I reflected on this and decided it was about my set of beliefs and values. In a world based on relationships and the building of trust, it was clear that the objective and logically ordered reality of positivism (Baranov, 2004) was not suited to the 'what' or the 'how' of this study. An interpretivist approach that envisages the manner in which the investigator interprets the social world of participants as key to successful research (Baranov, 2004), instantly resonated with what I wanted to achieve.

According to Eisenhart (1988), the purpose of interpretivist research is to enable the researcher to 'make sense' of the world from their participants' perspectives (p. 103). From my own point of view, this meant being involved as an insider and an outsider and the title of this Dissertation requires an explanation of this concept. Milligan (2016:239) examines 'insider-outsider positionings' and argues that researchers are often neither one nor the other but take on different positions depending on their situation and their research participants. They, therefore, enter into 'continuously shifting relationships' that are messily blurred (Thompson and Gunter, 2010:25-26), making the researcher an 'inbetweener' (Milligan, 2016:248). My perceived inbetweener positionality became even more complex when my experience, both as a school leader and a system leader, was considered. It meant being cognisant of three roles and responsibilities (those of the Principal, system leader and researcher), while maintaining critical reflexivity in the consistent and continual examination of my reactions and my rationale for this study. I needed to adequately portray the experiences of the participants according to their individual contexts and lived experiences and to interpret these experiences so that they made sense in the research community. I endeavoured to utilise the participants' knowledge and experiences to contribute to educational leadership knowledge in the Irish system. I aspired to my EdD being a vehicle for change in the real world by drawing on the study participants' experiences while maintaining my perspective from the system (Lester, 2004). This presented somewhat of a

challenge as researcher. As I interviewed each participant, I was cognisant of being 'one of them' from my own experience as a primary school Principal. Their challenges and celebrations stimulated memories and emotions deep within me and a sense of understanding from my own fifteen years in the role. A second layer of understanding arose as I reflected on my privileged position as a system leader, privileged in the sense of straddling the role of practitioner and provider, and being enabled to influence leadership professional learning provision and policy development. Aside from a sense of 'inbetweener' (Milligan, 2016:248), and the blurring of my researcher positionality as insider and outsider as described above, this understanding gradually materialised as an immense responsibility to relate my participants' stories adequately and objectively within their everyday contexts and cultures while ensuring criticality. Using Eisenhart (1988), I found myself asking; 'What is going on here?' and 'What intersubjective meanings underlie these goings on?' (p. 104). Endeavouring to find these answers and understanding the 'liquidity' (Thomson and Gunter, 2010: 28) of my research status became the core of my interpretivist research approach.

5.4. Rationale for Research Study and Methodological Approach

As already stated, this study aimed to provide a balanced interpretation of the benefits and challenges of being an Irish primary school Principal while also problematising effective distributed leadership and highlighting the person of the leader. It was my intention to provide an understanding of why people become Principals, even if initially unprepared. I hoped to provide new knowledge to the system on how to cater for the professional learning needs of those becoming Principals, and those more established in the role Furthermore, I endeavoured to highlight the schism between a deep held enjoyment of the role and a passion for it, while considering its conceptualisation as tough and overwhelming. The latter point was crucial for me as a system leader concerned about the existing negative interpretation of the role and the current reality, as noted in Chapter Three, regarding low numbers of applications to senior leadership positions.

For me, this rationale naturally linked to an interpretive paradigm in which mutual 'intersubjectivity (mutual recognition) between researcher and research participants is fostered and valued' (Weaver and Olsen, 2006: 461). I believed the participants recognised me as one of them but there was also an underlying sense of difference. One questioned my understanding of their current reality (from my position in the system) while, on the other hand, many affirmations of my insiderness also came through in the language ('*You know the way, you*

know yourself', '*I think you know*'[33]). Something not often discussed in Ireland is an unsaid questioning, 'Why did you want to work in the system and leave your school?' and 'When are you going back?'. I answered honestly that a wonderful opportunity had arisen for me and that I am entering the final stages of my career. Both questions have been posed to me on many occasions, and I have always endeavoured to be as transparent as possible.

Recent research on the complexities of system leadership and secondment opportunities in Ireland highlight the limitations of the secondment model due to the five/seven/ten-year rule. This rule dictates the return to school after a given period for teachers and school leaders seconded to the system. Currently, within Oide, professional learning leaders are seconded for up to five-years, senior leaders for up to seven years and senior managers for up to ten years. This rule provides rather limited options to those who enter into system leadership (O' Donnell, 2023). Additionally, Principals seconded to the system lose their Principal's allowance for the duration of their secondment. This limits the possibilities of career progression. One of my participants asked, '*Do you know what it's like in the real world, do you remember that?'.* This participant's comment ensured a return to reflection on my position as an educational professional and my complex responsibility to my participants. It made me understand that the theoretical framework of the interpretivist paradigm I had chosen to work within was key and that reflection on it would improve the quality of my research (Baptiste, 2001).

5.5. A Relativist Ontological Approach

The work of Baptiste (2001) guided me towards the ontological question of what is real. What was most real for me in my study was, I think, the joy experienced by the participants in their role. As noted in Chapter Six, this was almost tangible. The importance of conveying this to the system sat heavily on my shoulders. In the Irish system, there is no research on the benefits of Principalship, no mention of it in the media and a very limited focus in leadership professional learning. This leads to narrow understandings of Principalship and adds significantly to its negative perception. Equally real in the interviews were the many challenges of the role and the need to ensure a balanced conveyance of both. I felt genuinely guided by the literature here and admit to seeking refuge within it. In explanation, I have also experienced both palpable joy and challenge in Principalship which opened my mind to the joys and struggles as described by the participants. I have lived experiences of the challenges involved in effective distributed leadership and my own personal development over the years. I clearly

---

[33] From here onwards any data extracts from my study are in italics.

remember my experience of new Principalship and the challenges of being more established in the role. It felt right to be working within a relativist ontological approach as I consistently attempted to keep a wider perspective by situating my participants' contexts and experiences in the broader social, political, and educational system realities during the time working on this study. Another significant ontological element for me was the manner in which the reality of my participants was constructed individually or collectively, both in their different contexts and in the interviews I conducted. According to Kivunja and Bawa Kuyini (2017), these multiple perspectives on my behalf as researcher, and on behalf of the participants, helped to 'orientate' my thinking about the research problem and to determine 'the foundational concepts which constitute themes' (p. 27). Further, the relativist ontology overlapped with the subjective epistemology as explored in 5.5. below, to ensure that meaning was made of the various contexts of the participants through my interaction with them. My use of both ensured I achieved 'deep insights' into my 'humanistic' research (Kabaji and Mukanzi, 2018: 2) and into the 'multiple realities' of the participants as 'persons who experience a given phenomenon' (p. 6), here the role of primary Principalship.

5.6. A Subjectivist Epistemology

Baptiste (2001) presents epistemology as the sources and processes of knowledge. In the question he poses about study outcomes, I decided that I was not at all looking for single correct answers to my research questions but, rather, to produce 'defensible perspectives' (p. 8). Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain how new knowledge can be constructed by the researcher and communicated to the research community. Guided by this literature, I found myself reflecting on my own positionality as the researcher, what was known to me already, and what new knowledge my data had unearthed. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest establishing how we know what we know so that, as researchers, we have the capacity to investigate the truth. I believed that I had developed knowledge through my own experience as a school Principal, through networking with colleagues and through working in the system in support of school Principals. In later literature, Guba and Lincoln (1994) claim that objectivity can never be fully attained due to reality always belonging to someone and because new knowledge is 'literally created as the investigation proceeds' (p. 111). My knowledge is subjective to me, to my values, beliefs, and ethos, but it is also filtered through my professional experiences and contexts. The knowledge gleaned from my participants is subjective to their values, beliefs, and school experiences. Hence, the knowledge from this study is, 'created through interaction between and among investigator and respondents' (Racher and Robinson, 2003: 469). I set out to explore

the dominant dimensions and related issues of being a Principal from the lived experiences of my research participants. I understood from the beginning that this would vary according to both my own experience and professional context, and those of the participants. Accordingly, throughout this study, I have worked through the lens of a subjective epistemology.

Irish primary schools make up an intriguing tapestry of varied school contexts that belie diversity and are still subjective according to the values and beliefs of their Principals and school communities. I remained cognisant of the importance of open-mindedness and reflection on what my participants shared with me. I attempted to employ 'epistemic cognition' (Greene and Yu, 2015: 46) to decide what I knew rather than what I believed, by engaging in critical thinking about the knowledge emerging from my study and the opinion of critical writers in education alongside what participants were saying. However, subjectivist epistemology is underpinned by the fact that 'what is perceived is what is real' (Feast and Melles, 2010:4), while acknowledging that 'observations are influenced by the observer and the observer is influenced by the observed' (Levers, 2013:3). Levers (2013) uses the famous image of the Rubin Vase to explain how it can be perceived either as a white vase on a black background or two people facing each other. Levers (2013) declared: 'there is no right or wrong image', it is 'dependent on the person perceiving' (p. 3). With this in mind, my aim from this epistemological stance was to enable an understanding and a description of the personal development of the Irish primary school Principal and its impact on the role's benefits and challenges in the early stages of Principalship and when people become more established. I was, as Racher and Robinson (2003:469) describe it, involved in 'a search for meaning', knowing that the meaning I found was dependent on my own perception, that of the participants, and that of the readers of this Dissertation. I struggled more with Baptiste's (2001) work on axiology and so I turn now to that.

5.7. A Balanced Axiology

I found it challenging to separate my values from the data analysis and to achieve a balanced axiology, described by Baptiste (2001), which entails the researcher presenting a balanced report of the research findings. Generally speaking, my values aligned with those of my participants. However, on occasion, I experienced a significant difference. This was particularly evident when people shared their experiences of anger, cynicism, disillusionment or impatience with the system. It was also evident when the work I am personally involved in was subject to criticism, particularly in relation to specific programmes such as the PDSL. Conversely, I was reassured that the participants were not telling me what they thought I wanted

85

to hear. Significantly, Brooks and Normore (2015) argue that leadership is connected to the manner in which people influence each other and suggest that researchers need to question potential power dynamics that may influence their work. To this end, I worked hard to keep my own values from influencing my analysis.

It is important to note that this was also about personality difference. Of course, some of my participants thought about things and went about things in different ways from me. I felt myself pausing, endeavouring to understand, and, with understanding, coming to an acceptance of different perspectives and ways of working. Kivunja and Bawa Kuyini (2017) suggest that the researcher asks what is the nature of the situation being studied. As this study is about the benefits and challenges of Principalship, both when newly appointed and more established, and how the personal development of the leader and effective distributed leadership provide [or not] nutrients for leadership development, the subject matter has multiple realities which I explored and attempted to make sense of through my interactions with the participants. These multiple realities came from individual contexts, life and leadership experiences, involvement in professional learning, different personalities, and various stages of personal development. All of these realities had to be accommodated ensuring the participants were research subjects with 'an active decision-making role' (Baptiste, 2001:9), to the extent that I encouraged them to expand on interview topics as they wished.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) advise using the criteria of teleology, deontology, morality, and fairness to ensure appropriate ethical standards are reached. My interpretation of teleology ensured I consistently focused on my research being useful to as many people as possible. I endeavoured to shape the study so that it would be useful in some small but significant way as a reflective read for Principals, to assist them in shining a light on their strengths and empowering them to upskill in areas in need of further development. I hoped the study might help empower and encourage aspiring leaders to reflect on their suitability for the role and again, to upskill in specific areas. Furthermore, I wished the study to play a part in enlightening and informing policy makers around the complexity of the role and the demands it makes on the person of the leader together with the importance of bespoke and supportive professional learning. The aspiration that this research would interest many different types of people, and that the methods I used (explained in the next section) were pragmatic and appropriate for this purpose, remained a constant throughout.

Reflecting on a deontological approach as I gathered my data, I clearly understood that every action I took would have its consequences, as emphasised by Guba and Lincoln (1994). As already noted, the Irish education system presents a tapestry of contexts and cultures. One of the most important elements of my research was maintaining a flexible approach to the participants. There is a world of difference between being a Principal in a large urban school in Ireland and being a Principal in a small rural setting and yet they are essentially focused on the same vision - providing the best learning opportunities for the students in their care. Guba and Lincoln (1994) remind us that realities are multiple when working within an interpretivist paradigm and that context must always be taken into consideration. They advocate for an understanding of the individual rather than the universal to gain a deeper knowledge of the participant and their context. According to Cohen et al. (1994:112), a proper deontological approach 'involves treating people as ends in themselves' and 'requires us to treat others as we would wish others to treat us'. My inherent admiration of and respect for my participants, and their obvious dedication and commitment to their demanding roles, helped me achieve this as I met each participant and considered their individual contexts and perspectives. I thought about their similarities and differences and wrote a brief reflection after each interview to remind me of their various circumstances, considering the broader perspective of their aims and visions. These brief recordings formed the beginning of my 'reflexive journal' which included questions that 'unpack the initial responses' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a:18). They ensured I pursued a consistent interrogation of my responses to determine why I reacted in particular ways during the various stages of the research. The elements of morality and fairness are examined in the next section.

5.8. The Recruitment and Selection of Participants: Study Sample

The choosing of the 'sample universe' for this study was an important step for me and 'inclusion criteria' included a track history of accessing professional learning and being involved in its provision (Robinson, 2014:25). The participants were recruited by being approached directly by email with a follow up phone call. They were known to me professionally through their work in professional organisations and schools. Each participant was involved in 'system-level leadership' which involves, as explained by McMahon (2016:151), 'school leaders in work beyond their school, local community, and context'. The participants in this study continue to work as facilitators of professional learning for other school leaders in the system and as participants in various leadership projects and supports. These participants have a track record as effective leaders with a positive and enthusiastic

outlook to enable them to be invited by the system to inspire and motivate other Principals. As well as working in the system, they have all been involved in professional learning for their own personal and professional development. The participants come from a variety of school contexts but should not be regarded as representative of any context or type of school.

I acknowledge the selective nature of my sample, that is, they each have a reputation as an effective principal in so far as they have all been asked to work outside of their schools. Brooks and Normore (2015) contend that researchers should consider the 'motivations, power and privilege' of interviewees (p. 801) and the manner in which their thinking is shaped by their influence over others. I felt strongly that by selecting Principals regarded as effective, despite their positions of influence, I could explore the challenges and issues inherent in the role rather than focus on issues related to overly challenging circumstances or predominantly negative reactions to Principalship. In this way, I felt the sample fitted the objectives of the study (Shaheen et al. 2019), in the sense that it enabled a focus on both the benefits and challenges of the role. Further, this sample of participants brought with them their experience of not only being engaged in professional learning but of their role in providing leadership learning and support to other Principals. I thought this important given one of the intentions of the study was to provide insights into the professional learning of aspiring and serving principals. This close alignment with the study's research questions endorsed my sampling strategy approach (Robinson, 2014) and concretised the rationale underpinning my sample choice. The sample comprised fourteen Principals with one person alerting me to their unavailability. I secured a willing backup participant but was contacted at a later stage by the previously unavailable participant who said that circumstances had changed and that they would very much like to be involved in my research project, resulting in fifteen participants. This, therefore, was a practice example of 'altering sample size within agreed parameters' (Robinson, 2014:31). The selection of this research sample and the various considerations arising from this choice are re-visited in the study's limitations section of Chapter Nine.

The varied realities of the participants' contexts are provided in Table 5.2. below. They are presented according to the number of teachers in their schools in ascending order. I made this decision due to the significance of distributed leadership in this study.

Table 5.2. Research Participants' Contexts[34]

Pseudonym	Number of Teachers	Number of Students	Setting	DEIS/Non-DEIS *
Fergus	30	430	Urban	Non-DEIS
Evan	25	431	Urban	Non-DEIS
Andrew	22	371	Urban	Non-DEIS
Mollie	22	266	Urban	DEIS
Cora	18	240	Urban	DEIS
Ava	15	233	Rural	Non-DEIS
Bella	15	206	Urban	DEIS
Kevin	15	54	Urban	Non-DEIS
Gemma	10	134	Rural	Non-DEIS
Brendan	7	112	Rural	DEIS
Janet	5	72	Rural	DEIS
Katie	4	64	Rural	Non-DEIS
Tara	4	42	Urban	Non-DEIS
Kay	3	27	Rural	Non-DEIS
Adele	3	26	Rural	Non-DEIS

*DEIS refers to Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools and signifies disadvantaged status with extra resources available from the DE.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose morality as the third element of axiology which focuses on moral values upheld during the research together with the truthful interpretation of the data collected and analysed. I reflected on the importance of upholding the rights of all participants to secure their goodwill and to conduct this research in a respectful and peaceful manner as suggested by Khatri (2020). The final axiological element advocated for by Guba and Lincoln (1994) is fairness, pertaining to the fairness of the research, ensuring all participants are treated equitably with an avoidance of favouritism or discrimination. I was guided by the four principles suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1994) (principles, accuracy, property, and

---

[34] Number discrepancies are explained by shared Special Education Teachers [SETs] teachers being based in some schools rather than others and by the extra resources granted to DEIS schools.

accessibility) therefore approaching my research with a clear understanding of what information I was seeking from my participants while focusing on the accuracy of this information. As my ethics application outlined and my indicative themes (Appendix 5) state, I endeavoured to explore the leadership attributes and dispositions of my participants and their personal development over the duration of their career. I was motivated by Crawford (2018) who argues that effective Principals need to understand the complex emotions present in the workplace and how personal engagement is integral to motivation and enthusiasm. Additionally, Nussbaum's (2011) Capabilities Approach as a social justice theory, provided a backdrop to my thinking as it perceives 'each person as an end' (p. 18) and focuses on the opportunities available to them. In relation to accessibility, I remained clear on the future dissemination of my work through the Irish education system explaining that I hope my research will appear in journal articles, conference papers, literature reviews and. of course, written summaries to participants if requested. I also hope this research will be used to inform the work of the Oide Leadership Division and leadership in general, in the Irish education system. As Brooks and Norwood (2015) suggest, I aim to share this study with stakeholders and to see it incorporated into leadership professional learning experiences. Additionally, I hope the study's recommendations will be featured in articles, book chapters and podcasts, and ultimately have the potential to influence educational policy.

5.9. A Naturalist Methodology

Kivunja and Bawa Kuyini (2017) state that the methodology refers to the research design, methods, approaches, and procedures. In this study, I assumed a 'naturalist methodology' (p. 33) in which I gathered data through semi-structured interviews while remaining cognisant of my own experience in the role of primary school Principal and my on-going system work with Principals in the Irish education system, Cohen (2000), in his study on anthropological fieldwork, claims that 'we carry theoretical and emotional baggage that can color and influence our work' (p. 319). These claims resulted in my reflecting on how my participants would perceive me. I determinedly remained aware that although I was formerly one of them, I had now transitioned into the system and was no longer either enduring the demands of the Principal's role or experiencing its joy. I questioned my 'assumptions of neutrality' (p. 317) and perceived myself as both the outsider and insider that I actually was. This situated me in my own mind before I embarked on the interviews. I made a point of articulating this to the participants, acknowledging the pressures on them, listening attentively to their obvious dedication and pride, and consistently thanking them for their time.

I felt this to be an important point in my research, this open acknowledgement of my dual outsiderness and insiderness. It enabled my approaches to interviews, data collection and analysis to become further honed to answer my research questions and to determinedly become involved in an act of interpretation of my research (Eisenhart, 1988). This act entailed the showing of genuine appreciation for the role of Principal, to ensure my participants' experiences were portrayed according to their individual cultures and contexts. Additionally, it entailed an interrogation of who I am as a researcher, former teacher and school leader, system leader and novice researcher. Critically, though, I needed to also be aware of how too many researchers have grown fond of the status of 'research outsiders' as Ruitenburg (2009: 318), warns in her work on the philosophy of education. Ruitenburg (2009) argues that the methodology of a study needs to be congruent with its theoretical framework, which in turn 'has to be pertinent to the research question' (p. 318). I was aware that I needed to maintain a balance between being within and without to remain true to my methodology and the Irish policy framework I was working within. It was necessary to acknowledge the 'rights and duties' (Humphrey, 2013:576) of both myself as researcher, and the participants, and their intersections, which, according to Humphrey (2013:576) could range from 'the harmonious to the antagonistic'. I attempted to 'investigate the interpretations of the situation made by the participants themselves, to understand their attitudes, behaviours, and interactions' (Cohen et al. 1994:20). I aspired to being 'a connoisseur and instrument' (Eisner, 1991:129) and to acknowledge my voice as one of personal interpretation (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), to make sense of the world my participants inhabited.

5.10.   Trustworthiness and Authenticity

The trustworthiness and authenticity of this study, the research quality, was inspired by Kivunja and Bawa Kuyini (2017) who advocate for the proper investigation of a research question to determine its credibility and claim that reporting on the true findings of a data analysis will make for a dependable study. I use 'true' here not to suggest a single truth but to mean being faithful to what my participants said. Throughout my research, I remained cognisant of how my findings would be understood and interpreted by others in the field. Recent policy in Ireland provided a contextual framework as did the work of Irish and European educational researchers.

Reflecting on trustworthiness and authenticity, I read Guba (1981), who linked trustworthiness to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Berkovich and Grinshtain (2021) contend that these rigour strategies are well suited for qualitative interpretive studies

such as this. I realised that my capacity to successfully investigate the research questions would largely decide the credibility of this research, making a deep understanding of the elements of an interpretivist paradigm crucial, as already explained. This challenge provided a journey of learning and self-discovery during this study that was simultaneously daunting and rewarding. Guba (1981) claims that the researcher's competency in producing inferences from their own construction of meaning, while ensuring the fair emergence of data findings, determines their dependability. The unique context and culture of each participant supported my attempts to achieve dependability as I sought to ensure that individual perspectives shone through this study's data to guide how I constructed meaning. Each Principal involved, remained loyal to their school and its culture and responded to my questions through this lens. I feel the accommodation and respect of my participants was a golden thread throughout this process that succeeded in yielding rich data.

Shah and Corley (2006) contend that confirmability is about achieving high standards in data management and recording with verbatim transcription and meticulous notes. This aspiration remained with me throughout the project. Kivunja and Bawa Kuyini (2017) argue that transferability refers to the researcher providing enough contextual data to enable readers to relate the findings to their own context. The recommendations in Chapter Nine will hopefully inspire readers to consider the potential for this study's findings in both their own practices and contexts, an important consideration in qualitative research according to Brooks and Normore (2015). This transferability potential for my readers and the possibility of any positive impact on their practice, no matter how small, inspired this study to its completion. I turn now to an explanation of the research methods.

5.11.   Research Methods

I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews preceded by two pilot interviews. I was guided by Kallio et al. (2016) and their framework approach to the development of an interview guide. Their theory proposes five inseparable steps in the preparation of interviews which include identifying the prerequisites, considering previous knowledge, formulating the guide, pilot testing it and presenting it in the study. These steps are outlined throughout this section with the fifth and final step being realised throughout.

Cohen et al. (1994) describe the interview as 'a social, interpersonal encounter' and as 'intersubjective', (p. 506) enabling the participants to respond at length and, to an extent, to lead the conversation according to their experiences, context, and culture. I explained at the

beginning of each interview that there were no right or wrong answers and that each was unique due to the individual circumstances of each participant. Further, I explained that each participant's current context and culture would be influenced by their life experiences, their own person as a leader, how and why they took on the role, and the duration of their Principalship. The interviews were both 'conversational and situational' (Cohen et al. 1994:510). However, I was also aware of the variety of information collected from the participants due to the conversational style of the interviews and my 'flexibility in sequencing and wording' which challenged the 'comparability of responses' (p. 510). In other words, according to step one of their interview guide, I was able to focus on the meaningful issues for the participants and enable them to express their diverse perceptions (Kallio et al., 2016). My former experience in the conducting of interviews guided me to remain cognisant of the bigger picture and to maintain a focus on my research questions.

As recommended by Kallio et al. (2016) in their second step, these topics were informed by the literature as outlined in Chapters Two, Three and Four, and were focused on key emerging themes. These Indicative Themes (Appendix 5) were specified in advance by email. They included the affective domain of leadership, transformational, sustainable and distributed leadership, the skills of effective leadership for school improvement and social justice, the potential for positivity in the role for aspirant leaders, professional learning and system supports.

In their third step, Kallio et al. (2016) advocate for two levels of questions, comprising main themes and follow-up questions from which participants could speak freely about their own experiences. I chose spontaneous follow-up questions rather than pre-designed (Kallio et al. 2016) to enable the flow of the conversation while ensuring that consistency was achieved by asking all participants the main theme questions. I decided to use an 'informal conversational interview' as presented by Cohen et al. (1994:510). This ensured that the interviews matched the individual experiences of each participant, and the follow-up questions emerged as the interviews progressed, in addition to the main themes I had pre-prepared.

Rapport with the participants and building their trust was of extreme importance. I ensured that each person was aware in advance that the interview would take 45 minutes, and time was spent at the beginning of each interview reassuring them about confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy, according to ethical considerations. I also offered them the opportunity to pose questions. Shah and Corley (2006) contend that interviews are opportunities for participants

'to describe their own experiences at length' (p. 1828). In each interview, I asked the participants to think of a metaphor for the role of Principal, following Ryan and Bernard (2003) who suggest that people often represent their thoughts with analogies and metaphors. McClintock et al. (2003) claims that metaphors assist us in the comprehension of a research context and in the appreciation of diverse contexts. The interviews I conducted were aimed at enabling the participants to answer questions and offer commentary through the lens of their individual contexts and so, following Schmitt (2005), I endeavoured to use their metaphors [Appendix 3] and my own [Appendix 4], to reduce complexity and to achieve 'valuable and surprising narratives' (p. 363). To ensure my interviews were of a high standard and using the fourth step of the framework as proposed by Kallio et al. (2016), I pilot tested the questions with two Principal work colleagues. This led to the need 'to reformulate questions' (Kallio et al. 2016:2960) as outlined in Table 5.3. below.

Table 5.3. Interview Question Changes

First Change	Change Made
When asked about their favourite aspect of Principalship, the participant immediately answered with 'the children'.	What are your two favourite aspects of the role apart from the children as most Principals answer this question by firstly mentioning the children.
Second Change	**Change Made**
I did not have the sustainability question in this interview,	I decided to include a question on what sustainable leadership meant to each participant to be solution focused with this research.
Third Change	**Change Made**
I did not include a question on their colleagues' perceptions.	I introduced this question to provide more criticality in the interviewing process, asking each participant what a private chat between myself, as researcher, and their colleagues would glean for me about them.
Fourth Change	**Change Made**
I did not include a question about the negativity of Principal colleagues.	I wanted to focus on the negative perception of the role in the system and my participants' understanding of it.

5.12. Further Ethical Considerations

As already outlined, I aimed at ensuring a balanced axiological stance in this study, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure ethical standards were maintained as appropriate throughout. After receiving approval from the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee [Appendix 6] before commencing my research, I consistently re-visited the application to ensure I remained cognisant of my responsibilities. Darlaston-Jones (2007) claims that we must examine our motives and ensure our actions and processes are scrutinised if we wish to work ethically. Ensuring the norms and protocols of ethical qualitative research (Berkovich and Grinshtain, 2021), I ensured I obtained informed consent, that all participants were aware of their ability to withdraw at any stage, that I was risk aware, and that the benefits of this study outweighed the risks. Despite a busy role in Oide Leadership and many personal demands on my time, I remained aware of the importance of not causing additional stress to the participants.

As extremely busy people, juggling the daily ups and downs of a very demanding role, I discussed dates and times for the interviews which most suited them. This ranged from early morning to late evening depending on individual circumstances and included weekdays and weekends. The toll of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on schools and school leaders' well-being came up consistently in the conversations and ensured I tried to maintain an empathetic and understanding approach to the situation of my participants and their various levels of recovery from an unprecedented and challenging period. This focus on the wellbeing of the participants during this particularly challenging time led to an emergent methodological approach which moved away from follow-up focus groups on completion of the interviews. Although rationalised in the study's ethical approval as a means of examining the broader perspective of positivity and emotional development, the emerging data afforded an in-depth exploration of both concepts during the interviews. Together with feedback from my tutors and the ethical consideration of asking my participants to re-convene in two focus groups in a very demanding post-pandemic period, a change occurred to my methodological plan with the omission of focus groups from the study's data collection process. I was guided by Ausband (2006) who argues that the researcher's focus should be on bringing the project to completion, gaining new insights and revealing unexpected findings. This approach is re-visited in section 5.14. below.

The importance of providing adequate information at the beginning of the interviews was not under-estimated. Clarity for the participants around what to expect, question examples, indicative themes, and information about how the data would be used, aimed to put minds at ease in advance, and to minimize harm. All participants taking part in the study are referred to by pseudonym and any data potentially identifying them or their schools was deleted from the transcripts. All interviews took place using the University of Glasgow Zoom facility with input from participants downloaded, encrypted, and securely stored on the University's secure storage space. Written summaries of the findings will be made available on request. As noted on my ethical approval application, this research will also be used to inform the work of Oide Leadership.

5.13. Data Analysis: Beginning the Process

I gave considerable thought to the use of software to conduct the transcription and data analysis but the subjective nature of the data being collected and the interpretative methodological approaches I utilised did not rationalise its use. I decided to manually transcribe the interviews and to analyse it without software. The transcription proved to be a rather tedious but useful

exercise. Principals in Ireland very often use phrases and words from the Irish language and software would not have succeeded in capturing the nuances of meaning in the narrative.

I experienced the novice analyst's tendency towards hunches as I read and re-read the transcripts. Baptiste (2001) warns against the development of hunches at the beginning of data analysis that might lead to ignoring more important insights. This proved impossible to avoid on initial reading, and I became instantly submerged! However, having decided on thematic analysis, I was drawn to the idea of reflexive thematic analysis and as Braun and Clarke (2022a) explain, this is about critical reflection as a researcher. I fitted well into the category of a researcher who enjoys 'uncertainty' and 'chaos' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a:11) and I enjoyed coming across the contradictions, the inconsistencies and the paradoxes in the data set. The many different contexts and experiences of the participants contributed to this level of messiness, as did their development as Principals over time.

I had subconsciously made many assumptions about the data I gathered, and as I became more immersed in it, I felt that I experienced 'analytic sensibility' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a:44) as thoughts came and went regarding what the participants said and how their contributions connected to my work, to current issues in the system, to their professional learning, and to leadership literature. Body language and voice tone were noted in some detail in a reflexive journal as I endeavoured to see and hear beyond the words of each participant. At first, I erred on the side of too linear an approach, wanting to list all words of note from each participant. Knowing I was going in the wrong direction, I abandoned this approach and relaxed more. I began to re-read the data set and I let the thoughts come and go freely. When I re-read again, I found myself focusing on sections of the data and the codes began to grow rapidly in number. I remember feeling the responsibility of providing 'plausible interpretations' (Nowell et al. 2017: 11) of the data set which guided me away from my hunches and assumptions to a deeper, more data informed sense of the contribution of each participant.

5.14.   Data Analysis: Coding

Being guided by Braun and Clarke (2022a; 2022b) enabled me to maintain a systematic approach to coding. Braun and Clarke (2022b), advocating for coding reliability in thematic analysis, reassured me that themes developed early, themes that were inputs rather than outputs and themes that were surprising, along with topic summaries, were all positive signs that I had engaged in conceptual and design thinking in advance of this coding stage. Braun and Clarke (2022b) maintain that coding is not about identification but 'interpretation', linked to researcher

subjectivity (p. 11). Having interrogated the meaning of semantic and latent coding, I noted that both happened organically and spontaneously, the semantic (surface level) coming easily and the latent (deeper level of meaning), developing as I worked. I was encouraged by Braun and Clarke's (2022a) advice on not becoming stressed and not worrying about right and wrong but truly trying to understand what I was doing. I used short phrases to represent meaning in every segment of the data. To ensure I missed nothing, having gone completely through the data set, I then coded in reverse, beginning with the final participant and working my way backwards to the first. The rationale was to ensure complete familiarisation and to miss absolutely nothing. The short extract in Table 5.4. below provides examples of my coding approach.

Table 5.4. Coding Samples

Interview Question: What does an effective or successful Principal look like? Data Extracts Participant: Ava	Initial Codes (Research Question Two- How does becoming a Principal influence the benefits and challenges of the role?
'An effective Principal understands and appreciates the good work of the previous Principal and continues with their vision blending it with their own'.	Understanding and appreciating the work of the previous Principal. Building a vision with appreciation of the past.
'I actually didn't agree with the Principalship of the school I started in. I had plateaued and I wanted to do more. I felt I wasn't being encouraged. It was a fabulous school and I'm still best buddies with all of them, but I had itchy feet'.	Not happy with the leadership in my school. Lack of encouragement. Plateaued, itchy feet, wanted to do more.

I applied this approach to the entire data set and continued reflexive journalling as advised by Nowell et al. (2017), using my journal entries simply to check my interpretation of what the participants said.

Nowell et al. (2017) describe the function of themes as 'bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone' (p.8). This happened organically. With my research questions in sight, I enlarged the print of every code and cut each out separately. Once again, the words of Braun and Clarke (2022a) were important; 'Do whatever works best for you' (p. 65). The next step was 'a topic summary' (p.77) which is everything the participants said about a particular topic. I found this worked for me as a first step towards considering actual themes. It was at this stage that the real messiness of thematic analysis enveloped me. I was pulled between accepting the various routes open to me and getting the job done when time was of the essence. However, I fully understood the importance of allowing myself to be lost in the data set before I began deducing candidate themes. I started the development of broad ideas that the codes seemed to cluster around. I

made use of visual mapping to initiate the development of themes and sub-themes [Appendix 7]. I panicked slightly with the number of codes (hundreds) and wondered if I was doing the data set justice, but the prominence of the research questions balanced my approach and I realised my aim was 'to tell a particular story' (Braun and Clarke, 2022a: 88) about the data. I examined the connections of the codes within the themes to check 'the central organising concept' (p. 89) and was reassured when Braun and Clarke (2022a) suggested not worrying about having too many themes. I had 37 and my analysis needed considerable re-development. I used these questions from Maguire and Delahunt (2017:3358) to clarify my thinking:

1. Do the themes make sense?
2. Does the data support the themes?
3. Am I trying to fit too much into a theme?
4. If themes overlap, are they really separate themes?
5. Are there themes within themes (sub-themes)?
6. Are there other themes within the data?

I re-visited the entire data set considering each candidate theme in relation to its salience and importance in addressing my research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). This led to a revision of mind mapping and the division of the themes into potential emerging themes and sub-themes. I was confident that potential final themes made sense in relation to my research questions and that they were strongly supported by the data. Instead of being guilty of fitting too much into a theme, I was generating too many themes. Some contradictions arose within themes, for example, self-believe versus imposter syndrome. These ended up being contained in over-arching themes. One sub theme generated significant data, but I decided to leave it as an important sub theme within Theme One. Theme One is about the benefits and challenges of the role and the participants often suggested solutions throughout, making 'being solution focused' a sub theme of interest. Additionally, some candidate themes became outsiders in the sense that they highlighted contextual aspects of the participants' situations and were not discussed in detail in the study (Nowell et al. (2017). I decided they were potential areas for further research, so I set them aside as relevant but outside the remit of this study. Two examples of such themes were governance and the work of the Irish Inspectorate. Eventually, I arrived at what I considered to be the final themes of the study, satisfied that I could tell the story of my data to reveal new insights and unexpected findings (Ausband, 2006:768) without the use of follow-up focus groups.

5.15. Data Analysis: Defining and Naming the Themes

The final phase of my data analysis was the consideration of the story that each theme told (Nowell et al. 2017) and the naming of the final emerging themes. The first theme contextualises the Principal's role and equally highlights the benefits and challenges involved. Also included is a significant sub-theme of this first theme, as already explained. As all of the participants expressed concern for newly appointed colleagues and reported challenges in their early days in the role, I was happy to see the second theme describe both in content and name, the reality of this stage of leadership and the participants' development into a more established stage. Intrinsically linked to both of these themes were the final two, the personal development aspect of Principalship and the impact of professional learning and system support. Braun and Clarke (2022a) warn against single name themes so I chose thematic titles that I hoped would provide a clear understanding of what the four themes conceptualised. They are outlined here:

1. All Things Considered: A Tough Role with Significant Benefits
2. Setting the Scene: Principalship by Accident or Design
3. Personal Development for Sustainability
4. The Person of the Leader and Opportunities for Development

5.16. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter outlined my research approach and reflected on how an interpretivist paradigm shaped my perspective as a researcher and guided the methodologies utilised to generate data from my participants. It provided me with an opportunity to reflect on the importance of being, at least partly, led in conversation by the participants, of considering their school cultures and contexts and my own unique positionality as both an insider with them and an outsider as researcher and system worker. The chapter also enabled me to consider the usefulness of this research, what new knowledge it will add, what impact it will have on experienced, newly appointed, and aspirant leaders and what effect, if any, it might have on leadership development and supports in the Irish system. The approaches to interviews were explained in detail and ethical considerations were highlighted. The rationale for change in the emergent methodological design without focus groups was outlined as being due to the rich data that emerged from the interviews and my ethical responsibility to consider the time pressures on my participants in a very demanding post-Covid-19 period. Most significantly, the work alluded to in this chapter prepared me for data analysis, the subject of Chapter Six. It reinforced the privileged position of the researcher, particularly in my case, as I felt trusted by competent and confident school leaders who lead teaching and learning in their schools despite significant

challenges. The data I present must reflect their lives, their work, their personalities, and their positive and courageous approaches to their daily work. Adams St. Pierre (1997) suggests that by theorizing our own lives, we can develop more valid responses to research. The work I have summarized in this chapter affirms my achievement in this endeavour.

6. Chapter Six: Data Analysis and Presentation of Findings

6.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the key themes emerging from the data generated through the fifteen semi-structured interviews conducted with Irish primary school Principals. The data is discussed in relation to the literature in Chapters Seven and Eight. As explained in Chapter Five, the participants were all experienced Principals significantly involved in professional learning and the support of other school leaders in the system. Their school contexts, their leadership experience, their commitment to leadership professional learning, and their involvement in leadership work in the Irish system, were all outlined in the previous chapter. I noticed that throughout the interviews, my approach to qualitative research traditions was greatly influenced by these individual school contexts and experiences, and by individual interpretation. As all the data extracts in this chapter demonstrate, 'no single, determinable truth exists' in qualitative research and the truths that are found are intrinsically 'bound by the time, the context, and the individuals who believe in them' (Morrison et al. 2002:27).

The individual circumstances of the participants, and how meaning changes with context in qualitative research (Morrison et al. 2002), underpins the data analysis and the emergence of four predominant themes and their sub-themes, as outlined below.

Theme One relates to research question one [RQ1]: What are the main benefits and challenges in the role of the Irish primary school Principal?

6.2. Theme One: All Things Considered: A Tough Role with Significant Benefits (Sub-theme: The Benefits)

A myriad of sub-themes emerged under this theme which were whittled down to the list of benefits as presented here:

1. Work Satisfaction
2. Challenge, Buzz, Variety and Fun
3. Pride in Achievement and in School Context
4. Pride in Children, Team and Community
5. Love of Teaching, Learning and Children's Development
6. Positivity/Negativity

6.2.1. Work Satisfaction

Despite the developmental demands of the role, all the participants articulated happiness in the job and a strong sense of enjoyment. Katie simply stated that *'It's a tough job, but I love it'*.

Janet substantiated this perception by saying, *'I love my job. I really do'.* As the participants shared their experiences, there was a genuine sense of their enjoyment of the role, alongside an acknowledgement of its challenges.

6.2.2. Challenge, Buzz, Variety, and Fun

The data also identified how the participants felt about challenge, buzz, variety, and fun. Kay stated that '*I just enjoy the buzz, and I suppose I enjoy that every day is different'* The participants shared an attraction to challenge and the importance of achieving a balance between the challenges and the benefits. Mollie declared that getting the balance between both '*makes us tick'* while Kay revealed that she applied for the role of Principal as she knew '*it would be a challenge'.* According to Spillane and Lowenhaupt (2019), entry into Principalship offers many opportunities for those seeking a challenge.

6.2.3. Pride in Achievement and in School Context

Another significant area of enjoyment was in the celebration of achievement and success. Mollie explained that achievement in her school added to her enjoyment of the role. She mentioned the completion of a new building project, getting an initiative off the ground and acknowledging success. Honouring the multiple truths revealed in the data (Morrison et al. 2002), it is noteworthy that Mollie expressed concern about keeping abreast of change and finding time to spend with staff and students. Indeed, the stark truth of the challenging work involved in relationship building was mentioned by all of the participants.

6.2.4. Love of Teaching and Learning and Children's Development and Progress

Teaching Principals, in particular, expressed a love of their teaching role. Adele said, *'I love the teaching side of it'.* Administrative Principals expressed the importance of their teaching and learning role and how they tried to maintain a focus on this aspect of their work. However, all the participants in administrative positions explained how they struggled to maintain a focus on teaching and learning while their attention was pulled elsewhere, linking their ability to enjoy this aspect of the role with their management of the many demands on their time.

There was a strong sense of consistent appreciation and enjoyment when it came to working with children from all fifteen participants. Spillane and Lowenhaupt (2019) maintain that people are drawn to Principalship to enable them to extend their commitment to children and children's needs. Kay explained a project that features the child's voice:

. . .the Partnership Schools of Ireland,[35]*. . .really facilitates the voice of the child and the voice of the community being allowed to flow into the school culture.*

Andrew maintained that teachers' success is always a positive. Kay stated that Principalship is enhanced '*when you have a brilliant staff'*. Andrew described how important parental affirmation is when he revealed what was written in a thank you card on his desk*, "Thank you for looking after our most precious thing"*. He explained that he enjoys *'parental affirmation'*. These positive experiences stand in direct contrast to the many negative experiences the participants experience, as outlined in section 6.3.

The data established a tangible sense of enjoyment from the participants when teachers and all members of the school community do their best to support the work of the school. There was a strong sense of being '*lucky*' (Gemma), of '*affirmation*' (Andrew) and of working with people in partnership being one of the most enjoyable aspects of Principalship.

I now turn to the presentation of the challenges, according to the participants, as part of Theme One, and also in relation to RQ1. The same contrasting presentation of multiple realities is evident.

6.3. Theme One Sub-Theme (The Challenges)

1. Challenging Relationships
2. School Governance
3. Balancing Positivity and Negativity
4. Demands and Workload
5. Lack of System Understanding

6.3.1. Challenging Relationships

There was evidence of the stress involved when relationships were not working. Challenging relationships with teachers particularly, caused the participants high levels of stress. Kay described how she felt '*completely strained'* and *'scared'*. Gemma claimed that *'10 years of a very, very acrimonious relationship with [a staff member] was very, very tough, very, very challenging'*. Conversely, ten of the participants referred to having a brilliant staff, showcasing their diverse realities.

---

[35] Partnership Schools Ireland (PSI) aims to ensure better outcomes for children by promoting partnerships between their schools, families, and wider communities. It is a joint initiative by the National Parents' Council Primary [NPC] and the IPPN and is part-funded by the Department of Education. https://www.npc.ie/partnership-schools-ireland/about-partnership-schools-ireland

6.3.2. Governance

Another area identified by the participants in relation to working with the school community was governance structures. Gemma stated that in her recent Master's research, it emerged '*that a lot of Principals are not supported properly by their BOM's*[36], *so much so that it's causing us to lose Principals*'. Kay advocated for a solution focused approach, '*if we could have shared BOMs, we're duplicating policies*'.

6.3.3. Balancing Positivity and Negativity

The participants value positivity but also understand how easy it is to develop a negative attitude due to the complexities of the role. Considering positivity, Brendan stated that '*Being a school Principal is very positive, it's very rewarding*'. However, Katie warned that being positive '*takes massive energy*'. This multiple truth was identified by all fifteen participants and underpins the key theme within this study, namely the benefits and challenges of the role and how both are consistently experienced by all participants. The reality of these multiple truths also forms part of the rationale for this study as explained in Chapter One.

The data revealed the participants' intolerance of negativity. Seven participants spoke against having a negative attitude towards the role. Bella claimed that she struggles with negativity from others describing it as '*belly aching*'. Brendan spoke a lot more strongly against such negativity contending that:

> . . . *I thought of a collective noun for Principals, and I believe the correct collective noun should be a negativity of Principals.*

6.3.4. Demands and Workload

To balance the privilege and benefits of the role as outlined earlier, participants were very clear about how challenging the role is despite the many benefits they enjoy as previously outlined. Ava argued that the job is '*challenging, you can go in and say I'm happy and I'm positive, but there are so many demands in the job*' while Tara agreed by declaring:

> . . . *the role as it stands is generally unsustainable. I think there aren't enough people who can do the role and maintain their mental health.*

When asked what specifically they found challenging about the role, the participants gave a wide range of answers. Ava declared '*Oh paperwork, you know, I just want to get on with what's happening in the classroom*' while Mollie said she struggles with '*keeping abreast of change*'.

---

[36] 'The board of management/manger(s) is the body of persons, or the person(s) appointed by the patron to manage the school on behalf of the patron' (DE, 2023a: intro).

Cora revealed that *'I kind of feel overwhelmed with my workload and, at times, I don't know where to start because there's so much to do'*. This section of the interviews also revealed that things could become very challenging and overwhelming:

> *. . .when you need to rest, when you need to recharge, and you need to get away from it, there is no way of getting away from it (Evan).*

6.3.5. Lack of System Understanding

Although five of the participants articulated a high level of system support during the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a perceived lack of such support noted by six of them.

> *. . . the sense that the system was completely tone deaf to what was going on in schools you know rather than being contextually aware, they were a million miles away from where schools were. (Evan)*

Brendan argued that there were '*so many different partners and education partners pulling out of us in every direction'*.

However, this perceived disconnect between schools and the system went beyond the pandemic. As Tara explained, *'they're not prioritising and they're not valuing the role'*.

6.4. Sub-Theme in Theme One: Being Solution Focused

In this final grouping under Theme One, the participants suggested solutions to their challenges under the following sub-themes which are also aligned to RQ1.

1. Addressing Challenge for Sustainability
2. Effective Leadership
3. School Culture and Values
4. Distributed Leadership
5. General Suggestions

6.4.1. Addressing Challenge for Sustainable Leadership

Making the role more sustainable was important for all the participants. Cora explained how she approaches problems:

> *. . . (I) try and tip away at it and then I ask others for help, I'm great at that, I distribute as much of my leadership as I can.*

Adele felt that it is about an organised approach:

> *So, I think it's about organising yourself and being able to box in your time, you know, and do what you have to do with school but draw a line on it.*

6.4.2. Effective Leadership

All of the participants had strong opinions on what effective leadership looks like. Tara claimed that in an effective leader's school, *'there's a very clear vision and they know what they're trying to do'*. More importantly, according to Tara, these leaders *'can bring others with them but also involve others in that map making'*. Evan brought it back to teaching and learning when he argued that *'to me a successful school leader is somebody who's very comfortable in the role of leading learning in the school'*. Tara's and Evan's contributions closely align those of Daniëls et al. (2019) who contend that effective leadership is indeed, among other things, about Principals with the ability to develop trust and collaboration in their school communities, while keeping their focus on teaching and learning.

6.4.3. School Culture and Personal Values

The participants felt that understanding the bespoke culture of the school is key to success in Principalship. Kay argued that the Principal is *'A person who is true to the integrity of the school'*. Katie agreed about keeping school context to the fore and argued that Principals should *'keep things simple to your own local school and your own local level'*.

In addition to highlighting the importance of school context, the participants linked success in the role to leading according to their own core values and beliefs

Janet argued that you are best *'going with your gut'* while Gemma explained that, for her, Principals have *'to have the ownership, and the oversight and you know, the courage to act, you know, the moral purpose'*. This data is linked to Nussbaum (2011) and her research on values and beliefs being complicated and closely related to one's emotions as it is to Arar and Saiti (2022) who remind us that leaders need formal training to optimise moral behaviour. The data revealed relationships as integral to the success of everything. Cora contended that *'the one thing that is most important to me in terms of Principalships and leadership is the relationships within the school'*.

6.4.4. Distributed Leadership

The data firmly established all fifteen participants' belief in the importance of distributed leadership. Fergus explained how important a good leadership team is to him. He argued that *'it's that whole thing of succession planning, getting the right people in'*. Gemma described the development of leadership capacity as *'really, really important in terms of sustaining us. You're not in this on your own'*. However, the following comments pointed to the need for further

development of distributed leadership in the Irish system and some of the difficulties which prevail. Cora explained:

> *First of all, distributed leadership is totally misunderstood as the delegation of role, so we need to start by re-educating people on what distributed leadership is and what it looks like on the ground.*

O'Sullivan and MacRuairc (2023:15) accuse the DE of engaging in 'a discursive twist' regarding their approach to distributed leadership, promoting it as holistic when, in reality, it is about delegation. Bella contended that developing leaders *'need help and guidance'* and that *'you have to give them some kind of a framework or give them an opportunity to feed back at a staff meeting'*. Fergus suggested a more practical approach.

> *If the role of Principal as it is with everything in it can be split between Principal and Deputy with someone else for SEN [Special Education Needs], then you have a tripartite there where sustainability is possible. . .*

Fergus said he believed that the struggle to develop leadership capacity is:

> *. . . not changing because they do not understand leadership, they do not understand the role and they don't see themselves as leaders.*

Without such understanding, it is difficult to perceive distributed leadership as a potential solution to addressing the challenges of Principalship.

6.4.5. General Suggestions

Finally, the data contained solution focused comments from the participants that struck a chord either for their practical implications or their general wisdom. I felt strongly that they should not be omitted from this data presentation.

> *. . . I keep saying this, there's a need for a central system of bureaucracy for every primary school in the country that's linked into everything. . . (*Kay)

Andrew spoke about Principals' contracts and a '*two-pronged approach'* that *'would be taking some work off the Principal and the secondary element will be me as a Principal working on myself'*. Tara posited that it is about *'having a clear picture of yourself, of your own limits and of your own work life balance'*. Kevin explained how some policies and initiatives can be of assistance:

. . . I do like the whole start with 70/18[37] right up to 44/19[38], the whole intention of the department. I love the LAOS combined with the PIEW[39] and the SSE[40] for me, it actually frees me up, we can look at what we're doing, we have a focus.

I felt these final few comments were spoken from the heart and were suitably indicative of the views shared by all participants.

*I think, when you're happy yourself, you know, in your job, and you radiate that sense of happiness, it has a ripple effect with everybody around you. (*Kay)

Katie claimed that one of the most important aspects of Principalship is holding your head high and standing firm about who you are. She declares: '*when you're wearing so many hats, you forget to put on your invisible crown'.* Being true to yourself underpins the concept of authentic leadership (Lynch et al. 2022) and is re-visited in Chapter Nine.

6.5. Theme Two: Setting the Scene: Principalship by Accident or Design?

From this main theme, the following three subthemes emerged, aligned to RQ2: How does becoming a Principal influence these benefits and challenges?

1. Circumstances of Appointment and Life Experiences

2. Early Experiences

3. Professional Learning for Newly Appointed Principals

With their contrasting responses to my questions, I felt the participants were enabled to respond in their own words, and to represent their individual contexts, recruitment circumstances and early career experiences. This is in keeping with the advantages of qualitative research approaches as suggested by Morrison et al. (2002) and as mentioned in section 6.1. above.

6.5.1. Circumstances of Appointment and Life Experiences

Despite the increasing availability of leadership learning opportunities in the Irish system as outlined in Chapters One and Three, the analysis of the data revealed that appointment to Principalship was often unexpected. Indeed, not one of the fifteen participants had actually planned their career progression towards Principalship. Rather, they applied to the role due to being unhappy in their current school (three participants), needing to move location for

---

[37] Circular 70/2018 (DES, 2018c) Leadership and Management in primary Schools. Available at: Leadership and Management in Primary Schools

[38] Circular 44/2019 Recruitment/Promotion and Leadership for Registered Teachers in Recognised Primary Schools (DES, 2019a).

[39] PIEW Empowering School Leaders through Prioritising (Pilot, Implement, Embed and Wait), IPPN Resource Bundle Publication (IPPN, 2019). Available at: https://issuu.com/ippn/docs/piew_oct2019_formatted

[40] School Self-Evaluation Process (SSE) (DES, 2022a).

personal reasons (four participants), or opportunistically, because the position unexpectedly arose very early in their careers (seven participants).

Their decision to apply for the role was either based on a position arising in their own school, a need to move schools for geographic reasons, or unhappiness in the school in which they were working, rather than following a pre-planned career path. It surprised me that this was the case for fourteen of the fifteen participants.

Leadership was not on my radar, but a job came up.
Andrew (5 years in the role)
I needed a school closer to home.
Gemma (11 years in the role)
I went for the role because I didn't agree with the Principalship of the school I was in.
Ava (13 years in the role)

Moreover, this finding of applying for a Principal's role for the above reasons was observed by Mollie in relation to current role applicants.

> *. . .so, they're going for Principalship that they're not ready for or genuinely interested in. I would much prefer to see them going for it for the right reason.*
> Mollie (23 years in the role)

Also worth noting is their previous experiences in school leadership, with eight of the participants having had no prior leadership experience, four having been Deputy Principals and three having been middle leaders. This is particularly significant when considered alongside the wide spectrum of their tenure in the role, ranging from four to 29 years. This means that as recently as four or five years ago, two of these participants applied for the position without adequate experience or a career plan which progressed them towards Principalship.[41] The following two data extracts exemplify this.

> *So, I started subbing in September. I got a fixed term position in a school, stayed there for the rest of that year, and it was that summer that I interviewed for and got the first Principalship.* Tara (four years in the role)

All of the participants reported that at the point of applying for Principalship, they had a lack of knowledge of what the role entailed. The participants' accounts of their thinking at that stage demonstrate this lack of knowledge. According to Murphy (2023), this transition into

---

[41] As noted earlier, in Ireland, applicants to the role are required to have at least five years' teaching experience, with the exception of schools with fewer than 80 pupils. Sometimes, this criterion cannot be adhered to, due to the low number of applicants.

Principalship remains understudied in the literature. Andrew, five years a Principal, said he 's*aw the role through rose-tinted glasses'* and stated that *'it was a huge learning curve'*.

Many of the participants mentioned their naivety about the role and held their youth and inexperience responsible for their decision to go for Principalship. Brendan declared *'I had youth, naivety, and innocence on my side. I thought I was the bees' knees to be appointed Principal at 30'*.

Alongside the pragmatic nature of their decision, their leadership inexperience, and their rationale for application to the role was a belief in themselves. Katie (nine years a Principal) explained it like this: *'I would have been very confident. I've got this, and this is amazing, and this is wonderful, and it was until it wasn't'* while Brendan simply stated, *'I thought I could do a great job'*. These feelings of confidence were enhanced by participants' backgrounds. All fifteen participants had developed an interest and experience in education and leadership from early life and teaching experience, and many spoke about a willingness to take on responsibility. This propensity is described by Murphy (2023:42) as 'anticipatory socialisation' for the role. Adele (the longest serving Principal, at 29 years*), admitted that she 'was always looking at the Principal and saying gosh you know, if I was the Principal now, this is what I would do'*.

A significant contributing factor to their decision to go for the role seems to have emanated from encouragement provided by those around them, including professional colleagues and family members. Spillane and Lowenhaupt (2019) contend that some people are 'coaxed' into the role by colleagues and members of their family while Murphy (2023) maintains that relationships with loved ones are formative along the pathway towards Principalship. Brendan revealed that his colleagues had '*lit the spark in me'* and Kevin (seven years in the role) quoted his wife: *"I think you'd be good; I think you should go for it; you have the support of people"*. Additionally, there was evidence of determination to pursue the role despite the advice and experience of predecessors and despite pressing life situations:

> *. . . because he completely just sat us down and said: "This will change everything". He gave all those insights and was so open and honest, maybe I didn't listen enough (laughing), it was just No, I'm doing this, I'm going for it.*
> (Andrew)

Another factor that seemed to influence their decision was an appreciation or a dissatisfaction with their own former Principals. Wang et al. (2016), as cited in Chapter Four, maintain that the influence of former Principals is significant. Janet (in the role for 14 years), spoke about

her former Principal revealing that '*He was still rooted in kind of where he started, and things hadn't progressed'*. By contrast, and coming from a different context, Ava spoke about how effective Principals should:

> *. . . understand and appreciate the good work of the previous Principal and continue with their vision, blending it with their own.*

Another salient reason to apply for the role was the participants' love of teaching and learning.

> *. . . I had amassed you know, just a lot of CPD[42], a lot of experience, and I was confident in my teaching.* Gemma (Teaching Principal)

The data, thus far, points to unexpected Principalship opportunities for most of the participants arising from their school situations, their need to move geographically and their dissatisfaction with leadership in their school. All fifteen participants admitted to a lack of knowledge about the role and a naivety about its implications. However, the data also reveals a self-confidence from the participants in their capacity and an inclination to lead before Principalship opportunities arose for them. Their leadership characteristics had been noticed and encouraged by others. Additionally, there seems to have been a drive and ambition amongst the participants despite what might be considered extenuating personal circumstances, and the influence of former Principals. The final area emerging from the data indicates their enjoyment of their teaching duties (Teaching Principals) and their strong belief in the importance of their role as leaders of teaching and learning (Administrative Principals). Therefore, an organic pathway towards senior leadership is indicated for all the participants in the absence of a planned career progression. It identifies the participants as people who were working towards the role unconsciously but who were also suitable candidates for it. Only the timing of opportunities to apply for the role is identified in the data as accidental. The next section highlights the impact of the early years of Principalship.

6.5.2. Early Experiences

The data in this section focusses on how the participants experienced their early days in the role of Principal. Challenge and struggle were key features. Janet described her first year as one in which '*I had everything thrown at me and I needed to learn quite quickly on the job'*. Katie struggled with '*a massive culture of perfectionism'*. Kay recalled her thinking at the time: '*well here I was going into a situation and it's either sink or swim now because I hadn't been trained for the position'*.

---

[42] Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

This element of learning on the job was evident in the interviews with all fifteen participants. In one way or another, they all told stories of their early days in the role and how they did their best to learn as quickly as they could.

> *I would have compared it to like, you've read a book about how to ride a bicycle, you know all the theory ... and next thing, you're on top of the bicycle, somebody gives you a push and you're off down the hill, you've never used the breaks and gears before and you're flying down this hill trying to figure out the theory as you're going... (Brendan)*

Additionally, the data indicates that the participants did their best to maintain face with the resources available to them, not wishing to let themselves down in front of their colleagues as newly appointed Principals. Janet spoke about her endeavours to appear well informed:

> *. . .so, I sat down for two weeks at home, and I read, and I read, and I read . . .*

Bella had to deal with her internal role change from Deputy Principal to Principal:

> *. . .maybe it's hard to think, how you're going to pull something new out of the bag. . . or that people are going to say. ... is she the poacher turned gamekeeper kind of thing?*

The data here relates back to the fears many new Principals feel, and the fear of letting themselves down as described in Chapter Four, linking to how Nussbaum (2001) claims that there is vulnerability emanating from our emotions.

All of the participants spoke about the challenges of early Principalship, a single truth that traversed the interviews. The questions posed to the participants in the interviews around their early experiences and how they coped brought the conversations to what was lacking for them as newly appointed Principals and what they thought needed to be done to support those new to the role. I turn to this below.

6.5.3. Supporting Newly Appointed Colleagues

Their own early career experiences led the participants to identify the need to support newly appointed Principals as they begin in the role.

> *. . . they have to dip their toe in the water, taking on something big and building up their leadership. . .. (Brendan)*

> *. . .the training that's there now, is immense compared to the training that was there for us as we started off, you know. (Kay)*

This latter comment refers to the aforementioned Misneach (Irish word for courage) Induction Programme for newly appointed Principals currently provided by Oide Leadership.

> *To be sustainable, I think it has to start with the preparation. And while the PDSL course is excellent, it's actually too academic and I tutor on it, and it's providing them with the theory, loads of theory, not enough on the practice of being the leader.* (Cora)

> *I think it has to come from programmes like the PDSL, it has to be more human, more practical based, theory is fine but it's taking the theory out and being able to put it in practice. . .* (Katie)

These contrasting views indicate that the PDSL Oide Leadership Programme is regarded by the participants as a worthwhile programme that they would like to link more with the practical experiences of participants. Although the programme already includes in-school experience in both the participants' own schools and a different school, and in a setting outside of the education sector, the participants feel more is needed. I was glad to hear the critical commentary here as I was worried the participants would only tell me what they considered I would want to hear regarding this programme, as explained in Chapter Five.

The participants also identified a shadowing process, re-visited in Chapter Nine, for those new to the role.

> *I also think there needs to be a programme where people just come in and follow me around for a few weeks to see what this looks like . . .* (Tara)

The participants described the reality of taking over the leadership of the school when such shadowing does not happen. Gemma disclosed her experience:

> *. . unfortunately, my predecessor didn't do a handover, so I was going in, you know, and it was a blank slate, a blank canvas . . .*

With respect to current system supports, formal mentoring for newly appointed Principals was mentioned in twelve out of fifteen interviews. Fourteen out of the fifteen participants have been formally trained as Oide mentors and twelve of them spoke about how this system support enables them, as more experienced Principals, to support their newly appointed colleagues. Gemma spoke of the support as '*a real two-way relationship for us that I'm learning so much information from them*'. Similarly, the participants articulated a high regard for the Misneach Induction Programme as mentioned above and as outlined in Chapters One and Three. Cora contended that '*Misneach needs to continue for longer*' while Adele claimed that *'the Misneach programme is great for newly appointed Principals'.*

Finally, the participants spoke equally highly about the coaching support provided by Oide Leadership and its potential to support people new to the role. As Andrew explained:

I think it's one of the best things the department has done for school leaders is coaching. In my early years, my first two years, I tried to deal with everything myself and it didn't work and that's when coaching came at the right time.

In this section, I have noted challenges for the participants as newly appointed Principals and their endeavours to be perceived as competent in the role. Describing their experiences brought the interview conversations around to what they needed during this challenging time and how the system could further support them. The data suggested that these Principals had decided to be proactive around this support and fourteen out of fifteen were trained as Oide Leadership Mentors. All of the participants praised the various system supports currently available, and all of these supports are re-visited in the conclusion sections of Chapter Nine. I now turn to the third theme, the person of the leader.

6.6. Theme Three: The Person of the Leader and Opportunities for Development

From this theme, two subthemes emerged, also aligned to both RQ2: How does becoming a Principal influence these benefits and challenges? and RQ3: How can professional learning mediate the challenges and enhance the benefits?

1. Finding a Balance to Avoid Excessive Emotional Labour

2. Life Lessons and Experience

Linking their need for professional learning in relation to their personal development, the participants spoke very openly about how important this learning is to them. The affective domain of school leadership dominated here, and I had a strong sense of its significant impact on effectiveness and sustainability in the role. The many variations in their approaches to managing their emotions signified the multiple truths that can be revealed in qualitative data. (Morrison, 2002). The data in this section seemed to naturally divide into two sections with the first recounting the participants' struggles to manage their emotions, as the most challenging aspect of their personal development. The second suggests a connection between life lessons and experiences and the personal development of the participants over time since early Principalship.

6.6.1. Finding a Balance to Avoid Excessive Emotional Labour

The participants described their efforts to manage their emotions while attempting to avoid undue pressure on those around them. In fact, all fifteen expressed the importance of this. The data identified that while they did not want to be closed off to their staff, they needed to be careful around how they expressed their emotional struggles.

> *My sharing would be at surface level; that's the affective domain of leadership where we have to suppress some of our feelings in order to facilitate the development of the school and others. (*Cora)

Once again showcasing the participants' multiple realities, these opinions were balanced with a strong sense of the importance of honesty:

> *I think the whole stoic Principal like, don't show emotions thing like, it's just not sustainable like, and it's not healthy modelling for your staff because if they see that from you, that's what they feel is expected from them and then you get burnout. (*Tara)

The release of this emotional labour at a later stage in the Principal's own time also emerged from the data. Bella explained it like this:

> *. . . but that comes out later on in you, it probably does, and you have to let that out at some stage when you're on your own maybe or in the car driving home.*

Andrew turned to his Deputy Principal for support. His Deputy Principal acts *'as a sounding board for my frustration'* and Andrew very much appreciated the fact that *'I can rant away and get it off my chest'*.

In this section, the concept of suppressing emotions is prevalent in the data as the participants showed a strong sense of being responsible around their emotions while maintaining a balance between being '*real*' (Janet) and engaging in '*healthy modelling'* (Tara). Emotional labour is examined through the lens of the literature in Chapter Eight. Finally, the data has also identified the emotional labour process and its release at a later stage, either when the participants are alone or with a family member.

6.6.2. Life Lessons and Life Experiences

Under this sub-theme, the participants spoke about how they have developed over time and with life experience. As most of them became Principals early in their career (six in their twenties and six in their early thirties with two in their forties and one in their fifties), their comments represent their current situation and reflect their tenure in the role.

Mollie (23 years in role) declared that '*Life and the knocks of life, maybe your own personal life, the things you've had to overcome'* have helped her emotional development while Andrew (five years in role) maintains that '*you do get more resilient over the years, it's a bit of a sad indictment of the job that you harden to things, but you do develop thick skin* (looks away from the camera). Kevin (13 years in role) contended that this is all about growing closer to your own set of values and beliefs. He argued that '*if I do things that move me a little bit closer to*

those values, then everything is easier'. Katie (9 years in role) agreed, when she contended that you must have '*an emotional core of your own that you can tap into'.*

The participants linked their personal development over time to long-term sustainability and the challenge of achieving it. It emerged from the data that this challenge was particularly due to early career stage Principalship. Andrew remembered his perception of what others were thinking about him when he revealed that 'I *felt inexperienced. I felt people were kind of saying, who do you think you are going for this job?* Kevin showed concern for his future when he stated:

> *I have another 24 years to go alright. . . and at the moment, at the pace I'm doing, the expectations and the workload, I don't see me in the job in 24 years.*

Tara expressed a 'bigger picture' point of view:

> *. . . I think we're currently getting applicants for the role who aren't ready, who aren't able, but there aren't alternatives and it's you know, it's a really dangerous cycle to be in on a systemic level.*

These comments suggest that the participants are anxious about their future careers. There is a sense of real concern here around their capacity to sustain themselves for the duration of their careers while considering the role's current challenges and complexities, as contended by Earley and Bubb (2013). The data also identifies a systemic issue already mentioned, of becoming Principal for the right reasons, and the long-term impact of early career Principalship.

Finally, I turn to the fourth theme, professional learning and system supports.

6.7. Theme Four: Professional Learning and System Supports

The subthemes in this section are outlined below and are aligned to RQ4: What is the potential of the Irish education system to support those becoming Principals and those more established in the role?

1. Impact of System Leadership
2. Quality Professional Learning
3. The Benefits of Networking

6.7.1. Impact of System Leadership

All the participants had participated in significant professional learning both before entering the role and after appointment. All of them are involved in system work in support of their

colleagues. The data indicates that this work is very important to them and impacts positively on their practice. Speaking about opportunities to work with newly appointed Principals, the participants were very clear about the benefits that brings. Evan (works with three system stakeholders) explained that this work is *'where I get most of my energy from'* and Adele *(*works with Oide) claimed '*I'm benefitting and learning a lot from it'*. Kay (also works with Oide) claimed that being involved with system supports has '*given that freshness to my approach to school'*.

These comments illustrate the participants' enjoyment of being involved in professional learning and their eagerness to help newly appointed and other colleagues to further develop their leadership skills. They then went onto comment on the benefits of quality professional learning both for themselves and their staff members.

6.7.2. Quality Professional Learning

Cora advocated for:

> . . .*the importance of being aware of my own professional learning first. . .. It's like that cliché of putting your own oxygen mask on first.*

However, the participants also suggested that these supports are limited in their capacity to help Principals.

> *There are professional supports out there, but professional supports can only support you in so far as you know, a life jacket is only as good for you as the conditions around you allow it, the system isn't designed to support school leadership. (*Evan)

This contrasts significantly with the praise of the Irish system supports in section 6.5.3. Staying with professional learning supports, and very relevant to the last theme, the participants believe that there is not enough focus on the development of the person of the leader. As Katie put it:

> *I really don't want to go to a conference or a day where they are discussing Section 24.*[43]*I want them to explain to me what emotional resilience looks like, so I want the tools to be able to keep myself right.*

Thus far, the participants in this study appreciate the support provided for them in the system but there is an element of dissatisfaction emerging. They identified a need for more opportunities to develop the person of the leader and to support the affective domain of leadership. As Murphy and Louis (2018:176) argue, all school leaders must be highly skilled

---

[43] Section 24 (4), Education Act, (Government of Ireland, 1998), refers to procedures applied in the appointment, suspension and dismissal of teachers or other staff.

in building relationships and developing teams, and their pedagogical skills need to be embedded in a 'value-centred, relational frame'. Regarding relationships with colleagues, the participants were very forthcoming in their appreciation of networking.

6.7.3. The Benefits of Networking

Due to a lack of focus on the person of the leader, Principals turn to networking opportunities to support them personally. These opportunities are provided by various stakeholders in the system as outlined in Chapter Nine. The participants see these and other groups as very helpful. Additionally, they are also seeking more recognition for these networks from the DE and more time to benefit from them.

> *The IPPN, the most important letter is the N, it is about networking . . . it's the informal chats, it's about meeting people (Brendan).*

Mollie explained that the IPPN Principals' support meetings have been *'fantastic'*. Bella agreed when she maintained that *'you glean a lot of information from other Principals, the networking is brilliant'* and '*you get buoyed up by meeting people who are in the same circumstances as yourself'*. Andrew, however, went a step further, suggesting that this networking is *'acknowledged by the department'* and said these opportunities would be even better '*if the system acknowledged them and formalised* them'.

6.8. Chapter Conclusion

The first theme, **All Things Considered: A Tough Role with Significant Benefits,** provided data on what the participants enjoy in the role. However, this positivity was balanced by evidence of the negative effects of poor relationships and a governance structure experiencing problems. This theme also focused on the participants' endeavours to remain positive and how they deal with negative colleagues and strive towards a more developed form of distributed leadership.

Initially, the findings from the study presented a perceived sense of an unplanned entry into the role which changed to a more definite pathway towards leadership as the data emerged. This thread throughout the second theme, **Setting the Scene: Principalship by Accident or Design,** finally became Principalship by design. The participants seemed destined to become Principals, they simply had never articulated this desire or planned it as a career progression. Due to this lack of planning and preparation, their early days and months in the role were challenging despite system supports and they were clear that they did not want this to be the case for their

newly appointed colleagues. They became proactive by getting involved in the system supports themselves.

Theme Three, **Personal Development for Sustainability**, included data indicating the responsibility the participants felt to balance or manage their emotions. This data identified how the participants have found this easier as they developed in the role but having got thus far, it also pinpointed their concern at keeping their momentum going and achieving sustainability in complexity. Avoiding suppression of their emotions also emerged strongly from the data attached to this theme.

In the fourth theme of **The Person of the Leader and Opportunities for Development**, the participants talked of the benefits of being involved in system supports and how they appreciated the quality professional learning provided by the system. This appreciation was balanced by their perception of its limits and the lack of focus on the development of the person of the leader. Because of the latter, they turn to networking for the personal support they need.

Throughout the interviews, I endeavoured to delve as deeply as possible into the lived experiences of the participants. By attempting to understand their world as constructed by themselves (Morrison et al. 2002), and to recognise 'the categories of meaning' in their 'everyday lives' (p. 30), the participants' multiple truths enriched the data set and enabled me, as researcher, to gather the data according to qualitative research traditions.

The next two chapters, Seven and Eight, will present the data discussion. These chapters are organised differently, as the discussion follows the sequence of the research questions.

7. Chapter Seven: Discussion of Research Findings Part One

7.1. Introduction

The previous chapter detailed the study's findings on the connection between the role of the Principal, personal development in Principalship, and the significance of the professional learning and system supports made available to the participants in the Irish system. In this chapter, key findings from the fifteen semi-structured interviews are discussed in relation to the international literature, with the discussion structured to answer research question one. This chapter is devoted entirely to the findings from the first research question due to the substantial amount of data generated by the participants. The data here was significantly more than that from the other three research questions collectively. Chapter Eight provides a similar discussion in relation to research questions two, three and four. This chapter concludes with a synopsis of my interpretation of the findings and a sign posting to Chapter Eight.

The aims of this study included hearing the voices of practising Principals, listening to what makes their role challenging and rewarding, and understanding what system supports they need. The following question, although amended many times from the beginning of the study, was chosen to facilitate these aims in relation to the benefits and challenges of the role and their significance in the early stages of Principalship.

RQ1: What are the main benefits and challenges in the role of the Irish Primary School Principal?

The data is divided into two sections, firstly the benefits, followed by the challenges.

7.2. The Benefits

All of the participants spoke strongly about their love for the role, their pride in their achievements, their passion for working as part of a team, and of their pleasure at providing quality teaching and learning opportunities for their students. The data here highlights significant benefits and, to an extent, contradicts current media trends: *'The great resignation: Principals work weekends, nights and holidays-there's no break'* (McBride in The Irish Times, 2022) and '*I feel burnt out after just four years of working as a school Principal, what can I do?'* (Mooney in The Irish Times, 2023). These and similar media headings have significantly influenced leadership discourse in Ireland over the last decade or more, and positivity about the role of Principal is often absent in the media and in the literature. Yet, participants in this study inspired me by their positivity and were imbued with a positive enthusiasm as described in Chapter Four (Maslach and Leiter, 1997; Murphy and Louis, 2018; Hilton, 2020).

The main benefits of the role, drawing on participant data, are summarised here and link closely to the sub-themes in Chapter Six.

7.2.1. Work Satisfaction

All of the participants clearly articulated their love of the role and how they generally enjoy their work. Byrne-Jiménez and Yoon (2019) point to a will to do better and to do differently and argue that Principals have 'a deep belief in the power of education' (p. 3). In this study, the Principals connected their enjoyment of the role to their core values and beliefs and made a link between them and their school's culture. For all of the participants, an alignment between their values and beliefs, and those of their school resulted in a sense of happiness and contentment at work, linking once again to the value of authentic leadership (Lynch et al. 2022). The participants articulated this as, for example, pursuing *'your own core values, your moral purpose'* (Andrew). There was a significant sense that this was not easy to achieve particularly during their early days in the role. Hallinger (2010) argues that when the Principal's personal values and beliefs are linked to the values of the school's leadership team and those of the school community, optimum leadership for learning can be developed. Seven of the participants presented the intersection of their values and beliefs with their daily work as manifesting itself in core purpose and a genuine feeling of love for their position as school leader, despite the many challenges the role presents. Such an intersection arises, perhaps, from the moral purpose of seeing 'every student learning successfully and working towards their potential' (ACER, 2018:1), with Principals dedicated to achieving this shared vision with their staff. According to Lynch et al. (2022), this intersection is linked to leadership authenticity which I re-visit in Chapter Nine. In contrast, when core values and beliefs do not align, Principals may be poor at communicating priorities and may have poor expectations of both staff and students (ACER, 2018). The Principals in my study who professed being happy in the role enjoyed many aspects of Principalship as detailed in the next section.

7.2.2. Challenge, Buzz, Variety and Fun Re-visited

All of the participants described the challenge, buzz and variety involved in the role as a key benefit. One spoke about *'the buzz you get when you get all staff working together'* (Mollie). The attraction to these aspects of Principalship is highlighted by Bobo and Judge (2004) who ascertain that extroversion (gratification from outside the self, as they understand it) is the most consistent characteristic of transformational leaders who seek excitement and social attention, and embrace and enjoy challenge, including change. Ten of the participants in this study articulated change as a benefit, finding it stimulating, and perceiving it as an opportunity, as

mentioned previously, to link their own core values to a shared vision bespoke to their own context. The participants explained this in the following ways: *'a change is as good as a rest'* (Ava) and *'openness to change, that's huge'* (Mollie). This may be explained by the current belief that a 'one-size-fits-all approach' does not work and recognising the 'differences in school contexts' as key (NCCA, 2022:13). While this may explain the participants' reaction to change as a challenge they welcome, the objectionable side of change must also be considered. This is explained by Yilmaz and Kılıçoğlu (2013) who argue that the psychological transition of change for people must be managed effectively. Although presented as a benefit by the participants, the effort needed to manage change cannot be underestimated and I return to this when discussing the challenges of the role.

The participants also shared their acceptance of challenge in general. For example, Tara stated that *'there's new challenges every day'* and that she *'likes that sense of achievement'*. Each participant revealed their attraction to at least one of these areas of challenge, buzz or variety, and all fifteen verified the pleasure they experience when there is a sense of fun, relaxation, and celebration in their school. They made it clear that being happy in their school emanates from such a sense and is a significant benefit of being in the role.

This focus on being happy relates to Nussbaum's (2011) theory on central capabilities as the ninth capability emphasises the importance of play and of being able to laugh and enjoy recreational activity. From her ten capabilities, which Nussbaum claims are an approach 'to comparative quality of life assessment' (p. 18), Nussbaum (2011) places play as the ninth 'substantial freedom', important for well-being and a flourishing life (p. 21). Relating to this, all of the participants mentioned the significance of fun in their work at school, particularly when connected to the children and the staff. As Ava declared, '*it's fun together'*. Murphy and Louis (2018) remind us that children can only experience wellbeing if the adults around them are experiencing it also. Maslach and Leiter (1997) maintain that people who are engaged in their work feel enthusiastic about their role and are characterised by a strong sense of energy, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction. A key aspect of all of the participants' experiences involved a sense of fun and enjoyment of celebration to mark achievements and special occasions. Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) claim that the right to play is earned by work and that because work is laced with play and humour, people can be seen as whole people rather than simply as role occupants. The participants corroborate this view by declaring that *'we don't, culturally, do enough to celebrate what we're doing really well'* (Tara). Cameron (2013) connects fun to energy, claiming it fosters and enables positive energy especially when connected with

interpersonal relationships. All of the participants noted that they enjoyed having fun. Mollie claimed that *'a laugh in the staffroom'* enhances her positivity. The participants noted that this fun side of leadership is regarded by them as significant and perceived as a way of getting to know each other better and working together in more effective ways. As a result, they perceived fun as a definite benefit of Principalship.

7.2.3. Pride and Celebration of Achievement

Love for the role and enjoyment of the buzz, change and excitement as explained above, were linked to pride in the work of the school and school context, expressed by all participants. The term 'pride', or a related term, was explicitly mentioned in seven of the fifteen interviews. Gemma simply stated that *'I am very proud of my work'*. There was a wide range of achievement in the participants' schools from children's development to staff learning, and from specific projects to whole school improvement. Each achievement was acknowledged as significant, and each was celebrated. Kevin revealed that *'I love celebrating with people, it's acknowledgement and appreciation'*. An interesting factor emerging from the data is the amount of money the participants put into acknowledging their staff at their own expense, thereby reinforcing the importance they place on celebrating achievement. Cora revealed that *'I spend a lot of money; I'm forever buying chocolates and different things'*. There was evidence of a strong link between achievement and celebration of achievement, and school culture or the vision, mission, and values of the school. As Bella explains, *'that's kind of been the culture of our school, I think that's really important, to affirm the staff'*. According to Melesse and Molla (2015), school cultures that are effective and healthy provide opportunities for communal celebration. This strong sense of pride in achievement was perceived by the participants through the lens of their varied school contexts and the bid to celebrate and acknowledge was evident in the data set and considered a definite benefit of being a Principal, even if on occasion, it was at their own financial expense.

7.2.4. Dedication to Teaching and Learning

All the participants saw the needs of the children attending their school as their core priority and their motivation to improve children's learning outcomes was the main focus for every Principal. LAOS (2022) advocates for teachers' responsibility *'to support continuous improvement in learning and teaching'* (p. 9). The data clearly highlighted how seriously this work is taken and how these Principals feel leading teaching and learning is their most important task. This is relevant in this section in benefits because the Teaching Principal participants clearly expressed their love of the art of teaching and classroom management.

Adele declared that *'I love the teaching side of it'* and *'I've just learned to manage the administration alongside the teaching'*. According to O'Connor (2022), 83 per cent of the 114 Teaching Principals who participated in her Irish study of Principals and their well-being, declared that they were satisfied in their jobs and articulated the joy they felt in their classrooms where they could experience uninterrupted teaching.

The Administrative Principals I interviewed for this study were similar in their belief that leading teaching, learning and assessment was their core function but differed from Teaching Principals in their frustration around not being in a position to prioritise it. Evan stated that, in his opinion, the workload *'pulls people away from their core purpose which is leading teaching and learning'*. The Wallace Foundation (2013), an American philanthropic organisation specialising in fostering equity and improvements in learning for young people, prioritises teaching and learning as five of the key responsibilities for schools stating that Principals have the responsibility to shape a vision for academic achievement for all their students, empowering teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their best. All of the Administrative participants were theoretically aligned with this viewpoint although, in reality, the Administrative Principals felt they were less effective than they would have liked in prioritising this role remit due to the pressures on them from other demands.

In a recent survey conducted by Rahimi and Arnold (2022) on behalf of the IPPN, over half of the 405 respondents claimed that they spend too little time on curriculum planning while 76.5 per cent agreed that *'leading teaching and learning'* was *'very important'* (p. 20). Evan contends that it is about getting *'the balance between what they should be doing and what they are doing'* thereby bringing the tension between leading teaching and learning and dealing with all the other demands of the job to the fore. In other words, leading teaching and learning is regarded as both a privilege and a priority but managing the time to lead it adequately dilutes this very definite benefit of the role. It makes sense that my participants who are primarily trained as teachers, should prioritise this key aspect of their work, but they lament the way it can also become a challenge because of time. As one Principal reported, (McBride in the Irish Times, 2022), 'The role was to lead teaching and learning. But that became so difficult to achieve'.

Although referring to post-primary level education. Moynihan and O' Donovan (2022) claim that Principals have the capacity to be empowered when *'powerful collective responsibility'* (p. 613) exists in their schools. This capacity emanates from a deep desire to 'contribute to the ultimate goal of greatly enhanced student learning outcomes' (p. 15). But how do they navigate

around school improvement goals, compliance, and accountability? According to Elmore, writing for the OECD in 2008 as referred to in Chapter Two, policy must recognise 'the principle of reciprocity' (p. 57) in which school Principals and their school communities work together with policy makers to achieve school improvement. The data suggests that this is challenging due to the time demands made on Principals but, according to the participants in my study, it is a benefit of the role that is impossible without the full support of colleagues and the power of positive relationships, the final sub-theme emerging in this section.

7.2.5. Positive Relationships

Finally, there was acknowledgement from all of the participants of the importance of positive relationships and agreement that they generally experience such in their schools. These positive relationships were mentioned throughout as being with students, parents, staff members, the wider school and local communities, and with their colleagues in other schools and in the system. The participants articulated these relationships as their reassurance and nourishment, and they talked of the importance of the benefits therein. According to Psychogios and Dimitriadis (2021), those involved (in positive relationships) are 'inseparable actors of a co-constructing process of leadership' (p. 1). McKay et al. (2022) maintain that transformational leaders enhance positive emotions to ensure a positive approach to work from teachers. The participants I interviewed, demonstrated an acute awareness of this leadership conceptualisation articulating significant appreciation for the 'mutually dependent relations involved (p. 1).

Nussbaum (2011) includes affiliation as her seventh capability and describes it as showing concern for others, engaging in 'various forms of social interaction' and being able to understand other's situations (p. 34). A common topic mentioned by the participants was their awareness and understanding of those around them. All of them articulated being acutely aware of children's needs and staff needs, and all of them suggested they were finely tuned into the needs of their colleagues. Brendan spoke about the privilege of guiding his class and the wonder of seeing the children '*develop and progress'* while Ava revealed that *'one of the big things that came back from the children is that togetherness (of staff)'*. All fifteen participants articulated a sense of honour when partaking in celebrations, and humility when involved in crisis, tragedy, illness, and with children in need of extra support. Andrew revealed that when he saw a student with a *'very traumatic background'* make it through his final year, he thought, *'that's what makes it sustainable - when you have these good news stories'*.

A common theme throughout was how the participants' relationships with everyone around them at school strengthened their resolve, assisted them with decision-making, and enhanced their experience of the role. In contrast, as explained in the next section, toxic relationships achieved the opposite, draining their energy and developing feelings of fear and strain. Kitt (2017) contends that because school leaders are under pressure, they struggle to avoid negative emotions, making positive relationships very important to them. Kitt (2017) equates these positive relationships to a collaborative type of leadership that maximises the quality of teaching and learning by encouraging and supporting the staff. This approach links with Nussbaum's (2011) contention that her ten capabilities have an 'intimate relationship to the very possibility of life in accordance with human dignity' (p. 64). This link clearly points to people needing to be looked after 'no matter what the world around them has done' (Nussbaum, 2011:68). Moreover, the participants, in their approaches to all members of the school community, demonstrated a strong will to achieve social justice for everyone. As Katie explains about newly appointed colleagues, they are *'thrown into this school environment, and they are with no knowledge of the diversity of personalities'*. Throughout the interviews, all fifteen participants recounted in some form or another how hard they had worked to understand their people and to offer opportunities for development, and how they had continued to reap significant benefit from these efforts. I now turn to the second aspect of research question one, the challenges of Principalship.

7.3. The Challenges

The previous section detailed the benefits of being a primary Principal in Ireland. Unfortunately, it seems that these benefits can become overshadowed by the more negative conceptualisations of the role. The participants spoke of being overwhelmed, lost in paperwork and bureaucracy, not having adequate governance supports, and having to deal with multiple and relentless initiatives, policy changes, and legislation compliance. These challenges link to the literature as outlined in Chapter Two, around expectations of Principals (OECD, 2008a, 2008b; Sugrue, 2009) and how they are simply human like everyone else (Fink, 2005). The main challenges according to the participants are outlined here.

7.3.1. Shifting the Balance towards Positivity

All of the participants stated that they had a daily struggle to battle against negativity. This negativity emanated from all areas of the schools' communities, from their own thinking when feeling overwhelmed, and from the source they had least patience with, namely other Principal colleagues. Brendan's collective phrase of *'a negativity of Principals'* comes to mind as does

Bella's *'belly aching'*. Barton (2018) claims there is *'a toxic narrative'* around how challenging the role of school leadership is and how the focus should be balanced with 'the joys and privileges of leadership' (p. 140). Hilton (2020) advocates for Principals to return to the 'why' rather than the 'what' to attain clarity in their sense of purpose. The participants aligned the negativity from colleagues with their entrapment in what Tara describes as *'jumping from fire to fire trying to put one out before the next one starts'*. They also linked it with becoming overwhelmed by work. Bella recognised this when she said that 'the workload is *'definitely the root cause of it'* (negativity) and with feeling immense pressure from the demands of compliance and accountability as outlined in the next section.

In relation to the school community, there was evidence of distress around limited resources for children and the struggle to attain them, with participants lamenting the amount of time and energy such core work takes. Fergus queried his school's capacity to adequately meet the ever-increasing needs of the children and stated that *'we're doing our best'* and *'it's a massive, massive challenge'*. Raftery (2021:6) claims that creating an inclusive environment to meet the needs of all 'remains a key challenge'. As noted in the section above on the benefits of the role, the participants were passionate about this core work but indicated their frustration around the challenges involved. Looking after the additional needs of children is described as a 'mammoth responsibility' taken on solely by 48.5 per cent of Administrative Principals and 63.9 per cent of Teaching Principals (National Principals' Forum [NPF][44], 2021:12). In my data set, eight of the participants linked their decision to go for the role of Principal to their passion for meeting the needs of students. Andrew claimed that *'I wanted to have a bigger influence'.* According to IPPN (2014), the work of providing learning opportunities and experiences for all children and maximising their learning potential is a key priority. The participants in this study agree and they noted that when they felt unable to meet this priority to the very best of their ability, that went directly to the core of their stress, affecting their confidence and decision-making. They deemed this as a significant challenge of Principalship.

Other challenges highlighted by the Principals in my study included relationships with parents. Katie spoke about *'the complexities of parents'*. However, the participants' positive interactions with parents were much more prevalent than those which were negative. Mollie verified the buzz she felt *'when parents tell you that you're doing a good job'*. The data also suggested a

---

[44] The National Principals' Forum [NPF] is an entirely voluntary, registered grassroots lobby group of practising Primary School Principal Teachers, established in May 2018 (NPF, 2024). Available at: https://www.principalsforum.org/

strong sense of the commitment to partnership that good relationships take. Bella contended that *'being able to give time is so important even if that time is at your own expense'*. There were clear indications of the amount of time the participants put into this communication work and how little time they generally felt they had available, creating a consistent challenge for them. Mac Giolla Phádraig (2010) claims that 'the principle of partnership' (p. 88) has taken hold in relation to parental involvement. However, the participants, some of whom are engaged in various parental initiatives, emphasised that the time required to implement effective communication, including with parents, is substantial, even when achieving good results.

The Principals also spoke of challenging relationships with staff members. Some of these emanated from parental complaints and the management of addressing issues between teachers and parents and was a feature in nine of the fifteen interviews. Bella described her attempts to get the balance *'between making the parents feel totally vindicated for coming in'* and *'having the teacher's back'*. Another source of relationship challenge was unsuccessful job applications mentioned by six of the participants as explained by Kevin, when he revealed that a teacher *'who didn't get the Deputy Principal's job'* had remained off work after the recruitment process.

All fifteen of the participants described experiencing stress around change reform. Brendan spoke about how *'you have to work with people'* and how he attended training with a teacher who was objecting to change to encourage her to embrace that change. Katie claimed some teachers struggle with change because for them, *'it's always been okay the way it is'*. Barton (2018) declares that the ability to explain why things need to be done is the mark of a successful Principal. This thinking is expanded by Dhillon et al. (2020) who argue that Principals who clearly communicate the reasons for change, especially around issues of social justice, affect its implementation more easily. Successful implementation of worthwhile and effective change is often referred to as transformational leadership, as outlined in Chapter Two.

Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) declare that transformational leadership assists in the development of collaborative school cultures, and Leithwood and Mascall (2008) argue that motivation, capacity, and work settings are key enablers of successful transformation. Acton (2021) contends that transformational leadership is necessary to achieve change and, significantly, that all newly appointed school leaders need a pre-appointment understanding of the concept. Finally, Wilson Heenan et al. (2023), in their literature review of transformational leadership, propose it as potentially 'the leading model in the future' (p. 22), relating it directly to improved teaching and learning and listing a wide range of benefits including satisfaction,

shared vision, emotional expression, and empowerment. While none of the participants actually used the term transformational leadership, they all alluded to their efforts to achieve its benefits which, for them, included successful implementation of change and the development of leadership capacity among their staff members. However, they strongly expressed how challenging it remained for them to truly follow their own values and beliefs and how achieving the listed benefits through reform took incredible energy, forbearance and interpersonal skill. They articulated that this work adds significantly to work and stress levels and, indeed, to relational conflict.

7.3.2. Demands and Workload, Compliance and Accountability

All of the Principals who participated in my study considered the demands made on them to sometimes be overwhelming and this accords with much of the literature. Earley (2020) contends that the job is highly complex with 'emotional demands, the accompanying workload, and the high stakes accountability cultures' (p. 117). Spillane and Lowenhaupt (2019) claim that not only does the job entail more responsibility, but it also brings more complex responsibility. According to the IPPN (2022), the school Principal fulfils the roles of:

> CEO, the de facto CFO, the head of Human Resources, the Quality Assurance Manager, the Facilities Manager, the Head of Operations, the Marketing Manager, the Health and Safety Officer and the Complaints Department (p. 13).

The IPPN (2022) maintains that there is a crisis relating to the sustainability of the role of Principal in Ireland. The Principals partaking in this study concur, stating that the pace is increasing and that, most of the time, they are unable to stay on top of their workload. Mollie, looking back to when she began in Principalship, stated that *'the workload was more manageable then without a doubt'*. Katie suggests that the workload takes away from her positive approach to the role. The IPPN (2022) blames 'successive pieces of legislation, circulars, policies, guidelines, and new initiatives' and the 'expansion of the role of the school leader' (p. 13), concurring with the participants' perception of policy overload as mentioned in Chapter Three. The Principals advocate for a halt but the system does not respond and continues currently, for example, with a new curriculum and a revised literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy framework with on-going changes to School Self-Evaluation (SSE). This latter point connects to the final challenge, what the Principals described as a disconnect with the system and evidence of a somewhat neoliberal educational environment. This is outlined in Chapter One and Three, and supported by Mooney Simmie (2014), Lumby (2013) and Gunter (2013).

7.3.3. Lack of System Understanding

From the participants' perspectives, the system simply keeps demanding from them. From the system's perspective, schools are expected to comply with policy enactment, initiatives, national priorities, and OECD guidelines. The Irish government makes demands on the policy makers, who in turn make demands on schools. This creates a persistent demand tension which is manifested in schools by weariness and a lack of time and space for reflection, planning, and work/life balance, as suggested by the workload issues outlined in the previous section.

Additionally, the participants' perception of external evaluation complexifies this tension. Ten of the participants articulated the pressure they feel to stay ahead and to be ready when an external evaluation comes their way, with that evaluation portrayed in a rather negative light. Kay described *'the land you get when someone arrives unexpected',* while Andrew revealed that he had a fear of *'the cigire'* (Irish word for Inspector). Adele described *'this fear of the Inspector arriving in and not seeing all the good things that are going on'.* Hislop (2022:63) explains that the purpose of the Inspectors' Advisory Role, additional to evaluation, is 'to affirm good practice and to provide practical advice' around the SSE process. However, the participants claim that this advisory role largely remains under-developed as yet.

In contrast, three of the participants maintained that their experience of external evaluation was positive. Evan, after an incidental inspection and a very positive report, described the feedback from the Inspector as *'unbelievable for something that happened with no notification or anything'.* Kay described how *'they* (the Inspectorate) *affirmed all the good practice that was being done'.* Adele advocated for the PIEW Capacity Planning Framework[45] as recommended by the IPPN (2019) with her school stating: *'this is what we're piloting, this is what we're implementing, this is where we're embedding, this lot is waiting'.* Section 13 (3a) (i) of the Education Act (1998) states that inspectors, along with their evaluating duties, should 'support and advise recognised schools'. But in their extremely busy schedules, it is not surprising that the external evaluation process is perceived as another source of stress and challenge by the participants. As with distributed leadership, as examined below, the emerging advisory role of the Inspectorate is one which, according to the participants here, needs further collaboration and exploration to become an established and recognised extra source of support for schools.

---

[45] PIEW Empowering School Leaders through Prioritising (Pilot, Implement, Embed and Wait), IPPN Resource Bundle Publication (IPPN, 2019). Available at: https://issuu.com/ippn/docs/piew_oct2019_formatted
School Self-Evaluation Process (SSE) (DE, 2022a).

There was direct criticism of the present governance structure for schools with the participants feeling very strongly that the current system is not fit for purpose, and that too much is expected of volunteers who lack knowledge about the work of the school. Irish schools are governed by Boards of Management (BOMs) which are made up, generally, of two direct nominees of the Patron[46], two parents, the Principal, one other serving teacher, and two additional community members (DES, 2023a), all in voluntary roles with no remuneration. Although training is provided by the various management bodies, the participants reported significant knowledge gaps resulting, often, in additional workload for them. In the Chief Inspector's Report (2016-2020), former Chief Inspector Harold Hislop states that boards are not adequately equipped for their responsibilities and that their voluntary nature is not sustainable. He advocated for a shared governance structure among small schools and 'alternative approaches to the current management of schools' (p. 238). Andrew declared that *'it's a problem with the whole set up of BOMs and the management of volunteers'*. Gemma described BOM meetings as *'Groundhog Day'* stating that she was cognisant of *'the responsibility that was being placed on boards'*. On the other hand, the support of a good chairperson was mentioned a few times. Janet described *'our chairperson, who is amazing'* while Gemma said she had been *'blessed'* with her first chairperson. The discourse around BOMs in Ireland has been of a negative nature for some time and the Principals in this study concur. Different approaches seem to be needed. Andrew suggested shared BOMs. As primary BOMs changed once again in 2023 according to their four-year cycle of governance, this particular challenge for Irish Principals remains under the spotlight and according to my data, could benefit from collaborative review and development at both school and system level. The Covid-19 pandemic further compounded the challenges experienced by this group of primary Principals and I turn to this now.

7.3.4. The Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the Principals in this study feeling a significant sense of abandonment despite the supports put in place for them and their schools. Evan spoke in a very exercised manner in relation to this when he said that Principals *'had to crisis manage over the last three years'*, claiming that school staff really suffered due to the intensity of the pandemic. Mollie described the pandemic and the staffing issues which arose as *'the most difficult thing I've ever dealt with'*. Harris and Jones (2020) argue that school leaders were in the 'unfavourable position of being the pinch point in the system' and they described this fate as

---

[46] 'The Patron is the person recognised as such by the Minister in accordance with section 8 of the Education Act 1998' (DE, 2023, introduction). The patron appoints and dissolves BOMs.

'walking a tightrope without a safety net' (p. 244) maintaining that, because of the pandemic, 'unpredictability and uncertainty are now the watchwords of all those leading schools' (p. 247). Interestingly, although coming with a significant price, the pandemic also provided some element of a silver lining. Katie claimed that *'Covid stripped so much of the stuff that doesn't matter'*. Bella claimed that *'the system stepped up to the plate enormously during Covid'* despite the tardiness of setting up supports. The views of participants here aligns to the findings of Fahy et al. (2020), which include recognition of the increased demands made on school Principals during this time. These demands were, for some, balanced by the relationship development between all members of the school community and Principals' confidence in their staff to deal with the challenges that arose.

It is important to remember that Irish primary Principals were already experiencing significant challenge before the pandemic. D'Arcy (2019) described the role of Teaching Principal as 'an impossible situation' and school Principalship in general as being 'unsustainable without an appropriate middle leadership structure in place' with many 'stressed and overwhelmed' (pp. 8-9). As already stated, Covid-19 exacerbated this narrative, placing already stretched school leaders in very stressful positions and serving to intensify the many challenges and complexities of the role. The next section considers the significant sub-theme which emerged from the discussion on challenges as explained in Chapter Six. Having listed the challenges, the participants suggested possible solutions which, ironically, presented even further challenge for them.

7.4. Being Solution Focused

The participants were clear in their articulation of both the challenges of Principalship and their ongoing struggle to remain in a positive space despite those challenges. This may explain that when asked, the participants provided nine metaphors for the role that might be considered in both a positive and negative light as introduced in Chapter Five and Appendix Three. In this way, they were solution focused, preferring to consider solutions rather than allow themselves sink into negativity. They proposed various approaches to staying in a more sustainable space. These included breaking down problems into bite-sized pieces using the mantra that everything is achievable. Mollie claimed that *'everything is doable'* and that *'sometimes, all of these things are sounding much worse than they actually are, when you dissect them'.* According to my participants, a sustainable approach entails drawing a line under your work to achieve a work life balance, and such an approach insinuates organisation, preparation, and staying true to a shared vision and a set of goals while standing strong on refusing to take on too much. The

participants also felt that this approach is underpinned by their own values and beliefs. Kevin revealed that it was key learning for him to consider his values, and Gemma spoke about moral purpose and abiding by the words of Pope John Paul VV111, '*see everything, overlook a great deal and improve a little*'. IPPN (2022) advocates for sustainable leadership for the role of primary Principal and Deputy, claiming that leadership cannot be effective until a clear definition of the role is established. Furthermore, IPPN (2022) advocates for tasks and responsibilities not aligned with leading teaching and learning to be distributed and for shared leadership to be further developed with new and varied approaches to Principal preparation, recruitment, workload and school governance. Two of the solutions to the challenges of the role, as proffered by the Principals in this study include the development of distributed or collaborative leadership and the leadership expertise and approaches needed for Principalship. Both solutions have emerged as separate sub-themes in relation to research question one. This is because both are perceived by the participants as critical in their bid to remain effective and sustained in their role. However, as already stated, both also provide further challenge.

7.4.1. Distributed Leadership

All of the participants agreed that the role of Principal cannot be successful without the support and assistance of others. Furthermore, they all had a vision for distributed leadership empowering others to lead and to have autonomy in areas of expertise and/or responsibility. As Gemma explained, *'I'm just one piece of the jigsaw'*.

Distributed leadership as a construct is well documented in the literature in both a positive and negative light. Spillane (2005), who wrote extensively on the concept, claims that distributed leadership is not a 'cure-all' (p. 149), but a system of practice comprised of leaders, followers, and a situation that could equally be 'democratic or autocratic' (p. 149). Spillane (2005) is clear that what matters is how leadership is distributed among people and how it is linked to school context. Harris (2013) reminds us that effective distributed leadership depends on the approaches of people in formal leadership positions as prime influencers and that the concept remains shadowed by 'issues of power, authority and inequality' (p. 546). However, O'Sullivan and MacRuairc (2023) contend that distributed leadership, in its most holistic form, is premised on formal and informal leaders working collectively. Cora warns that if distributed leadership is conceptualised *'as giving others jobs'* then it is *'starting off in the wrong place'*. Instead, she suggests that Principals need to *'look at all the interactions that are part of the process of getting change to happen within a school'*. According to Gunter et al. (2013), much of the literature on the subject is 'bunkered' (p. 558) due to the school improvement drive and the

efforts to make 'leadership models accessible to policymakers and professionals' (p. 558). Concurring with this view, Harris and DeFlaminis (2016) claim that the concept has 'unleashed a wave of enthusiasm and a surge of discontent' and that its dark side is delegation, a potential for bullying and a mechanism for getting 'top down' policies delivered' (p. 143). Fergus lamented this, stating that his leadership team request *'a list of tasks to do'*.

Writing specifically on the Irish context, Hickey et al. (2023:1) contend that distributed leadership is 'an elusive construct' and although present in educational rhetoric for a long time, remains devoid of a definition. They claim that authentic sharing of leadership requires a significant shift in power and effective collaboration rather than the sharing of tasks or workload. In other words, distributed leadership is about thinking as a leader rather than thinking about the tasks you are assigned. The participants suggested that their leadership teams still do not perceive themselves as leaders but rather as people in task orientated roles. All the participants plan to further develop distributed leadership in their schools to make their leadership role more sustainable. There was evidence of the privilege of being able to choose your own team and of being in a position to build a leadership team with a shared vision for your school that aligns with your own values and beliefs. Fergus claimed that, as Principal, *'you need to be picking your team'* and *'you need to have free rein to do that'*. Hickey et al. (2023) claim that it must involve those without formal leadership roles as well as those with them. They conclude, and also concur with Spillane (2005), that it would be inadvisable to seek a definition, as distributed leadership is subject to individual school context and warrants a professional conversation to be properly constructed within it. Murphy (2019) agrees, arguing that distributed leadership might be best served by understanding the differences between individuals and schools. Murphy argues that there is no one size fits all regarding distributed leadership and that how it is enacted is dependent on the individuals involved and their school context.

Hence, distributed leadership remains a contested construct which lacks clarity in school practice due to the deeply contextualised nature of school leadership. This goes some way to explaining how the solutions included here have the potential to provide further challenge for Principals. There is also the contested duality of developing leadership capacity versus providing a space for the neoliberal demands of policy enactment. This question is interrogated by Cavanagh (2010) who examines the concept of collegiality and states that it is an approach to school leadership that proposes allowing *'the key voices in the educational partnership to come together and jointly shape professional policy and practice'* (p. 21). However, Cavanagh

also warns that collegiality is not clearly conceptualised and that its origins need to be better understood as it can hegemonically appear as 'emotionally appealing language; to replace that of policy and management' (p. 21). Additionally, Torrance (2013) conceptualises distributed leadership as multifaceted, involving everyone in the school community, those in formal leadership roles and those without, teachers and support staff. She argues that distributed leadership is 'context-specific'. 'socially constructed', 'negotiated',' hierarchical' and to a large extent, in 'the gift of the head teacher' *(*p. 362). Torrance (2013) challenges the distributed leadership narrative, engendering reflection on exactly what it means for schools to enact it, with seemingly complex issues involved in its effective implementation.

The participants agreed that policy documents support distributed leadership in theory. Referred to previously, these documents include Looking at our School (2022), Leadership and Management Circular 44/19 (DES, 2019), SSE Circular 56/2022 (DE, 2022a) and supporting documentation like the PIEW Framework as provided by the IPPN (2019). However, there was a strong sense of the skills needed and the time and space necessary to mediate policy at local level, to implement it in accordance with school context and culture and to ensure all the other demands of the role are met, not least teaching a class, or looking after children with diverse needs. Murphy and Brennan (2022) argue that while the discourse around distributed leadership is prevalent in Irish educational policy, the 'developmental supports necessary to implement it optimally, are not' (p. 11). Murphy and Brennan (2022) claim that all school leaders involved need 'ongoing development, within and beyond the school' (p. 12).

The views of the Principals in my study align with the literature around distributed leadership. The concept is accepted by the participants as a useful and necessary approach to leadership. However, they generally concur that it is an area still in need of further interrogation, research, and professional learning and one that continues to add significantly to their workload. The literature, as already outlined, that questions distributed leadership as a hegemonic attempt at compliance and extra workload complexifies the picture. The concept also necessitates significant focus on their personal development as a leader.

7.4.2. The Leadership Approaches of the Principal

The leadership expertise needed to navigate the complex role of Principal came through strongly in the data. According to the participants, they need a clear vision developed and progressed collaboratively in a team with teaching and learning at its core. Ava claimed that *'it's about having harmony with your school'* and Mollie stated that an effective leader *'can*

engage them (their staff) *to move forward'*. According to Hernández-Amorós and Martínez Ruiz (2018), in their study on the use of Principals' metaphors to understand leadership, the central concept of such a vision is influenced by a 'shared, collegial and distributed' form of leadership (p. 604). Hernández-Amorós and Martínez Ruiz (2018) introduce the concept of the Principal as a guide attempting to influence others towards the achievement of goals and objectives, a paternal or maternal figure seeing themselves responsible for the well-being of their school community.

The importance of a balance between leadership and management was highlighted by the participants. Brendan remembered a line from his Misneach Programme which said: *'a manager looks at the bottom line, but a leader looks beyond the horizon'*. Brendan reflected on this and felt he was more a manager than a leader in early Principalship. He received inspiration from an IPPN colleague who told him that it is not the big things but the many small things that Principals do that matter. Katie declared that Principals *'need to identify clearly their role in both leadership and management'* and that *'there has to be a balance there'*. Quin et al. (2015) contend that transformational leaders inspire a shared vision, model the way, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart by increasing teachers' sense of belonging and commitment with celebration and recognition. In relation to leadership and management, LAOS (2022) presents these as inseparable constructs and claims that for 'schools to be led effectively, they must be managed effectively' (p. 10). The participants emphasised the importance of the balance between leadership and management stating that the school must be a safe, well-run organisation if it is to provide the best learning opportunities for students. They claimed that the Principal and the school team should ensure a culture of happiness and inclusivity in which everyone's voice matters, particularly that of the child. Tara stated that *'I am passionate about inclusion'* yet Ava warns that *'inclusion is a wonderful concept'* but the responsibility of the Principal to achieve, often without adequate support and resources. They reiterated the importance of remaining true to the school's integrity, vision, and context and according to the Principal's own core values. Andrew maintained that *'if you're a good person and you stick to your own core values, your moral purpose'* that people will believe in you and *'see that you are making decisions for the right reasons'*. Significantly, they articulated the importance of self-awareness on behalf of the Principal to seek professional learning for themselves and their team in any area they feel needs further development. Cora reminded us of *'the importance of being aware of your own professional learning first'* and I return to professional learning for the person of the leader in Chapter Eight.

7.5. Summary of Research Question One and Chapter Conclusion

The participants provided a comprehensive overview of the benefits and challenges of Principalship and how best they could remain solution focused suggesting a complex role with a very definite need for skills and development. The benefits of the role were well highlighted. These benefits were challenged by the participants' efforts to remain in a positive space while dealing with the demands of workload and compliance and a perceived lack of system understanding. Dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic served to further exacerbate the challenges. The participants presented the solution focused potential of distributed leadership and the leadership expertise conducive to being effective in the role. They also provided evidence of the challenges of distributed leadership as a construct, its current under-developed position in the Irish system, and the need for bespoke professional learning to develop leadership capacity. The participants listed the skills they feel Principals need [Appendix 2]. They also strongly articulated the need for bespoke support for newly appointed colleagues. Considering the skills and knowledge needed to be effective in the role and to both celebrate the benefits and address the challenges, the circumstances of early Principalship were influential to the role's benefits and successes. Chapter Eight relates what becoming a Principal and early Principalship meant for the participants and how they navigated their early days in the role. It also examines the impact of professional learning and system supports on the work of the Principal in answer to research questions two, three and four.

8. Chapter Eight: Discussion of the Research Findings Two

8.1. Introduction and Summary of Key Findings in Relation to Research Question Two

In the previous chapter, the key findings from the fifteen semi-structured interviews were interrogated through the lens of research question one. In this chapter, the findings are discussed in relation to the relevant literature and research questions two, three and four. Chapter Eight concludes with an overview of the findings and a signposting to the next and final chapter which presents the conclusions, recommendations and system implications.

RQ2: How does becoming a Principal influence these benefits and challenges?

The thinking and circumstances within which my participants entered into the role of Principal will be examined here in relation to the literature to determine how this stage of Principalship impacts on their perception of the benefits and challenges of the role. The data indicates that bespoke professional learning and system support is key to ensuring that the stage of becoming a Principal is properly understood, supported, and made as easy as possible, to avoid some of the circumstances the participants experienced themselves. The literature suggests the need for bespoke support due to the particular challenges of this stage of leadership as outlined in Chapter Three (Crawford and Cowie, 2012; Earley and Bubb, 2013; Spillane and Lee, 2014). The participants also articulated the importance of more targeted and bespoke support so that their newly appointed colleagues have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the role and be in a strong position to address the challenges.

8.2. Becoming a Principal by Accident or Design

As outlined in Chapter Six, although initially appearing as haphazard and unexpected, the circumstances of early Principalship for the participants followed, for some, a strong self-belief, encouragement from those around them, and a willingness to engage in professional learning and to assist other Principals. A surprise finding was the readiness by the participants to assume leadership roles despite acknowledging a significant lack of understanding about the expectations of the position. Kılınç and Gümüs (2021) describe the transition from teaching to Principalship as 'a daunting process' (p. 55) and yet note that many enter into the role without preparation or induction. As cited in Chapter One, Kılınç and Gümüs (2021) claim that research on the early days of Principalship is scant which may partly explain why so many, including the majority of this study's participants, enter into the role in a seemingly under prepared state of readiness.

Table 8.1. highlights the Principalship recruitment situation of each of the fifteen participants. It outlines the age at which they became Principals in ascending order from youngest to oldest, details their immediate prior experience and their main rationale for making the decision to pursue the role.

Table 8.1. Circumstances of Appointment

Pseudonym	Entry Age into Principalship	Former School Leadership Experience	Reason for Becoming Principal
Janet	23	None	Encouraged by family and colleagues to apply for the role.
Adele	24	None	Needed to move location.
Kevin	24	None	Encouraged by family to apply for the role.
Andrew	25	None	Wanted to be in a position to influence special education.
Gemma	27	Middle Leader	Needed to move location.
Tara	27	None	Needed to move location.
Cora	28	Middle Leader	Encouraged by colleagues to apply for the role.
Brendan	29	None	Unhappy with former leadership.
Katie	29	Deputy Principal	Felt ready when the position arose.
Evan	30	Middle Leader	Felt ready when the position arose.
Kay	32	None	Encouraged by colleagues to apply for the role.
Mollie	34	None	Felt ready when the position arose.
Fergus	35	Deputy Principal	Needed to move location
Ava	39	Deputy Principal	Unhappy with former leadership
Bella	52	Deputy Principal	Stepped up when her Principal went out on secondment.

8.2.1. Circumstances of Appointment and Life Experiences

80 per cent of the participants (12 out of 15) stated that apart from the reason given above, they became Principals because the position became vacant in their schools or in a nearby school. Nearly all of these vacant positions were due to retirement (two were due to the Principal moving) but in the case of these twelve participants, two males and four females were in their twenties, with one male and three females in their thirties. Of the remaining three participants, one male and two females, two became the first Principals of start-up schools, and the final participant, a female in her 50's, stepped up to the role when her Principal went on secondment. The current span of work career as a Principal or teacher is now set at 65 for Principals or teachers in this age group with no option to access a pension earlier if they were employed post January 1st, 2012 (DE, 2024b). Three participants are in this category, and all three began their Principalship role in their mid-twenties, entailing a career of forty years as Principal. The retirement date is from 55 upwards for those pre this date (the other twelve participants), with the majority of them facing a span of around thirty years in the role. Hence, sustainability becomes important as a significant challenge and highlights the need for a career-long approach to on-going development for long-serving Principals.

It is also significant that all the participants (nine in their twenties, five in their thirties), with the exception of one in her fifties) went for the role at such an early age particularly when cognisant of the negative discourse that prevails in Ireland around its complexities and challenges. All these participants expressed their eagerness to enter into the role and, at least at that point, certainly seemed to avoid internalising this negativity which, in turn, provokes questions about their ambition, their drive and their lack of knowledge of the role.

Examining the school leadership experience of the participants, eight had no former leadership experience. Of the remaining seven, three were middle leaders, and four or 27 per cent were Deputy Principals. By contrast, MacBeath et al. (2009), argue that 48 per cent of the head teachers they interviewed were previously Deputes or Deputy Head Teachers in the Scottish context.

Regarding their rationale for making the jump to Principalship, four participants became Principal because they wanted to move home. Four others were in their schools when the position arose and felt ready to take on the role while another four were encouraged by family members or professional colleagues or both, to apply. Of the remaining three, two were unhappy with former Principals, one was following a specific special education passion, and

one stepped up due to secondment. Alongside these reasons, all of the participants talked of believing in their capacity to be effective in the role and having the qualities to support it as outlined in Chapter Four and Appendix 2. The data is similar to that of MacBeath et al. (2009) who revealed that their participants had engaged in headship due to a family legacy of headship (as with three of my participants)[47] and, for them, moving from the classroom into headship was *'in the genes'* as Kay described. MacBeath et al. (2009) found evidence of their participants endeavouring to test themselves and rise to the challenge of the role (p. 18). This is the case with fourteen out of fifteen of my participants apart from one who stepped up due to secondment. This latter participant is in the category of 'accidental head' (MacBeath et al. 2009:18).

When asked to reflect on their decision to become Principals, it emerged that the participants felt bespoke professional learning was necessary to address the lack of knowledge experienced by newly appointed Principals. Having established this lack of knowledge and experience by listening to my participants' stories, I now return to research question two. In these circumstances, their ability to enjoy the role and address its challenges is negatively impacted. The question we must ask is what type of professional learning can address this issue. Earley and Bubb (2013:793) suggest that this learning should be in the form of space and time for talking about the role and reflecting on 'strategic goals and successes' while being observed at work with feedback, which enables further reflection. Earley and Bubb (2013) conclude that, no matter how good leadership preparation programmes are, bespoke responses are needed to support newly appointed Head Teachers during their first year in the role. This further complexifies the question around statutory preparation for Principalship in Ireland, and the comprehensive induction programme that is offered in its stead, a consideration for Chapter Nine. As the DE launched a pre-commencement programme for newly appointed Principals in 2024, there are emerging signs of movement between some type of pre-appointment preparation and Principal induction. I now turn to examining the participants' belief in their former selves while considering the role and how this aspect of becoming a Principal impacts on the benefits and challenges of their Principalship.

8.2.2. Early Experiences of Principalship

When articulating the circumstances of becoming a Principal, the participants expressed a strong sense of self-belief. Ava revealed that she was not worried because *'I was really going*

---

[47] The detail of these three participants' family involvement in leadership is not shared to ensure their anonymity.

from one rural school to another, and I knew what it was about'. However, Ava was going from being a teacher to a Principal's position and seemed oblivious to the major change of role involved. Katie explained that *'I would have been really confident'*. This can be linked to their personal experiences of leadership in advance of attaining the role. Only seven held formal leadership experiences but all of the participants expressed an interest in leadership matters from early career stages and significantly, five had leadership experience in local community activities, while all were involved in teacher professional learning. Montecinos et al. (2022) claim that aspiring leaders tend to meet together, often in professional networks, and if lacking engagement in school leadership, they seek leadership experiences outside the education sector and often in their own community.

This goes some way to explaining their perception of the role. Mollie declared that she was *'at a level of my career and felt I could do the job'*. However, Mollie also warned that, in hindsight, *'you need to pursue leadership for the right reasons'*. The participants described their thinking in advance of applying for the role with their main motivations being around ambition, a somewhat limited understanding of leadership, and a passion for a particular aspect of the role such as influencing change management and supports for students. According to MacBeath et al. (2009), aspirant leaders are willing to see beyond hurdles because 'influencing the lives of children' would far outweigh any disadvantages of the role (p. 20). The work of MacBeath et al. (2009) gets to the crux of this matter. For these new Principals, it was all about moral purpose and a perception that is obviously lacking in understanding of the challenging demands and practicalities of the role. This finding provides some justification for the struggles experienced by the participants in their early days as Principals. It points to the need for exploration towards a deeper understanding of the Principal's role at middle leadership or Deputy Principalship stages, and a concept I return to in Chapter Nine.

All of the participants spoke of how influenced they were, either negatively or positively, by former Principals. When they had a negative experience, it had some definite implications. Firstly, for two of the participants, it meant moving school to begin in Principalship themselves in an alternative setting. Ava revealed that her former Principal was *'a closed book'* for example. For another six of the participants, this was not the cause of their move to Principalship, but it greatly influenced their thinking around what they would or would not do in the role. Brendan contended that a former Principal *'did not appreciate the staff he inherited'*. For the participants who had a positive experience with former Principals, it was a case of aspiring to what was admirable and effective about their practice. According to MacBeath et

al. (2009), newly appointed Principals feel 'watched' to see if they can 'live up to, or live down, their predecessor's legacy' (p. 20). The data from this study indicates that their own former experience with Principals and the reputation of their predecessor had a significant influence on their navigation of the early days of Principalship. MacBeath et al. (2009) contend that newly appointed Head Teachers enjoy a longer 'honeymoon period' when taking over from 'an unpopular or ineffective head' (p. 20). However, following '*an experienced or revered head*' as described by Ava, might be more challenging. Ava revealed that she found herself succeeding '*a charismatic or authoritarian man*', describing early Principalship as being '*on probation*' with her staff (p. 20). When things were tough at the beginning for her, she asked herself; '*And you wonder is it because I'm a female?'.* This constituted the only reference to gender in the entire data set which is addressed in the future research section of Chapter Nine. Both the influence of former Principals and the gender reference can be considered 'unexpected topics' (Busetto et al. 2020:3), and a benefit of qualitative interviews. Ava articulated this period as being very tough, advising that there was no choice but to *'bide your time'* and that enjoying the benefits of Principalship during this *'rough patch'* was very challenging.

8.2.3. Summary of Research Question Two

There is very little in the literature that captures candidate's thinking in advance of appointment to the role of Principal in primary schools in Ireland. IPPN (2015) claims that people do not want to become Principals due to 'work-life balance, unrealistic expectations, and work-load implications' (p. 3). This IPPN (2015) article claims that the main attraction to move towards the role is the belief held by the aspiring leaders themselves that they are ready and able for Principalship and that certain aspects of the role are very appealing. This concurs with the participants' views. Many of them spoke about the influence they could have regarding inclusion, special needs and leading teaching and learning, and believed that the role would provide opportunities for them to extend their teaching passions. Conversely, it was the broader picture of the role that caused challenge post appointment. This view concurs with Montecinos et al. (2022) who contend that aspiring Principals have a desire to make a difference and to positively impact on their students.

These participants expressed exactly that, a passion for making a difference in outcomes for children and an underpinning interest in leadership roles. Other contributory factors included encouragement from those around them which comes as no surprise considering how their leadership qualities and interest in leadership might be perceived. The fact that they had a strong belief in themselves fits into the equation and makes their decision to apply

understandable, even if of an unplanned, relatively sudden nature. This implies a reactive rather than a proactive approach to Principalship. Add in ambition and a Principalship being advertised, and a recipe for progression exists. Such a recipe also explains why they were not deterred by warnings from those already in the position. Apart from the actual challenges experienced by these participants in early Principalship due to limited knowledge and/or experience, it is evident also how the ingredients of this recipe for Principalship fit into the benefits and challenges of the role. With their self-belief, ambition, and desire to make a difference, they had the potential to enhance the benefits. With their lack of preparation or professional learning for the role, it is easy to imagine how the challenges were exacerbated, particularly in the early stages of their Principalship role.

Murphy (2019) argues that only a minority of those who become Principals feel adequately prepared and that those who engage in leadership professional learning find the transition into Principalship easier. The Principals in this study provided ample evidence of challenge in the early days in the role. Janet recalled these days, saying *'when I look back on it, God Almighty, the mistakes I made and how green I was the first few years'*. Medford and Brown (2022) maintain that the culture of the school must align with the beliefs and values of the new Principal and getting to know and understand a school's culture takes time and effort, but the new Principal needs to be able to manage it and have the courage to do so. McGovern (2015) contends that newly appointed Principals in the Irish context are over-worked and over-burdened and that a 'lack of training and guidance' are 'significant barriers to authentic reform' (p. 181). McGovern (2015) maintains that 80 per cent of newly appointed Principals feel the role 'is more challenging than they had expected' (p. 202). Medford and Brown (2022) maintain that the culture of the school must align with the beliefs and values of the new Principal and getting to know and understand a school's culture takes time and effort, but the new Principal needs to be able to manage it and have the courage to do so. This provides the answer to research question two, how becoming a Principal influences the benefits and challenges of the role. I now turn to research question three.

8.3. Summary of Key Findings in Relation to Research Question Three

RQ3: How can professional learning mediate the challenges and enhance the benefits?

Thus far in this chapter, through research question two, the impact of early Principalship on the benefits and challenges of the role has been examined. This section of the chapter will answer research question three by presenting professional learning as a source of hope towards

sustainability in the role. As previously explained, one of the policy levers from the OECD (2008a) recommendations was professional learning. The latter emerged as a source of hope for the participants of this study in relation to aspirant and newly appointed colleagues, and for their own sustainability in the role as more experienced Principals. Additionally, this research question is answered by proposing that professional learning dealing with the person of the leader is especially significant and necessary when it comes to enhancing the benefits and mediating the challenges of Principalship.

8.3.1. The Professional Learning Needs of Newly Appointed Principals

Looking firstly at aspiring and newly appointed Principals, the participants expressed a strong sense of concern for their welfare and well-being. As Katie explained, *'they are blind as to what the true meaning of the role is you know'*. The majority of the participants in this study articulated a sense of blindness in their early days of Principalship. They acknowledged that system supports have improved immensely since the majority of them were appointed but they were adamant that more is needed, contending that the Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership (PDSL) needs to connect theory more closely to practice than it already does. Katie suggested that the PDSL should focus on *'taking the theory out and being able to put it into practice'*, They suggested shadowing for those newly appointed to Principalship roles so that people can truly understand the nitty gritty of the job. Andrew explained the privilege of shadowing his predecessor for a week describing his experience as *'an eye-opener'*.

Specifically in relation to those new to the role, Woods et al. (2007:45) contend that they are 'attaining a unique position of authority' and they need professional learning to empower staff and disperse leadership. Many of the participants were clear that an apprenticeship as a middle leader is a preferred pathway to the role rather than to move directly from a teacher's position with no formal leadership responsibility. Andrew claimed that he would have preferred *'a middle leadership position where I could have learned a bit more or some form of apprenticeship'*. The participants articulated the benefits of the many supports available to them. However, having experienced beginning in the role and recounting how un-prepared they actually were, they warned against complacency in this respect from the system.

According to Ng and Szeto (2015), newly appointed Principals are expected to know what to do when appointed despite facing 'varied challenges and multiple internally and externally imposed pressures' (p. 542). Ng and Szeto (2015) argue that newly appointed Principals strive hard to equip themselves with the knowledge they need, and a strong sense of positivity keeps

them on task and moving forward. Here, once again, is this sense of self-belief and confidence which motivates these Principals and keeps them going even when times are tough. It signals where appropriate professional learning can make a difference. Earley and Bubb (2013) describe the workload of newly appointed Principals as 'relentless, complex and emotionally demanding' (p. 782). They also argue that time spent in the pre-appointment phase is very valuable but the handover from out-going Principals is in definite need of further development. This concurs with Gemma's account of the handover in her school which resulted in *'80 percent learning on the job'*. As with the Principals in my study, Earley and Bubb (2013) maintain that new Principals very much appreciate mentoring, coaching, networking, and the support of family and friends. Interestingly for the Irish context, Earley and Bubb's (2013) study finds that even though their participants had been through a leadership preparation programme, moving into headship remains 'a major transition' and newly appointed Principals need to be 'self-evaluative, to be able to reflect on practice and identify areas for further development' (p. 795). The participants in my study were adamant that the system does not provide all they need although they clearly articulated gratitude for the professional learning and supports available to them. I will now examine whether the same applies to those more established in the role.

8.3.2. The Professional Learning Needs of More Established Principals

Both for those newly appointed and for those more established in the role, according to the participants, professional learning needs to place a greater emphasis on the development of the person of the leader. Katie, now nearly ten years in the role, declared that this aspect of professional learning *'is massively overlooked'*. Tara and her staff did a trauma awareness programme because *'understanding the science, understanding the why'* was *'quite eye-opening'*, explaining that it had a *'knock-on effect'* on her own trauma and emotional awareness. Tara found her own bespoke professional learning in her school's areas of need. Torrance et al. (2023) argue that the Covid-19 pandemic provided the impetus for school leaders to link strategically with health and social welfare stakeholders, and that it necessitated the development of new, informal networks that were responsive to specific needs and focused on a collaborative, autonomous approach within which leadership needed to be 'fluid, agile and responsive' (p. 11). All of the participants articulated their willingness to seek and facilitate professional learning bespoke to their current school context, and to their own leadership needs, particularly in the area of personal development. An examination of how the participants manage their emotions emphasises the type of professional learning needed and how it can be provided appropriately and adequately to Principals at all stages of their role.

8.3.3. Personal Development and Managing Emotions

The participants were all very aware of the importance of managing their emotions as each of them spoke at length about this aspect of their development. This part of the interview process was reflective, quiet, and thought-provoking. It emerged from the data that the Principals in this study believe that their personal development underpins all aspects of their work, and they were very clear that this was something with which they needed more help and support. One of their main on-going challenges, they said, was the necessity of managing their emotions to avoid upsetting other members of staff and remaining strong in their position as leader of the school community. Mollie was adamant that her staff needs *'a leader who is not going to crumble, who's not going to be volatile'*. Fergus concurred by stating that he feels staff members *'want a solid anchor'*.

Redmond (2016) presents developing resilience as one of the sub-themes in his study on the emotional aspect of school leadership and its potential to enhance how the affective domain of Principalship influences collaboration. Redmond (2016) claims that Principals 'place the highest premium on their capacity to endure' (p. 63) and the participants in Redmond's (2016) study, similarly to the participants in this study, were clear that it was important to have the 'ability to fight another day' (p. 70) citing resilience as 'the foremost affective competence' (p. 76). Conversely, it is also worth noting the dangers of resilience and its 'dark side' as suggested in a study by Mahdiani and Ungar (2021). They suggest a potential hegemony in its conceptualisation, arguing that resilience is not always a positive, and it sometimes masks psychological and structural problems. The concept of resilience can be used as a tool to place an unreasonable amount of responsibility on people. So, if a Principal feels overwhelmed by, say, another new policy, they could be accused of lacking resilience thereby defecting responsibility away from policy makers and managers onto individual Principals. In the context of this study, I consider the notion of resilient Principals as a rather concerning concept. Considering the policy backdrop to the study, an expectation of continual resilience does not, I believe, sit well with a reasonable regard and respect for Principals. I will return to this point in the future research section of Chapter Nine.

When newly appointed, the affective domain of leadership emerged as a particularly challenging aspect of the role. The participants articulated that experience in Principalship brings improvement to their personal development over time. Ava explained how she tried to solve everyone's problems early in her Principalship but now realises that *'I'm not there to make everyone happy'*. Cora explained said that she was *'completely at zero'* in terms of her

personal development when newly appointed and that she feels she is much better at managing her emotions now due to her work with other Principals in the system and her leadership professional learning. Lee-Pigott (2019) claims that the nature of newly appointed Principals' emotional experiences and how these experiences impact on them is 'critical to their leadership effectiveness' (p. 176). Lee-Pigott's (2019) study on new Principals in Trinidad and Tobago focuses on the intersection of school culture and the new Principal's emotional development, arguing that they often find themselves in violation of the rules of their school by displaying particular emotions or, as an alternative, they try to suppress them. Lee-Pigott (2019) suggests that new Principals may need 'forums or safe spaces' to prevent their leadership 'being tainted by their negative emotions' and calls for training 'focused on the study of emotions and their expression as well as strategies to develop emotional intelligence' (p. 188). Suppression of one's emotions is known as emotional labour and was mentioned by ten of the fifteen participants. The phrase, coined by Hochschild (1983), refers to suppressing emotions and being perceived in a certain light by doing so. For the participants in this study, that desired perception was one of strength, calmness, and resilience.

8.3.4. Emotional Labour

All of the participants reflected on their emotional resilience and also talked of suppressing some emotions and engaging in emotional labour. Cora maintained that the right thing to do is *'to hide your true feelings'* as her staff do not want to see *'a flight attendant that looks scared'*. In contrast, Janet asked, *'what is the whole point in me going there, pretending everything is rosy?'*. Gaffney (2011) agrees with Cora's approach, warning that *'poorly managed negative emotions have a long shelf life'* (p. 330). However, Gaffney also warns that the suppression of negative feelings leads to' physiological signs of stress' (p. 336) As introduced in Chapter Four, Nussbaum (2001) claims that emotions are eudaimonistic and therefore concerned with a person's flourishing. She situates strong emotions as upheavals of thought and claims that emotions are responsive to the ways of the world, connected to what we value and, in agreement with Gaffney (2011), Nussbaum (2001) claims that they may cause physiological sensations. Principals care deeply about their school community which can make them feel 'torn apart' (p. 75) when emotions are heightened. The Principals in this study who have managed to develop a shared vision collaboratively with their school community, become invested and dedicate themselves to their goals towards achieving this vision. When challenges get in the way, Principals feel very torn, and emotions elevate.

All of the participants spoke about the importance of professional learning which provides the opportunity to understand their emotional development and the essential link between their own values and beliefs, and those of their school's culture. Being provided with the time and space to explore their emotions, to take stock of how their values are encouraging them towards a collaborative vision, and to examine how 'value-laden' (Nussbaum, 2001: 88) their mixed emotions are, is very important to them. Kevin spoke about having the '*professional learning conversation'* and asking his staff '*what's important to your needs and priorities for the next two years'*. It makes sense that newly appointed Principals need extra bespoke support to reach the level of personal development they need, to deal with the challenges of Principalship. The participants in this study clearly articulated the need for professional learning to support them in their personal development. Perhaps it is timely for the Irish education system to ask the same question. I return to this in the next and final chapter.

8.3.5. Professional Learning through Networking

Cora praised the system supports available but reminded us '*that none of this is personal development'*. Due to this gap in system supports, the participants partake in networking as a way to further their own personal development. Ava declared that '*you have to network with the right people'* and Andrew queried the possibility of networking '*being acknowledged by the department'*. Clearly, this is one form of professional learning valued by the participants. Ensuring that these networking opportunities form a part of all professional learning provided by the system might be a way forward towards addressing the complexities of the Principal's role while alternatively enhancing its social networking potential. I re-visit these opportunities in Chapter Nine.

8.3.6. Summary of Research Question Three

The participants in this study expressed a strong concern for the well-being of aspiring and newly appointed Principals. They wished for them to be able to avoid the constant negativity that prevails and to be provided with access to more practice-based programmes and a shadowing or apprenticeship model of handover from outgoing to incoming Principals. They were keen to acknowledge the benefits of mentoring, coaching, induction for newly appointed Principals, networking and other professional learning provided by Irish educational stakeholders. However, they felt that more is needed in the area of personal development for the person of the leader. The demands on newly appointed Principals are well documented in the literature. While much is being achieved in the induction phase and various options are available in the pre-appointment phase, the participants, with one third of them appointed in

the last decade, talked of much learning on the job and all of them described the challenges of their early years in Principalship. Evidence of how the participants prioritise an understanding of their emotions and their personal development emerged steadily from their answers. They agree that how Principals approach this understanding and management is linked to their experience, personal qualities, school and home context, and their understanding of all the possible scenarios that may arise. The data indicates and the literature concurs (Woods et al. 2007; Earley and Bubb, 2013; Lee-Pigott, 2019), that to have any chance of coping adequately, Principals, whether newly appointed or more established, and those aspiring to Principalship, need bespoke support that places a strong emphasis on the development of the person of the leader. This provides the answer to research question three. How the Irish system ensures the provision of this support is the focus of the final research question of this study.

8.4. Summary of Key Findings Through Research Question Four

RQ4: What is the potential of the Irish education system to support those becoming Principals and those more established in the role?

In the previous section and in Chapter One of my research study, I established that the Irish education system is providing a significant amount of quality leadership professional learning and support to Principals, and particularly so to those newly appointed to the role. Additionally, it provides professional learning for all stages of leadership. This section suggests that the Irish system has the potential to provide more bespoke support, particularly to those aspiring to Principalship, to ensure their readiness for the role without mandatory provision.

8.4.1. Situating Professional Learning in the Irish Context

As already noted in Chapter Two, there is no mandatory training for the positions of Principal and Deputy Principal in Irish schools. Although appointments are made by open competition, it is entirely possible to move directly from a classroom teaching role to a senior leadership position and, in a small school of fewer than 80 students, a teacher can become a Principal with fewer than five years' teaching experience. One determinant of this situation is the large number of primary schools in Ireland (3,095) with another 124 special schools which are classified as primary schools, serving a population of just over five million (DE, 2023b). By comparison, Denmark has 2,265 primary schools serving a population of almost 6 million people and Scotland, in a context very similar to Ireland, has 2001 schools serving almost five million people. This places the very large number of primary schools in Ireland in context when compared with the lower school to population ratio in the other jurisdictions. Providing suitably prepared people to become Principals in this large number of schools is a key challenge.

152

Coupled with this demographic is the current teacher shortage in Ireland with almost two-thirds of primary schools in Dublin short-staffed in September 2023 and special education teachers 'being forced to plug gaps in primary school mainstream classrooms' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023, para 9). According to the IPPN (2023), projections indicated the need for fewer teachers, but unexpected high immigration, particularly in relation to Ukrainian students, changed this demographic. An additional issue for teacher supply is the current cost and lack of availability of housing and accommodation particularly in urban areas, causing teachers to seek rural accommodation or to seek employment abroad. These challenges are fuelled by increased demands on career breaks, job sharing, and parental leave, early retirement options and a new generation's admirable response to attaining a work/life balance. Coupled with the negative perception of the role as explained in the introduction, professional learning and supports for those becoming Principals in these current circumstances are, I suggest, critical.

To attempt to answer research question four, the challenge of policy enactment in the provision of professional learning for leadership in Ireland needs to be interrogated.

8.4.2. Professional Learning and Policy Enactment

Irish professional learning for schools is mainly focused on the mediation and implementation of policy and legislation at local level, rather than personal development and the building of leadership capacity. Accountability demands ensure that Irish Principals feel the need to avail themselves of professional learning to implement policy and initiatives and to follow legislative requirements. Compliance comes first in relation to professional learning and particularly in the case of Teaching Principals, whose focus is first and foremost on the leading of teaching and learning. As Ireland prepares for the enactment of a new Primary Curriculum Framework [PCF] (NCCA, 2023) and proposed changes to legislation in Child Protection, this has never been more relevant and crucial.

This explains the opinions of my participants. Evan explained that the supports already in existence are not adequate with leadership support services *'limited in terms of the outreach'* of the support they provide. Cora revealed that the emotional and psychological aspect of the role has developed for her *'through my work with CSL* (as a mentor), *through the work I do online and through my doctorate'*. Andrew called for the continuing support of an executive coach rather than being limited to eight sessions. Katie declared that there is *'absolutely not'* enough in the system to support the development of the person of the leader and Mollie claimed that autonomy and the focus on individual context is great but that *'putting everything together*

was the difficult bit'. Evan was very clear on how he felt the need *'to bring system awareness to how bad things are in schools'* (during pandemic recovery) and accuses the system thus: *'The system doesn't see the disconnect with schools as a concern. They have their agenda and that's it'.* Evan felt that the system does not take the readiness or capacity of schools into account, but rushes onto the next thing, and Tara concurred by saying that *'things are done and added with absolutely no thought given to impact on the Principal'.* Tara felt strongly that the system exhibits *'a lack of care'* so there will be *'knock-on impacts'.*

In their study of the Scottish professional standards and teacher education, Torrance and Forde (2017) contend that teachers need support to perceive standards as contested areas and to move beyond policy rhetoric towards influence and agency so that the focus does not become 'domesticated within a process of policy implementation' (p. 123). LAOS (2022), as outlined in Chapter Three, has such potential for influence and agency but as previously mooted, it also has the potential for 'policy rhetoric' (Torrance and Forde, 2017:123). If the focus of professional learning is on the latter, Principals are placed in the position of being mere puppets, lacking criticality. The potential of the Irish system to ameliorate such a focus is strong, the impetus to achieve it is another story.

8.4.3. Summary of Research Question Four

With particular respect to research question four, there are two threads running strongly through this study's data. The first is around the good system supports available that either do not provide optimum support or are limited in provision and too often focused on policy implementation. According to the participants, they do not address the importance of Principal agency and criticality in terms of their values and beliefs aligning with those of their school. Just as significantly, they do not address the development of the person of the leader. Many supports are also one-off or limited to a specific stage of leadership. The second thread is a distrust for the system. The same system that offers support is perceived as using this support to push more and more onto the already full plate of the Principal. Katie advocated for giving leaders *'time and space to breathe and to adopt and to listen and to understand and know'* while Mollie advised that time should be spent on staff and children instead of getting *'bogged down in policy and paperwork'.* The participants are asking for time and space to look at the bigger picture of their work and to develop the leadership capacity of others. There is no doubt that the professional learning offered to Principals focuses on system needs and places the responsibility of dissemination on their shoulders (INTO, 2017). The INTO (2017) claims that the personal development needs of Principals should be to the forefront and the organisation

welcomes 'shadowing, mentoring, coaching, internships and exchanges, online and face-to-face learning' (p. 3). Significantly, as a primary teachers' union, they warn again mandatory qualification for school leadership, citing such an approach as problematic for the large number of small schools in the country. King and Nihill (2019) posit that the Irish system is 'very vested in the basic transmission model of professional development and usually in line with the latest national priority' (p. 15). Having the system move away from such a focus is challenging due to the compliance and accountability focus placed on it. The participants in this study want more specific learning opportunities to ensure that they are growing personally and professionally and that they are granted the appropriate time and space to do this. This approach to professional learning is re-visited in Chapter Nine.

Sahlin (2023) advocates for more time to benefit from the collegial nature of professional learning. The participants praised the Oide Mentoring Programme as it provides two residential opportunities per school year for mentors to meet together in a community of practice. Sahlin's (2023) research maintains that the context of the learning is key, and that one-day programmes do not offer the opportunity for full immersion in the learning or time to properly reflect on the learning's potential to impact on practice back in school. Sahlin (2023) concludes that networking and interactions with other Principals are key and that all professional learning should provide a balance between theory and practice. Principals need access to 'systemised, formal professional learning at all stages of their careers' (p. 16). Sahlin's (2023) claims make sense, but the challenge is around fitting such learning into the busy Principalship role and investment from the system in this type of learning. Teaching Principals need access to professional learning around aspects of their teaching and classroom management and, with their Administrative colleagues, access to continuous training on statutory obligations and leadership development (Sahlin, 2023). In other words, the professional learning needs of Principals are numerous and varied, making it essential for the system to listen to their needs and to be guided by their requests. In this study, the participants were very exercised about the benefits of coaching, mentoring, shadowing, networking, and working in communities of practice. They were vociferously positive about the residential learning opportunities provided as professional learning for mentors. Most of all, they asked for time and space. The system is listening and responding but not enough so, according to them. To answer research question four directly, the Irish system has the capacity to properly support those becoming Principals, those newly appointed and those more established in the role. How it can listen more and

provide professional learning that situates itself closer to the needs of Principals will be addressed in Chapter Nine.

8.5. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter, in the section on research question two, focused on becoming a Principal and the surprising findings around the participants' lack of knowledge as they began in the role and how much they were influenced by other Principals. Their self-belief, their focus on certain aspects of the role and encouragement from those around them all served to provide a recipe that propelled them towards Principalship. Professional learning for newly appointed Principals and the many challenges they meet underpinned research question three. In this section, the importance of the personal development of the leader came to the fore, particularly when dealing with managing emotions. In the final research question, the professional learning provision in the system was examined for its shortfalls and there was a strong sense of a system disconnected from schools and placing more pressure on Principals due to system-level demands of change, rather than providing time and space for reflection and leadership development. In other words, the Irish system has the potential to do better. This is particularly significant learning for me as a researcher and professionally, in my position as a system leader and provider of professional learning for Irish Principals through Oide.

The next and final chapter, Chapter Nine, will draw conclusions and detail implications that showcase the many benefits of the role, the challenges within it, the essential nature of bespoke professional learning and what the system needs to consider, to make sure that role sustainability becomes a reality for Irish Principals.

9. Chapter Nine: Conclusions and System Recommendations

9.1. Introduction

This final chapter will examine the implications of the findings for the Irish system, having interrogated them through the four research questions in Chapters Seven and Eight. Here, I synthesise the data and focus on new knowledge in order to arrive at conclusions for each research question. This chapter will outline the study's contribution to existing leadership knowledge, focusing on the in-depth exploration of Irish Principals' experiences. It will highlight emerging issues related to increasing system-level demands and the significance of professional learning. Thereafter, it will consider possibilities for future research and discuss the limitations of the study. The lessons learned from my point of view as researcher and in my professional practice will be presented. Ending with a brief conclusion, the chapter will also present the recommendations of the study divided into three sections:

1. Recommendations for professional learning
2. Recommendations for the system
3. Recommendations for Principals.

As an overview, and in line with Thomson's (2023) conclusion guidelines, this chapter will focus on the conceptual ideas presented in Table 5.2. It will emphasize the importance of empowering Irish Principals to lead teaching and learning effectively and to access professional learning that fosters new knowledge in specific areas while supporting their personal development as leaders. The chapter will highlight a new understanding of why people enter into the role and consider the best options to provide appropriate professional learning for aspiring, new and established Principals. Finally, it will challenge the Irish Education system to listen more consistently to what Principals and all school leaders say they need in relation to professional learning, to develop a mechanism for dialogue and to examine its own position as a provider of both professional learning and consistent accountability demands.

9.2. The Research Questions Summary of Results and New Knowledge

9.2.1. RQ1: What are the main benefits and challenges in the role of the Irish primary school Principal?

The study highlights the benefits of Principalship and supports Hallinger's (2010) argument that when Principals' personal values and beliefs are aligned with those of their school context, they are in a better position to understand and enjoy these benefits. Further, with this alignment comes features of transformational leadership (Wilson Heenan et al. 2023) like communication, shared vision and distributed leadership. Troubling this literature is the case of newly appointed

Principals not yet in the position of practising authentic leadership. The concept of authentic leadership is proposed by Lynch et al. (2022:4) as the capacity to 'be true to oneself'. Both newly appointed and more established Principals potentially struggle to achieve authentic leadership, particularly when experiencing conflict, being overwhelmed due to workload, and consistently dealing with internal and external demands. Leadership literature over the last decade has focused on the benefits of Principalship to students, to school improvement and to policy enactment (OECD, 2008a; Harris, 2012; Day et al. 2016). However, the benefits to the person of the leader are not showcased sufficiently in the literature. In this study, adopting this perspective of role benefits has showcased the participants' love, passion, and enjoyment of many aspects of Principalship, constituting a significant contribution to leadership knowledge, establishing a significant gap in the literature and an important focus for those aspiring to Principalship.

The study also highlights the many challenges of Principalship. Due to overwhelming demands, the participants shared how challenged they are to maintain a focus on teaching and learning, to sustain a balance between their leadership and management responsibilities and to address negative perceptions of their role. They proposed forms of distributed leadership and the further development of their own person as potential solutions to these challenges. However, they describe both aspects of leadership as in need of further development. In the case of distributed leadership, they acknowledged its potential to make a significant impact on their workload by empowering the sharing of leadership in their schools. They were adamant that they need more support to achieve this as many teachers and middle leaders are not in a suitable state of readiness for such collaboration.

The conceptualisation of distributed leadership as a developmental challenge is a consideration well known in the literature of Harris (2013), Gunter et al. (2013), Harris and DeFlammis (2016) and Hickey at al. (2023), among others. Although proposed by Spillane (2005) as a construct with the potential to distribute leadership and link it to school context, the participants are clear that distributed leadership is not fully understood in Irish schools and needs significant mediation at local level. Although there have been various policy documents on the subject, this study adds to the views of Murphy and Brennan (2022) which verify the lack of developmental supports being provided to embed distributed leadership. Although already explicit in the literature (Murphy, 2019; Torrance, 2013; Murphy and Brennan, 2022), a further understanding of the lack of distributed leadership development in the Irish system, despite numerous policy documents and supports, makes a significant contribution to the literature.

Furthermore, this study highlights a distinct gap in professional learning for the person of the leader within such a model, highlighted in research question three below.

9.2.2. RQ2: How does becoming a Principal influence these benefits and challenges?

The most surprising additional knowledge from the entire study and a new perspective, arose from the circumstances of becoming a Principal. Utilising Thomson's (2024) encouragement to seek congruence within the data analysis and clear linkage to the research questions, I was cognisant of the participants describing their willingness to enter into the role while admitting a significant lack of knowledge about its remit and responsibilities. The situational circumstances around becoming a Principal are generally absent from the literature. Rather, it tends to focus on formal preparation (Daresh and Male, 2000; Ng and Szeto, 2016), school culture (McNamara et al. 2021b; Medford and Brown, 2022) and experiences once in the role (Earley and Bubb, 2013; McGovern, 2015; Medford and Brown, 2022). Murphy (2023:45) argues that leadership practice and development are actually 'social practices' taking place in 'cultural contexts' that require people to be ready to lead their school community effectively. Such practices need a stronger vision in the Irish context according to Murphy (2023). The participants portrayed a significant lack of knowledge in relation to a very complex role. Once in the role, all Principals in this study agreed that they paid dearly for this, articulating their lack of knowledge as *'naivety'* (Brendan) and seen through *'rose-tinted glasses' (*Andrew).

Earley and Bubb (2013) contend that a formal leadership preparation programme may not necessarily be the solution, an interesting point of view given that none exists in Ireland. However, they suggest the pre-appointment phase has a very valuable shadowing and handover potential for those entering into the role to partake in experiential learning and to build tacit knowledge with peers. Some programmes, such as Oide's post graduate diploma in school leadership (PDSL), facilitate effective leadership visits entailing an element of job-shadowing, but this is not a compulsory programme for Principalship. From as far back as 2015, the IPPN called for job-shadowing for those aspiring to leadership to enable them to experience at first hand 'the multiplicity of skills required' for the role (IPPN, 2015:5). More recently, a study conducted by the INTO (2021) found that a formal handover procedure is necessary between outgoing and incoming school Principals and that newly appointed Principals should be able to avail of a shadowing experience in advance of beginning in the role.

The contribution to knowledge from this research question presents a new understanding of the circumstances of those making the decision to apply for Principalship and the potential for a

period of formal shadowing/apprenticeship/handover. This would serve the purpose of making the incoming Principal more aware of the challenges before their predecessor leaves, empower them to work together on issues that arise, link to the Tuiscint programme which I return to below, and enhance the confidence of the new Principal to deal with the complexities of the role in the early stages of Principalship. A deeper understanding of this professional learning opportunity would greatly enhance the existing body of knowledge in educational leadership.

9.2.3. RQ3: How can professional learning mediate the challenges and enhance the benefits?

The participants were clear that a focus on the person of the leader is a very important element of professional learning. They expressed gratitude for some of the worthwhile supports provided for them but all fifteen consistently regretted the lack of time and space available to them to network, and to learn collaboratively with other Principals. This study suggests that discussion and sharing of experiences might constitute a key element of all professional learning opportunities. Although not actually named by the participants, their description of this learning points to clusters and to communities of practice. The areas of learning the participants did name were the collaborative creation of a vision, the balance of their management responsibilities with their leadership development, how to become effective instructional leaders, and how to move towards transformational leadership while remaining true to context, culture, and vision. Additionally, self-awareness around their own professional learning needs and those of their staff were rated as very important. The participants cited these professional learning needs as essential retrospectively now that they are more established in the role.

Sahlin (2023) claims that networking is a beneficial and effective form of professional learning. In the Irish context, the IPPN organise Local County Networks at which groups of Principals gather informally to discuss what is important for them. These groups are supported by a trained facilitator who facilitates the discussion and incorporates an element of professional learning. Another example is the 'Meitheal' (old Irish word for neighbours helping each other), a support run by Oide Leadership where groups of experienced Principals come together with a trained facilitator. Many other communities of practice exist, particularly in specific areas of subject learning. As outlined in Chapter Six, the participants in this study expressed their appreciation of networking as part of their professional learning and called for its recognition as formal professional learning, supporting networking as one of a range of professional learning options. This very focused approach to the type of professional learning needed and the foci suggested

by the Principals potentially adds to the knowledge base on professional learning for established Principals and merits further exploration. Mulford (2003:47) advocates for professional learning that might 'maintain motivation and challenge for experienced Principals'. Mulford (2003) also introduces the idea of fixed periods of appointment for Principals enabling them to vacate the role before retirement and to avail of sabbaticals and secondments to have' periodic time away from the school context' (p. 47). No such opportunities exist for Principals in Ireland. According to Oplatka (2004), more established Principals are in 'maintenance vs renewal stage' with feelings of 'stagnation, loss of enthusiasm and disenchantment' (p. 45). My participants articulated anxiety around longevity in the role, particularly because of being appointed at such a young age. An optional step-down facility for Principals might become a consideration in the Irish system and is an implication from the findings of this study. Such a facility would mean Principals could choose, if they so wished, to move back into a teaching role in their own school without losing their Principalship terms and conditions. In Ireland, if a Principal steps down from the role, they lose their Principal's allowance. If they decide to work in a seconded position with Oide, they also lose their Principal's allowance until they return to school.

The professional learning needs of newly appointed Principals were a major concern for my participants who advocated very strongly for the care and support of their newly appointed colleagues. This concern is operationalised in the Irish system by the provision of one-to-one mentoring for all those newly appointed to the role with fourteen of the fifteen participants acting as mentors, as explained in Chapter Three. Like all supports, Oide leadership mentoring has its challenges, primarily ensuring that the best people train as mentors. There are further challenges around the matching of mentors with mentees, the time and effort the mentoring programme entails for both mentors and mentees and the on-going professional learning and sustainability needs of mentors. However, the remarkable dedication and hard work of volunteer mentors deserves recognition. Ongoing support from the DE is essential for effective mentoring, particularly in the area of established and continuous professional learning for Principal mentors as a community of practice.

 Due to their own experiences in the early days of Principalship, the participants expressed concern about their readiness, their level of personal development and the challenges they encountered early in the role. Such a high level of concern in 2022[48], with quality and varied

---

[48] The data for this study was gathered in May-July 2022.

professional learning available through the aforementioned mentoring service and, additionally, coaching and significant induction supports, is concerning. Ng and Szeto (2016) claim that new school leaders need both formal and informal supports from peers and mentors. The formal is provided in abundance for both new and established Principals in Ireland.

As outlined in Chapter Six, the participants had high praise for the Irish induction programme for newly appointed Principals (Misneach), provided by Oide which supports communities of practice, the building of networks and shared learning, empowering school leaders to 'respond effectively to the realities of managing and leading in the Irish context' [49]. Oide's programme for established Principals (Forbairt) supports school Principals, their Deputy Principal and another teacher leader to 'reflect upon and improve their ways of working together'. They also expressed their appreciation for the high-quality leadership learning provided by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI), and the various primary Management Bodies. It is clear that valued professional learning is available for leadership and particularly for newly appointed Principals and that it is not in short supply in the Irish context.

However, it is testament to the ever-increasing demands of the role that although readily available in the system, these supports still seem inadequate. This study points to a potential review of leadership learning in the Irish system and an interrogation of the provision of more learner-driven opportunities including networking, clustering, communities of practice and bespoke in-school support linked to the main leadership programmes as another implication of this Dissertation.

9.2.4. RQ4: What system supports are required while people are becoming Principals and when they are more established in the role?

The study has highlighted the many leadership supports available in the system from the DE and other stakeholders. There was a strong sense of appreciation of this level of support from the participants, particularly in relation to mentoring, coaching, Misneach and the PDSL for those aspiring to leadership, with its shadowing practice as outlined above and in Chapter Six. Significantly, the Oide Post Appointment Pre-Commencement Programme, Tuiscint,[50] is

---

[49] Oide (2024a) and Oide(2024b) refer to the Misneach and Tánaiste Programmes. Together with all other primary leadership programmes, descriptors are available at this link: https://oide.ie/leadership/home/primary/
[50] The descriptor for the Oide Pre-Commencement Programme, Tuiscint, (Irish word for understanding) is also available at this link and was made accessible in 2024 for the first time. The programme is aimed at those who have been appointed to the role of Principal but have not yet begun in the role. It is essentially the nuts and bolts of Principalship, a survivor's guide for all the practical, administrative, and relational work involved provided through a leadership lens. The programme has been developed in collaboration between Oide Leadership

now also available and will make a crucial difference to newly appointed Principals, equipping them with the management knowledge they need as they begin in the role. Conversely, the participants' appreciation of system supports was overshadowed by their feelings of overwhelm, their articulated disconnect with the system, and their wish to have their voices heard more. From their point of view, the system continues to demand change reform and policy implementation, classrooms are becoming more diverse, parents and students have higher expectations, and sustainability in leadership continues to move out of their grasp. Burke et al. (2022), although focused on post-primary Principals in Ireland, argue that there are three main causes of stress in Principals: relational issues, systemic issues from external pressures and systemic issues from the demands of daily responsibilities. This research resonates with my participants' experiences of unhappy relationships with staff members, demands from the system and being overwhelmed with work. Similarly, the findings of Maxwell and Riley (2016) in their study of over 1,300 Principals in Australia, confirms that the education sector continues to face increasing demands, particularly increasing emotional demands on teachers and school leaders. Maxwell and Riley (2016) specifically warn about the dangers of emotional labour, the suppressing or hiding of emotions, mentioned by each participant in this study. My participants' attempts to manage their emotional labour and their familiarity with its presence provides new knowledge for the system. Ultimately, as this study concludes, there is an emerging recognition that something has to be done to alleviate this situation.

9.3. Overview of Contribution to Knowledge

Although this was a very small-scale study and I make no claims to generalisability or representativeness, it does point to the need to recognise the benefits of Principalship and address the negative perception of the role in the Irish system and, in so doing, suggests a number of professional implications for leadership development. Renewed recognition of the role's challenges, the consideration of sustainability in Principalship and the system's responsibilities in both areas will inform leadership preparation and the further development of more bespoke supports for those aspiring to senior leadership and those newly appointed to the role. The importance of the person of the leader emerging from this study will provide insight for the development of bespoke professional learning opportunities to address the personal development of people at all stages of Principalship and for those aspiring to the role. The

---

Division, Teacher Professional Learning Section (TPLS) of the Department of Education and all primary stakeholders in the system.

EEPN (2019) provides key policy measures which include a focus on the link between accountability and autonomy, and bespoke professional learning for school leaders on topics 'relevant to their function' (p. 9). This research aligns with the CSL Continuum of Professional Learning for Leadership and the importance of bespoke professional learning for each stage of leadership as previously outlined. The data on distributed leadership will help to situate its current development as a construct in Irish schools and provide a focus on how professional learning can further aid its usefulness, its currency, and its implementation in specific school contexts. The conclusions from the data on becoming a Principal offer further understandings of this stage of leadership development and the supports needed to off-set challenge in the early stages of the role. Finally, the gaps identified by study participants in relation to leadership professional learning will potentially bring focus to the learner-driven elements of formal networking, clustering, communities of practice, shadowing, formal handovers and transformational leadership.

9.4. Future Research

Although not a focus in this study, the governance structure of Irish primary schools emerged from the data as a significant issue. It was clear, throughout the data set, that almost all the participants felt dissatisfied with how their schools were governed, with the caveat that three or four praised the people involved in governance for their kindness and support. The main criticism from the participants was the lack of support from their Board of Management, with members lacking the skills and knowledge to play a meaningful role in school governance. This should, I contend, be considered an area for further empirical research.

Another system support mentioned frequently by the Principals was the Inspectorate. As with governance, individuals were mentioned as caring and supportive but the collective still holds a level of anxiety for the participants based on the fear of getting caught out, about not being ready, and about not reaching a set of standards. This becomes an interesting phenomenon when examined through the literature. Ehren et al. (2013) claim there is a broad spectrum of approaches from a policing style which advocates for rule enforcement and a consultancy approach based on 'persuasion, advice, and education' (p. 5). Ehren et al. (2013) suggest that inspectors aim to drive school improvement through their relationships with schools and the reforms being implemented. The intended outcomes include enhanced collegiality, capacity building, and the re-evaluation of priorities in alignment with national action plans. However, Ehren et al. (2013) contend that alongside these intended outcomes are the unintended, including stress, which can end in 'absenteeism' and even 'resignation' (p. 27). Hislop (2017)

argues that the Irish Inspectorate is focused on their dual and balanced functions of accountability and school improvement through professional engagement and their 2015 Code of Practice.[51] This code advocates for three principles of development and improvement, respectful engagement, and responsibility and accountability. Hislop (2017) speaks about 'a developmental process for proposed changes' to 'alleviate fears and anxieties' (p. 6). Later, in the Chief Inspector's Report (2022), Hislop explains the purpose of advisory visits in specific areas to 'affirm good practice and to provide practical advice' (p. 63). Clearly, work is being done to ensure the school inspection process is more co-professional and co-constructed. This is particularly evident with the SSE process within which the Inspectorate is working collaboratively with schools to build capacity around internal evaluation. However, the well-established Principals in this study, clearly stated a continuing sense of anxiety and stress around external evaluation. Considering their contributions comparatively with the literature situates this as a developing space with significant potential and a second area of future research.

Resilience was identified by my participants as an important aspirational state for their well-being and sustainability, confirmed by Redmond's (2016) research. However, it remains a contested concept in the literature (Steward, 2014; Stynes and McNamara, 2018; Mahdiani and Ungar, 2021). I propose that it would make a third interesting area for further research.

Finally, the issue of gender was only mentioned once by one participant taking over from a very competent former male Principal. The influence of gender in Irish Principalship constitutes a fourth area of potential future study.

9.5. Limitations and Evaluation of the Research

Here I outline the limitations of this study. One limiting factor is the context of the fifteen study participants who are all involved in some aspect of system leadership and who have all experienced significant levels of professional learning for leadership. This may signify an over-positive position amongst my participants. On the other hand, each of the participants contributed comprehensively to the challenges of the role. All of them expressed a strong sense of being overwhelmed at times, and all of them said they struggle to achieve a work/life balance or sustainability in their Principalship. Their determination to be solution focused may well have tipped the balance towards the positive aspects of the role. Their system leadership

---

[51] Code of Practice (DES, 2015c). This code sets out the standards the Inspectorate uses for its work: https://tinyurl.com/2ptb9an6

experience positions them as being well informed about Principalship from a wider perspective than that of their own school contexts.

Another limiting factor is my position as a former school Principal and my change of role to a provider of professional learning in the system as part of the Leadership Division of the Oide Support Service. This has situated me as a researcher with a foot in both camps. Although this presented me with the challenge of subjectivity and the concept of 'insiderness' (Mercer, 2007:3), it simultaneously presented me with the benefit of dual understanding. Mercer (2007) describes the insider simply as a researcher 'who shares a particular characteristic, for example, gender, ethnicity or culture' with the researcher (p. 3). Through the participants' stories and conversations, I felt at one with them in their struggles and their achievements and I was consistently transported back to my reasons for becoming a teacher, a middle leader, and a Principal. Listening to their frustrations in the role and, particularly, to their perceptions of a disconnect with the system, I firstly felt a strong sense of shared culture, Secondly, I found myself challenged in my current role and reflecting on what my contribution might be with regard to making things easier and better. This inner conflict throughout the progression of this study might be seen as both a limitation and a potential advantage.

My positionality towards a positive perception and past experience of Principalship might be considered another limitation of the study and is outlined in more detail in the next section. Finally, although presented as a sub-theme in the data, the current governance challenge being experienced by Irish schools is a significant contributor to challenge within the role and was not explored as fully as it might have been had words not been limited in this study.

9.6. A Change to My Practice: Lessons Learned

I approached this study with a pronounced sense of love and affection for the role of Principalship. Being in the role for fifteen years had challenged me in many ways and I was often at breaking point, balancing family needs with the multiple demands of being a Principal. However, my glass was always half full rather than half empty. I was bestowed with an optimism and enthusiasm, and the capacity to switch off after the school day, to sleep peacefully most of the time even when stressed, and to be able to prioritise a social life throughout the academic year. I had a circle of supportive family members, friends and professional colleagues who carried me through the worst of times and constantly reminded me that I was not alone. I lauded myself on this positionality, believing that life is what you make it and that I had actively put structures in place to support my development both within and outside of the role. I came

to this study as a professional practitioner and since realise that the learning for me as a novice researcher has been significant. There is a possibility that I was quite simply, steeped in fortune. A more likely scenario is that I was blinkered to the realities of others from my very positive perspective.

Using Morrow (2005) as my guide, I felt justified that I was immersed in adequate data in this study. I was consistently aware of the need to embrace my subjectivity and reflexivity, but this demanded 'contextual grounding' or a familiarisation of participants' context and culture (Morrow, 2005:253). I understood that my prime responsibility was to comprehend the meaning the participants made of their own unique contexts, and to be 'a co-constructor of meaning' (p. 254). Gradually, as the study developed, and with the guidance of my supervisors, I became aware of a strong bias in myself as explained above, that of over-positivity towards the role, a strong drive to find solutions and an impatience with elements of negativity. The trustworthiness of my data became a significant focus. To ensure fairness as a criterion for trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005), the data demanded my acceptance of the varied constructions of Principalship presented by the participants and their very negative perception of some aspects of the role. I committed to ensuring that these aspects were expanded and honoured to ensure 'ontological authenticity', and that the constructions of other participants and other Principals were discussed frequently throughout the interviews to achieve 'educative authenticity' (Morrow, 2005:252). I became aware of the importance of acknowledging the challenges involved by listening carefully to the participants, not simply to the facts of their answers and stories, but also to their emotions. I endeavoured to perceive the participants as the authority in this study rather than myself as the researcher (Morrow, 2005). This positionality was one of 'researcher reflexivity' (p. 253) in which my own experience was both challenged and affirmed by those of the participants, and there was a sense of achieving 'praxis' as the participants' feedback aligned with or contested the literature (p. 253). My perceived insider/outsider stance and the critical reflexivity I aspired to from the beginning, and as explained in Chapters One and Five, were critical to how my thinking was transformed. I outline this transformed thinking in more detail below.

The research made me aware of how people's attitudes and beliefs shape their experiences and actions, of how they attach meanings to their behaviour, of their varied interpretations of situations, and of their different perceptions of specific issues (Woods and Sikes, 2022). Regarding my positionality, going in as an insider made me aware that I was both an insider and an outsider, 'attempting to enter the field in a credible manner' (Morrow, 2005:253). This

learning as a researcher enabled me to re-consider the importance of school context and individual life experience. It assisted my realisation that my perception of Principalship was only partially shared by the participants and that the challenges of the role require further focus and professional dialogue. Most importantly, I realised that the participants' individual experiences of Principalship have significant potential to influence my work in the system.

My perception of the effective or successful Principal has significantly changed. I perceived such a person as strong, confident, focused on senior leadership, resilient to challenge, and both optimistic and positive by nature. All of these qualities remain important in the role but do not, I now believe, add up to sustainability in Principalship. The participants, as the authority in this study, have shared their stories of being teachers and becoming Principals without having had a driving ambition towards the role. They shared their lack of knowledge about the practical implications of Principalship and how fearful they were of not being perceived as capable in the shadow of their predecessors. They described their struggles to manage their emotions, especially in early Principalship, and how they lacked support in their own personal development. They revealed feelings of being let down by the system in some ways and well supported in other ways, and of struggling to enjoy the benefits of Principalship while dealing with the challenges.

On completion of this study, my focus is now on context and life experience. This learning has situated my work in the system much closer to the school as the site of learning, and I appreciate that one approach to professional learning does not suit everyone. The participants expressed the need for a myriad of different approaches. After my conversations with them, I am beginning to see the need for guided on-site and sustained learning for Principals by an external facilitator working in support of the school and focused on individual context. This bespoke support is already provided by Oide Leadership, but its review and expansion needs to be imminent. Listening to the participants brought me to the realisation that this context-focused learning might potentially progress to clustered learning in local communities of practice which collaborate, share, and learn together. The participants themselves maintain that they need time and space to progress in their own personal and emotional development and this, I now suggest, has to become a significant element of professional learning. As importantly, they need acknowledgement of their own professional learning and their leadership experience. I progress some of this thinking in the next section.

9.7. Recommendations

9.7.1. Professional Learning

As already outlined in Chapter One and in section 9.2.3. above, the professional learning provided for leadership development in Ireland is extensive. For those aspiring to senior leadership roles, the successful Oide PDSL is currently part-subsidised by the Department of Education (DE) and provided by three universities, Limerick (UL), Galway (UoG), and University College Dublin (UCD). The programme is an eighteen-month blended learning experience with leadership visits to a school other than the participant's own and to a workplace outside the education sector. Maynooth University (MU) offers a year-long blended programme entitled 'Future Leaders Gateway Programme' aimed at teachers at all levels already in leadership positions and those developing their leadership skills (MU, 2024). Additionally, Ireland's seven universities offer a variety of Master's and Doctoral programmes on educational leadership. However, as already stated, it is possible to become a Principal without participation in any such programmes. Although based on the dimensions of the Looking at Our School (2022), the recruitment process suffers the challenge of low numbers of applications and limitations around finding the best candidates to match school contexts and ethos. IPPN (2022), in their survey of over 1000 primary school Principals, claims that 27 per cent of schools advertising an Administrative Principal position received three or fewer applications and that figure increased to 35 per cent in the case of schools advertising a Teaching Principal role.

The extensive induction process provided by the Oide Leadership Division[52] for both newly appointed primary Principals [Misneach] and Deputy Principals [Tánaiste], includes access to an experienced mentor for Principals in their first year. The executive coaching programme is available to all primary and post-primary Principals. The cross sectoral Comhar Programme aims to develop middle leadership capacity and significantly, scaffolds an understanding of distributed leadership in individual school contexts. Support is also provided by the DE for the SSE process and the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) planning process is equally supported. The Tuiscint Programme for the post appointment pre-commencement stage, is now available to newly appointed Principals since 2024. A bespoke programme, Caidrimh (Irish word for conversations), has been developed to support Principals and Deputy Principals in Special Schools, all of whom received Administrative status in September 2024

---

[52] All the programmes mentioned on this page are explained in the professional learning area at the following link https://oide.ie/leadership/home/primary/

(DE, 2024c). Additionally, the Oide Leadership Division provides designated school support during which a trained professional learning leader works with a Principal and their team in DEIS, SSE, teaching and learning and in the development of leadership capacity at the site of practice. Additional supports and programmes for Principals are provided by other stakeholders as already detailed. This reads as an exceptionally comprehensive list.

Having conducted this study, collated the above list and considered the numerous challenges of the role, I recommend that Principals be given the time and space to reflect on its many benefits. Re-visiting their aspiring selves, their beliefs, and values in advance of becoming Principal, and the many aspects of the role they genuinely enjoy, might be considered an essential element of all professional learning. An emphasis on the benefits might include their individual achievements and celebrations, the learning opportunities they provide for staff and students, and the success stories of all members of their school communities. Reflective professional learning opportunities, especially informal ones, could accordingly, focus on the positive relationships and trust they experience, their own personal development, and the alignment of their core beliefs with those of their school. Such approaches might guide Principals towards more authentic and transformational understandings of the role.

The participants in this study suggest the need for bespoke professional learning at all stages of leadership but particularly for those considering senior leadership in advance of appointment. They claim not enough time and reflection is given to the important decision of applying for Principalship. Having listened carefully to the participants, professional learning is needed on what the role entails, its benefits and challenges, its potential to disturb work/life balance, the role's potential longevity, and the underpinning of everything by the building of trusting relationships. Reflection on these aspects of Principalship is crucial when considering the role according to the participants' descriptions of how people arrived at the decision to apply. Oide's PDSL is well situated to consider these important elements of Principalship, and to reflect on the participants' perception of the programme as remaining too far removed from practice as outlined in Chapter Eight. It makes sense from the data that the Irish system provides bespoke knowledge for those aspiring to senior leadership in a timely and balanced manner to inform this significant career decision. This, in turn, has implications for middle leadership and Deputy Principalship.

Although one cannot generalise from fifteen participants, I am suggesting that some lessons could be tried in practice. One example is the development of the person of the leader for those

newly appointed. The participants suggested this as essential in the early stages of Principalship to ensure these new leaders are focused on relationships and the building up of their own confidence to deal with individual context and culture and to navigate the many challenges in their early days in the role. The inclusion of reflective professional learning at this stage to enable this personal growth might be considered so that people are offered both formal and informal learning opportunities to develop the person of the leader as opposed to, or at least as importantly as, the practice of the leader. The study also suggests that more established Principals continue to need bespoke learning on their personal development as they encounter challenge and burn-out and attempt to retain sustainability in the role. Nussbaum (2011) argues that we should aim to produce the capabilities of each and every person espousing the principle of 'each person as an end' (p. 35). Hence there is a responsibility on the Irish system to provide adequate time, space, leadership support and professional learning to ensure the capabilities of all schools leaders are nurtured and developed to sustain their role.

The utilisation of distributed leadership as a tool to develop leadership capacity is a second example of a potential lesson in practice. As CSL (2018) argues, there are three other stages of leadership apart from newly appointed, aspiring and more established, namely teacher, middle [Assistant Principals One and Two], and system leadership. Based on the participant responses, it's crucial to recognise the unique value of each leadership stage. This approach ensures that leaders who prefer to stay in teacher or middle leadership roles receive the necessary support, while those interested in advancing to senior leadership positions are encouraged and assisted in their progression (Forde, 2016). The conceptualisation of leadership throughout this study indicates the need for middle leadership development to ensure those aspiring to leadership are enabled to focus on collaborative or distributed leadership based on individual school contexts and that they are more informed of both the benefits and challenges of the Principalship role. I recommend the further extension of the Comhar programme and a link to sustained school support for leadership teams within their own contexts and facilitated by Oide staff. This might extend to clusters and communities of practice as a follow-up to Comhar, to further extend the learning opportunities.

Additionally, the data suggests a deficit in the understanding, development and mediation of distributed leadership at school level. As all fifteen participants mentioned distributed leadership and their attempts to develop it further, I recommend that the Irish system re-examines the potential to develop professional learning in this area that enables middle and senior leaders to learn together. Forde (2022) recommends that the Principal and Deputy

Principal working together to support middle leaders is a key element of leadership professional learning that models collaborative leadership with an external facilitator's voice. In the former CSL Middle Leadership Action Research Project, participants reported appreciation of working in clusters with other schools and seeing this learning opportunity as 'vital communication' and 'great learning' resulting in 'camaraderie' and 'a safe space' (Forde, 2022). Meeting entire leadership teams together, through the Comhar Programme as outlined above, would serve to strengthen leadership capacity and have a very significant reach while simultaneously addressing the need for further mediation of distributed leadership and the implementation of Circular 44/2019 (DE, 2019) in primary schools. In the same way as the leadership is collaborative, learning is collaborative. To avoid people entering into the role without a basic understanding of it, the development of leadership capacity at Assistant and Deputy Principal stages using this approach could potentially become a key focus in leadership professional learning in Ireland.

Due to the many supports currently available in the Irish system, the Principals in this study did not suggest the need for a formal preparation programme for people aspiring to Principalship. The launch of the Tuiscint Programme, as already outlined, as a practical tool kit for those who have just been appointed in 2024 will bridge the gap for those who become Principals without adequate practical leadership knowledge and experience. Additionally, having conducted this study, I recommend the consideration of shadowing and formal handover procedures to sufficiently prepare those beginning in the role. In 2024, and due to the complexity of the role, it is no longer either acceptable or practical for teachers to become Principals without adequate experience, knowledge and leadership professional learning. Although emanating from such a small participant cohort, the data in this study suggests the need for a combination of appropriate professional learning and improved handover and shadowing procedures to ensure the competence and confidence of new Principals. Rather than a mandatory preparation for Principalship, the Irish system might consider and accommodate mandatory shadowing and handover procedures. This might entail out-going Principals being encouraged to retire at the end of an academic year rather than at another time during it, and working with those in-coming Principals, perhaps between January and April, so that sufficient time is available for shadowing the outgoing Principal and for a formal handover procedure before the academic year ends. Substitution would be required to facilitate this form of professional learning.

The opportunity to step down voluntarily from Principalship was mentioned by a third of the participants. This is obviously an industrial relations issue, but it has the potential for development through distributed leadership. Deputy Principals and middle leaders could have the opportunity to step up to Principalship for short periods of time to enable Principals to relinquish the role. This might be, for example, a period of six weeks or two months, once a year. This would provide a resting period for Principals while simultaneously developing the leadership capacity of others. Further, it would accommodate the return of the Principal's focus to teaching and learning for the duration. In the Australian system, Principals have the opportunity to avail of sabbatical leave for a short period which is paid for by a reduction in salary of 20 per cent in the four-year period in advance of the short leave. Describing it as a 'professional renewal incentive scheme', Principals on the scheme are expected to use it as a period of professional learning to gain new skills and educational experiences (Education, Victoria, 2020: para 1). Paid sabbatical opportunities for Irish Principals do not currently exist but potentially provide an alternative method of choice for ensuring the time and space so sought after by the participants in this study.

Although the study represents the views of a very small number of Principals, the challenges they experience in the role were steadfastly and consistently evident throughout. From the data, a voluntary step-down facility for Principals enabling them to continue on their terms and conditions when they have completed fifteen years in the role would make sense. Such a possibility has long been recommended by the IPPN (2015) (although the organisation advocates for a step-down facility after seven years). IPPN contends that Principals should be supported to step down with their seniority and pension intact (IPPN, 2015).

From my own experience as the Principal of two separate schools, both school communities and I benefitted significantly from my moving away after eight years in one school and seven in the other. I was privileged to attain a system position after this period of fifteen years. Working in the system has afforded me new learning and a different perspective. System leadership has the potential to further the sustainability of Principals with the possibility of a new role in leadership learning. To this end, all school leaders could be afforded the opportunity to apply to work in the system, retaining their Principal salary. This is not the case currently and leaders working in the system, except in a small number of exceptions, lose their leadership allowances while on secondment. Secondment also poses other challenges. According to O' Donnell (2023), secondment is a transformative experience that creates proficiency in teacher educators while simultaneously developing a cultural disconnection from their schools. O'

Donnell (2023) points to the professional capital gained on secondment which provides secondees with the impetus to consider alternative careers in education, positing that such a stance is necessary due to the lack of stability and limited tenure in the secondment model. Acknowledgement of this positionality and extended professional learning for those involved might further support their options, including a potential return to their own or another school context.

In sum, the Irish education system has many options open to it which conceivably might serve to enhance the sustainability of Principalship. From formal shadowing and handovers to short breaks away from Principal responsibilities, sabbaticals and stepping down alternatives, there is much that can be achieved to support the overburdened Principal.

The participants recommended coaching, mentoring, reflection, and networking to further develop themselves as leaders. Having listened to the fifteen participants, and to reach a level of sustainability in Principalship, I recommend that these learning opportunities be made available earlier in a Principal's career but particularly, at Deputy Principal level. This means that current coaching and mentoring supports might be made available to Deputy Principals to empower them to engage in effective collaborative leadership with the Principal so that the move from Deputy to Principal is a more natural progression, an anticipated step for those aspiring to Principalship, with an understanding of what the role entails. In my own work in Oide Leadership, the current success of team coaching in the Irish system could be acknowledged by expanding team coaching sessions to eight rather than four sessions and accessible to all members of the school leadership team, irrespective of numbers. This might also address the slow burner approach to one-to-one coaching as was outlined in Chapter Four.

As all fifteen participants spoke about how they value informal professional learning, consideration might be given to networking as a formal, valuable, and accepted form of learning. All professional learning events might place a strong focus on promoting and providing networking opportunities and I recommend that these opportunities be prioritised on agendas and workplans. Learning in clusters or communities of practice, either online or face-to-face, might be considered when programmes or courses are coming to an end to ensure the learning and networking continues informally on completion of the programme. In the Irish education system, communities of practice have become a popular means of collaborative learning. According to Wenger (2000), participation in communities of practice is 'essential to our learning' (p. 229) as communities of practice can enable a collectively developed

understanding of mutual engagement. Wenger claims that communities of practice can afford deep learning in a given area and the opportunity to participate in a broader social learning system. It is worth considering the further expansion of current learning opportunities in communities of practice to enhance the personal development of school Principals.

While network meetings and communities of practice are already playing their part in contributing to Principals' professional learning, the participants are of the opinion that more of this is needed from the system. Currently, the Oide Meitheal Programme[53] provides the opportunity for more established Principals to come together informally four times a year in groups of four to six in which the professional conversation is facilitated by a specially trained working or retired Principal with coaching skills. The first question often asked is *'How are you?'* and when the usual answers are supplied in typical Irish fashion like *'I'm grand'*, *'I'm okay'*, the facilitator then asks, *'Now, how are you really?'*. This simple approach may well form some of what the participants are asking for. IPPN provides Network Support meetings for Principals with similar opportunities and are facilitated by trained Principals who invest in coaching and mentoring approaches to professional learning. These communities of practice need on-going support from the DE to be maintained in the system and to offer school leaders the networking opportunities that they articulate as so important to them.

As professional learning in general was an important aspect of the work of the participants, it needs to be strengthened by the system as a focus for every Principal, both for themselves and for everyone in their school community. It could potentially form part of professional discussions around all four domains of LAOS (2022) and be linked to teacher leaders through the lens of the Teaching Council's Cosán Framework. Enthusiasm, interest, and dedication for all professional learning needs and active facilitation in it already exists to a certain extent but might be further developed as a strong focus for aspiring leaders in preparation for leading professional learning in Principalship. It is important that Principals are supported to model engagement and participation and to support that of others. This support should be provided by their Boards of Management, to empower them to effectively lead professional learning and, by extension, there should be a recognition that professional learning is a key aspect of all leadership recruitment processes so that people are duly recognised for their engagement and participation.

---

[53] Meitheal is an Irish word to describe the manner in which neighbours used to come together to assist each other on farms and refers to a group of people working together to help each other.

9.7.2. Recommendations for the System

The participants in this study suggest that the Irish system could listen more closely to the voice of Principals. They revealed a distrust in a system consistently demanding change and a disconnect between that and the everyday lived experience in schools. As presented in Chapter Three, Dempsey and Burke (2020), claim that Principals need more streamlined communication in the Irish system to make things easier for schools. The establishment of the new DE Support Service, Oide, responds directly to the opinion of the participants in Dempsey's and Burke's study. As one participant asked: '*Any chance external agencies could coordinate policy and press releases to avoid each other's*? Additionally, in a recent European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education project that included representatives from Ireland, Hungary, Sweden, and Malta (European Agency, 2021), one of the findings from the report was a disconnect between policy makers and practitioners in Ireland due to the absence of a mechanism for them to come together to interrogate policy. This finding was accepted by the DE as an area of development for the future and one which has the potential to address the perceived disconnect from the system examined in this study. More work is needed to empower policy makers and practitioners to understand each other.

Currently, it seems the system and schools are on very busy parallel tracks that rarely meet. It is perhaps timely to consider another Education Convention, a national conversation on education. The Irish educational landscape is currently an over-crowded and contested space with many good people losing the battle to remain positive and enthusiastic in Principalship. Schools blame the system for the demands being placed on them and the system relies on schools to embed policy and mediate change reform. The Principals in this study readily admitted to feeling overwhelmed even though they were system leaders articulating high levels of enthusiasm and describing innovative approaches in their schools. They reported many examples of unsustainable aspects of their role. The valuable supports already provided are appreciated but not sufficient. The time has come to halt, to take stock, to support each other. Tools like the P.I.E.W Capacity Planning Framework (Pilot Phase, Implement Phase, Embedding Phase and Wait List Projects) developed by the IPPN (2019) as a practical planning model, and learning processes like SSE and DEIS planning, have the potential to create a more considered approach to change management.

Policy makers, academics and the Inspectorate would benefit from closer working relationships with leadership practitioners to unpack a vision together, to develop goals strategically, and to slow the pace of change. This is urgent as many are struggling, job application numbers to

Principalship are becoming problematic, and negative media coverage of the role prevails. Ireland is well known for its culture of partnership models and stakeholder engagement when it comes to educational policy development, and the creation of the primary Education Forum in 2018[54] is testament to this approach, Other examples include the NCCA's Schools Forum which includes practitioners to shape primary curriculum review and the National Council for Special Education's (NCSE) Consultative Forum in support of inclusive education (OECD, 2023). Additionally, the Oide Stakeholder Collaborative Forum takes place annually and brings all education partners together to discuss an aspect of leadership development in the Irish system[55]. System leadership is developed through the secondment model within which teachers and school leaders work with educational partners, including the Oide Support Service, to provide professional learning for teachers and school leaders within their schools, in Education Support Centres[56], and online. These initiatives are in line with the OECD's (2023) publication of its roadmap for engaging local school communities with educational policy development. I would advocate for Principal practitioner representatives as system leaders in all such initiatives and as a welcomed presence at all stakeholder gatherings. Negotiating policy by connecting practical application with the stakeholder voice could ensure powerful partnerships into the future.

Having considered the current situation of these fifteen participants and their open and authentic participation in this study, I believe that the Irish system must model sustainable leadership. According to the IPPN (2023), their mission is to 'enhance leadership capacity, effectiveness and sustainability' (p. 4). We currently live in a society where it has become unacceptable to have time to think and time to spend on developing people, essential aspects for addressing wider societal needs. The Irish education system has the capacity to support

---

[54] The Forum supports the planning and sequencing of change in the primary school sector and exchanges information on the intent and impacts of the actions in the Action Plan for Education in order to look for synergies and opportunities for schools to streamline implementation and address workload issues. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mt8fj7m5

[55] The 2024 Oide Leadership Collaborative Forum took place on March 20th in the Clock Tower Building in the DE in Marlborough St. Dublin. It was facilitated by former Chief Inspector Dr Harold Hislop and attended by a representative of all system stakeholders in the Irish system including the DE and the Inspectorate. The theme was Leading Learning: An Alternative Perspective.

[56] Education Centres (originally Teachers' Centres) have a particular remit under the Education Act (1998). In this context they respond to the System's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) agenda on behalf of the Department of Education and to the professional development needs of teachers, school management and parents at local and regional levels. Education Centres are Statutory bodies, funded by the Teacher Education Section of the Department of Education and are managed by voluntary Management Committees elected annually. The umbrella organisation, ESCI, promotes their role and the role of the Network nationally and internationally. There are 21 fulltime Centres and 9 part-time.
https://www.esci.ie/about-esci.html

Principals towards a more sustainable model of leadership that will enhance rather than disadvantage learning outcomes for students. Realistically, change must be embraced to support young people into the future, legislation must be adhered to, and accountability maintained. This study highlights the importance of relationships in this work. All the participants articulated how important their relationships with teachers and parents are. Regarding the latter, I cited Mac Giolla Phádraig (2010) in Chapter Seven, contending that partnership with parents is key. Partnership Schools Ireland (National Parents' Council [NPC], 2024) is a good example of this partnership approach and is underpinned by the work of Dr Joyce Epstein (John Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA). It proposes a trusting and practical partnership between parents, teachers and the local school community. Having been involved in this initiative myself, and receiving further endorsement from my participants, I recommend the programme as a significant support for building relationships of trust in schools.

Change, policy demands, and legislation can only be embraced in atmospheres of trust. True accountability can only be achieved when good relationships prevail. Relationships take time, people take time, neither the school nor the system has time, so sense-making becomes impossible. The balance between external demands and developing people has moved out of the reach of the Principal according to the participants in this study. The system's awareness of this and the manner in which it works to change this balance will decide the fate of the role of the Irish Principal into the future.

9.7.3. Recommendations for Principals

The participants in this study strongly advocated for Principals consistently taking stock of all the aspects of their role that they enjoy, particularly focusing on their positive relationships. They felt Principals should be empowered to reflect on what they appear to really believe, that they are privileged to be in the role, particularly in relation to their provision of high-quality learning opportunities for students and staff members. Conversely, they asked that Principals should also be encouraged to focus on the challenges, the negative relationships, and conflict, in a safe professional space where colleagues and facilitators can be trusted and where confidentiality is key. Having considered their opinions, I recommend that engaging in professional dialogue about the negative perception of the role and the everyday challenges with colleagues in similar positions has the potential to sustain and comfort, to reassure and motivate. Having time with people experiencing similar challenges to oneself can create a cathartic release. Including this time as an element of all professional learning in triadic groups

might be a worthwhile consideration in the future support of school leadership in challenging times of change. The continuation of the Oide Meitheal Programme will assist this approach.

An encouraging finding from this research is how aware the participants were of their own professional learning needs and how so many of them reported systematically facilitating conversations around the learning needs of their school community. They actively promoted a culture of professional learning to support recruitment, promotion, collaboration, and a shared vision. The Teaching Council's (2016b) Cosán (Irish word for pathway) Framework for Teacher Professional Learning seeks to 'foster a culture of powerful professional learning based on teachers' active engagement in their own learning' (p. 3). With the values of respect, care, integrity and trust, the Cosán Framework is flexible, recognises autonomy, and enables teachers and school leaders to pursue relevant learning opportunities. I recommend the Cosán Framework to facilitate conversations around professional learning in school communities.

These fifteen participants live professional learning each day. From this data, I recommend recognition of this active approach by the system and by recruitment boards so that leaders' engagement in learning can be personally documented and recorded, recognised and adequately acknowledged. The Droichead Induction programme for newly qualified teachers advocates for a standardised digital portfolio to capture and document learning (Uí Choistealbha and Ní Dhuinn, 2021). Maintaining such a portfolio of learning right up to senior leadership level would emphasise the importance of professional learning and enhance the recruitment process to senior leadership roles.

Having come to the end of this study, I firmly endorse distributed leadership as an active area of development that benefits from the support of an outside voice through coaching, mentoring, communities of practice, and national learning projects. Principals need to be supported to understand the challenges involved in developing effective distributed leadership and to seek the support they need to successfully develop it according to their own school context.

The data from the participants suggests that Principals could be supported to be more self-aware of their own personal development, understand how it has progressed since they began in Principalship, and ensure that they take every opportunity for further development through networking with colleagues and engaging in high quality professional learning. While generally keen to curtail their emotions in the presence of staff members, they might be further supported to articulate, in a professional manner, their feelings of tiredness, annoyance, anger, fear, or of being overwhelmed and so develop into a level of comfort with open and honest

conversations. As the literature has suggested, consistent suppression of emotions is not good for physical and mental health (Maxwell and Riley, 2016). Accordingly. I would welcome an initiative in which Principals reflect on this and suggest the support they need to develop their personhood and to ensure their own well-being.

Having listed the early experiences of Principalship, the participants advocated for more established Principals to be aware of how newly appointed colleagues feel and the circumstances of their beginning in Principalship. I believe that offering to mentor and to provide shadowing opportunities for those newly appointed and those aspiring to Principalship would aid their own personal and professional development, particularly in reciprocal mentoring relationships. The insights provided in this study on how people enter into the role and experience considerable challenge in their early days should, I suggest, be understood by those more established. in order to support mentoring, shadowing and formal handover opportunities and to provide bespoke professional learning and leadership experience opportunities for middle leaders and Deputy Principals. I recommend that those more established in the role might be encouraged to better understand the potential influence they have on aspiring leaders and consider their responsibilities to limit negativity, to avoid "war stories", and to encourage and support those interested in leadership. In Chapter One, I recounted how support from the former Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) ensured I felt affirmed, more confident and excited about my role in 2000. In 2024, I present affirmation, confidence and excitement as aspirations from the system for those beginning in Principalship.

LAOS (2022) has been interrogated in this study as a framework with the potential for self-reflection and collaboration but also as a potentially hegemonic instrument of performativity. Finally, I recommend that this latter imagining of its intent is addressed by the two principles that I feel pervade all the contributions of my participants to this study, namely social justice and inclusion. Through the courage and moral purpose of Irish school leaders, from which I was inspired to begin this research, this quality framework should underpin all leadership professional learning in Ireland, should be practically linked to all professional learning events and the tool kit for its practical application developed by the former CSL[57] should be utilised to inspire discussion and debate in all school communities.

---

[57] https://reflectiontool.cslireland.ie/

9.8. Chapter Conclusion

This study has afforded me the opportunity to highlight the role of the Irish Primary Principal. I am privileged to have been in the role myself for fifteen years and to currently work in support of Principals in the Leadership Division of Oide. I have always felt the need to facilitate discussion on the benefits of the role as there are so many aspects I enjoyed, including the children and their development, their families, and the relationships I built with teachers, leaders, support staff, BOM members and system colleagues. I simply loved being in the role. However, the challenges were constant, with moments of extreme stress, fear, heartbreak, and frustration. Being a Principal is extremely demanding, overwhelming at times and consistently frantic. The fifteen incredible participants of this study concurred, experiencing similar benefits and challenges.

My own learning as I progressed through this study has been significant. I am now much more aware of the circumstances of those new to Principalship and what constitutes their early days in the role. I have gained a deeper understanding of the reasons why they made the decision to become Principals. I have learned about the positive and negative influence of former Principals. I have renewed appreciation for those who do the job on a daily basis, and I stand in admiration of their courage and forbearance. I understand the participants' abhorrence of negativity about the role, especially from their colleagues, and I appreciate how much of their own personal time, space, and, on occasion, money, goes into the job. In summary, as a well-established Principal myself, the learning from this research project has been immense.

There is still much to achieve and to learn. Firstly, the system needs to better acknowledge the day-to-day reality of schools for Principals, through dialogue, listening and through ensuring that practitioners, policy makers and the Inspectorate move closer together and work more collaboratively. Secondly, the system needs to shout "Stop" and model a more sustainable approach to school leadership in consultation with schools. Finally, it needs to affirm, praise, nurture, comfort, and support Principals who struggle as I write, to maintain a work/life balance and that all important equilibrium between minding people and dealing with external demands, in their ubiquitous struggle against neoliberalism and towards a socially-just agenda. The system has the opportunity to change how Irish primary Principalship is perceived and to influence the role so it can be enacted for the better, but time is of the essence as the pressures continue to increase. It is timely to pause, reflect, discuss and network and it is essential that we make time to do this together.

Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine.[58]

---

[58] Old Irish proverb with the literal meaning of 'We live in each other's shadows' reminding us of the importance of our relationships with other people.

182

10. References

ACER [Australian Council for Educational Research] (2018) 'School Improvement'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mr3ru69z (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Acton, K.S. (2021) 'School Leaders as Change Agents: Do Principals have the Tools They Need?' in *Management in Education*, vol. 35, no.1, pp. 43-51.

Adams St. Pierre, E. (1997) 'Methodology in the Fold and the Irruption of Transgressive Data' in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 175-189.

Ainscow, M. (2015) *Towards Self-Improving School Systems, Lessons from a City Challenge*, Abington and New York, Routledge Publishing.

Aitsl [Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited] (2020) 'The Role of School Leadership in Challenging Times'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5cdvprss (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Arar, K. and Saiti, A. (2022) 'Ethical Leadership, Ethical Dilemmas and Decision Making among School Administrators' in *Equity in Education and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 126-141.

Ashforth, B. E. and Humphrey, R. H. (1995) 'Emotion in the Workplace: A Reappraisal' in *Human Relations*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 97-125.

Aston, H., Easton, C., Sims, D., Smith, R., Walker, F., Crossley, D. and Crossley-Holland, J. (2013), 'What Works in Enabling School Improvement? The Role of the Middle Tier' in *Evidence for Excellence in Education*, Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research Publication. Was available at: https://tinyurl.com/mvfasydt (Last accessed 27 March 2022, no longer available).

Ausband, L. (2006) 'Qualitative Research and Quilting' in *The Qualitative Report*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 764-770.

Ball, S. J. (2016) 'Subjectivity as a Site of Struggle: Refusing Neoliberalism?' in *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* vol. 37, no. 8, pp. 1129-1146.

Baptiste, I. (2001) 'Qualitative Data Analysis: Common Phrases, Strategic Differences' in *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 1-10.

Baranov, D. (2004) 'Navigating the Hidden Assumptions of the Introductory Research Methods Text' in *Radical Pedagogy*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 1-10.

Barry, G., Walsh, C., Ó Gallchóir, C. and Mannix McNamara, P. (2022) 'School Self-Evaluation and Empowering Leadership in DEIS Schools: An Exploration of Success' in *Irish Educational Studies*, pp.1-18.

Barth, R. S. (2006) 'Improving Relationships Within the Schoolhouse'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4mxkrkzt (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Barton, G. (2018) 'Principled Leadership: What is it I stand for? What is it I believe in?' in *Management in Education*, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 139-140.

Berkovich, I., and Grinshtain, Y. (2021) 'A Review of Rigor and Ethics' in *Qualitative Educational Administration, Management,* vol. 22, no, 3, pp. 549-564.

Birch, K. (2015) 'Neoliberalism: The Whys and Wherefores . . . and Future Directions' in *Sociology Compass*, vol. 9, no. 7, pp. 531-637.

Bobo, J. E. and Judge, T. A. (2004) 'Personality and Transformational and Transactional Leadership: A Meta-Analysis' in *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 89, no. 5, pp. 901-910.

Bowring-Carr, C. and West-Burnham, J. (1997) *Effective Learning in Schools*, Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Ltd.

Busetto, L., Wick, W. and Gumbinger, C. (2020) 'How to Use and Assess Qualitative Research Methods' in *Neurological Research and Practice Journal*, vol. 2, no. 14, pp. 1-10.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022a) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide,* London: Sage Publications.

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2022b) 'Conceptual and Design Thinking for Thematic Analysis' in *Qualitative Psychology*, vol.9, no. 1. pp. 7-24.

Brennan, J. and MacRuairc, G. (2011) 'Taking it Personally: Examining Patterns of Emotional Practice in Leading Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland' in *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 129-150.

Brooks, J. S., and Normore, A. H. (2015) 'Qualitative Research and Educational Leadership: Essential Dynamics to Consider when Designing and Conducting Studies' in *International Journal of Educational Management*, vol. 29, no. 7, pp. 798-806.

Brown, M., McNamara, G., O'Hara, J., Hood, S., Burns, D. and Kurum, G. (2019) 'Evaluating the Impact of Distributed Culturally Responsive Leadership in a Disadvantaged Rural Primary School in Ireland' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 457-474.

Burke, J. and Dempsey, M. (2021) 'Well-being in Post-Covid Schools: Primary School Leaders' Reimagining of the Future' Maynooth University. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3mfusk4d (Last accessed 17 March 2024).

Burke, J., Kinnarney, P. and Salokangas, M. (2022) 'Split in All Directions: An Exploration of the Impact of Well-being and Daily Responsibilities on Post-Primary School Leaders' Perceived Stress in *Journal of School Leadership and Management,* vol. 2, no. 2*,* pp. 110-125,

Byrne-Jimenez, M. C. and Yoon, I.H. (2019) 'Leadership as an Act of Love: Living in Dangerous Times' in *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 3, pp. 1-8.

Cameron, K. (2013) *Practicing Positive Leadership*, Oakland CA: Berrett-Koebler Publishing.

Chatzipanagiotou, P. and Katsarou, E. (2023) 'Crisis Management, School Leadership in Disruptive Times and the Recovery of Schools in the Post COVID-19 Era: A Systematic Literature Review' in *Education Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 1-29.

Cavanagh, J.B. (2010) 'Managing Collegiality: The Discourse of Collegiality in Scottish School Leadership', University of Glasgow Doctoral Thesis. Available at: https://theses.gla.ac.uk/2254/1/2010CavanaghEdD.pdf (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Clandinin, D. J. and Connelly, F. M. (2000) *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research,* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Clarke, S., and O'Donoghue, T. (2017) 'Educational Leadership and Context: A Rendering of an Inseparable Relationship' in *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 65, no. 2, pp. 167–182.

Clerkin, P. (2018) 'Health and Well-being of School Leaders' in *Education Matters* 2017-2018, pp. 142-144. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4cvbjh8e (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Clerkin, P. and Ruddy, D. (2018) 'IPPN's Action Plan for Education' in Leadership+, Issue 106, pp. 2-3, Cork: IPPN Publication.

Cohen, J. H. (2000) 'Problems in the Field: Participant Observation and the Assumption of Neutrality' in *Field Methods,* vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 316-333.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (1994) *Research Methods in Education* (Eighth Edition), London and New York: Routledge.

Coolahan, J., Drudy, S., Hogan, P., Hyland, A. and McGuinness, S. (2017) *Towards a Better Future: A Review of the Irish School System*, Cork: Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) Publication.

Crawford, M. and Cowie, M. (2012) 'Bridging Theory and Practice in Headship Preparation' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership,* vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 175-187.

Crawford, M. (2018) 'Personal Engagement, Emotion and the Educational Workplace' in *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 212-222.

CSL [Centre for School Leadership] (2018) *Learning to be a School Leader in Ireland*. Available at: Research - Oide (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Daly, R. (2020) 'A Study into Teachers' Perception of Leadership Practice in Large Co-Educational Primary Schools in County Donegal, Through the Lens of Distributed Leadership'. Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Master's Thesis. Available at: https://research.thea.ie/handle/20.500.12065/3890 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Daniëls, E., Hondeghem, A., and Dochy, F. (2019) 'A Review on Leadership and Leadership Development in Educational Settings' in *Educational Research Review*, vol. 27, pp. 110–125.

D'Arcy, G. (2019) 'IPPN Submissions: Budget 2019' in Leadership+, Issue 105, pp. 8-9, Cork: IPPN Publication.

Daresh, J. and Male, T. (2000) 'Crossing the Border into Leadership: Experiences of Newly Appointed British Headteachers and American Principals' in *Educational Management and Administration*, vol. 28, no,1, pp. 89-101.

Darlaston-Jones, D. (2007) 'Making Connections: The Relationship Between Epistemology and Research Methods' in the *Australian Community Psychologist*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 19-27.

Darmody, M., Smyth, E. and Russell, H. (2021) 'Impacts of the COVID-19 Control Measures on Widening Educational Inequalities' in *Young*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 366-380.

Davidson, R. J., Scherer, K.R. and Hill Goldsmith, H. (2003) *Handbook of Affective Sciences*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Day, C. and Sammons, P. (2016) 'Successful School Leadership'. Available at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED614324.pdf (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DE (2021) Information Note on Incidental Inspections. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5xnvyznd (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DE (2022a) Circular Letter 0056/2022 School Self-Evaluation: Next Steps. September 2022 - June 2026. Available at: gov.ie - School Self-evaluation: Next Steps September 2022 – June 2026 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

DE (2022b) Looking at DEIS Action Planning for Improvement in Primary and Post-Primary Schools: The Quality of Leadership and Management; Teaching, Learning and Professional Development. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/tmfh5shd (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DE (2023a) Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2023-2027. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ytfd7fat (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DE (2024a) A Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools and Special Schools. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ynb9wymb (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

DE (2024b) Voluntary or Compulsory Retirement-Teachers and Non-Teaching Staff. Available at: gov.ie - Voluntary or Compulsory Retirement - Teachers and non-teaching staff Last accessed 16 March 2025).

DE (2024c) Circular Letter 0011/2024 Staffing Arrangements in Primary Schools for the 2024-25 School Year. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/29csu2ec (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

DES [Department of Education and Science] (2003) Looking at our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools (2003). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/483j22ak (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES (2005) DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3ep2fuet (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES [Department of Education and Skills] (2011) Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mvxcwm97 (Last accessed 15 March 2024).

DES (2012) School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Primary Schools. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yvwu3s6s (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES (2015a) Report on the Review of DEIS. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4rennju9 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES (2015b) Circular Letter 61/2015 Primary Language Curriculum. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/f4b86djm (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES (2015c) Code of Practice for the Inspectorate. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2ptb9an6 (Last accessed 16 March 2025)

DES (2016a) A Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5n6twax3 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES (2016b) School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/eyfpctjc (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES (2016c) Circular Letter 0039/2016 Continuing Implementation of School Self-Evaluation 2016-2020. Available at https://tinyurl.com/yx63hzvm (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES (2017a) DEIS Plan 2017 Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/wm9ppkb2 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

DES (2017b) Circular Letter 0013/2017 Special Education Training Allocation. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3y2a5p5w Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES (2018a) Circular Letter 0003/2018 Leadership and Management in Post-Primary Schools. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3x8jvb3n (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES (2018b) Circular Letter 0070/2018 Leadership and Management in Primary Schools. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5n7tv5sa (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES (2018c) Well-being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4mb2nxh9 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

DES (2019a) Circular Letter 0044/2019 Recruitment/Promotion and Leadership for Registered Teachers in Recognised Primary Schools. Available at: gov.ie - Recruitment/Promotion and Leadership for Registered Teachers in Recognised Primary Schools (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

DES (2019b) Circular Letter 45/2019) Primary Language Curriculum Stages 1-4. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/hhcw294n (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Dempsey, M. and Burke, J. (2020) 'Covid-19 Practice in Primary Schools in Ireland Report: A Two-month Follow-up', Maynooth University. Available at: https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/12796/ (Last accessed 29 January 2024)

Dhillon, J., Howard, C. and Holt, J. (2020) 'Outstanding Leadership in Primary Education: Perceptions of School Leaders in English Primary Schools' in *Management in Education*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 61-68.

Dimmock, C. (2016) 'System Leadership for School Improvement: A Developing Concept and Set of Practices' in *Scottish Educational Review*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 60–79.

Doherty, R.A. (2011) 'New Labour: governmentality, social exclusion and education policy' Glasgow University PhD Thesis. Available at: http://theses.gla.ac.uk/2667/1/2010dohertyphd.pdf (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Donaldson (2010) Teaching Scotland's Future: Report of a Review of Teacher Education in Scotland. Available at: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/2178/7/0110852_Redacted.pdf (Last accessed 13 January 2024).

Donnelly, C. and McKevitt, J. (2016) 'We Need to Talk about Managerialism: On the Importance of Values Dialogue and Renewal Within Catholic Schools' in *Policy Futures in Education*, vol. 14, no. 8, pp.1078-1090.

Donnelly, K. The Irish Independent (2005) 'The €90,000 Top School Jobs Nobody Wants to Take'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4tt263nf (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Earley, P. and Bubb, S. (2013) 'A Day in the Life of New Headteachers: Learning from Observation' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership,* vol. 41, no. 6, pp. 782-799.

Earley, P. (2020) 'Surviving, Thriving and Reviving in Leadership: The Personal and Professional Development Needs of Educational Leaders' in *Management OECD Education*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 117-121.

Education Victoria (2020) 'Sabbatical Leave-Teaching Service'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bdhuxuub (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

EEPN [European Educational Policy Network] (2018) 'Desk Research Report on Education Research. School Leader Recruitment, Retention and Motivation in Europe'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/29vpjjc5 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

EEPN (2019) 'State of Affairs Report with Key Policy Messages'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/9c42es2e (Last accessed 17 March 2024).

EEPN (2020) 'Collaborative Learning and Collaborative Leadership in the Digital Age'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mvkpnfz5 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

EEPN (2022) 'The European Education Policy Network on Teachers and School Leaders Has Entered the Third Project Year!' Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mk6hhjtr (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Eisenhart, E. (1988) 'The Ethnographic Research Tradition and Mathematics Education Research' in *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 99-114.

Eisner, E. W. (1991) *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice*, New York: Macmillan.

Elliott. K. and Hollingsworth, H. (2020) 'A Case for Reimagining School Leadership to Enhance Collective Efficacy'. Available at: https://research.acer.edu.au/educational_leadership/5/ (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Ehren, M.C.M., Altrichter, H., McNamara, G. and O' Hara, J. (2013) 'Impact of School Inspections on Improvement of Schools-Describing Assumptions on Causal Mechanisms in Six European Countries' in *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, vol. 3, no. 43, pp. 3-43.

European Agency (2021) 'Supporting Inclusive School Leadership'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/392dz7v6 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

European Agency (2022) 'Increasing Inclusive Capability'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bdeprecv (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Estyn (2015) 'Improving Schools Through Regional Education Consortia'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/27bb3rem (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Fahy, A., Murphy, C., Fu, N. and Nguyen, T. (2020) 'Irish Primary School Leadership During COVID-19. Principals' Study Report 2020'. Trinity College Dublin. Available at: Irish Primary School Leadership During COVID-19. Principals' Study Report 2020 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Feast, L. and Melles, G. (2010) 'Epistemological Positions in Design Research: A Brief Review of the Literature'. Presented at the 2nd International Conference on Design Education from June 28th-July 1st (2010), University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/43zrft6v (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Fernandez, A.A. and Shaw, G.P. (2020) 'Academic Leadership in a Time of Crisis: The Coronavirus and COVID-19' in *Journal of Leadership Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 39-45.

Fink, D. (2005) *Leadership for Mortals*, London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Fitzpatrick Associates (2018) 'School Leadership in Ireland and the Centre for School Leadership: Research and Evaluation'. Available at Publications (cslireland.ie) (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

191

Fitzpatrick Associates (2020) 'Evaluation of the Centre for School Leadership-Bridging Phase 2018-2020'. Available at Publications (cslireland.ie) (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Flood, M. and Banks, J. (2021) 'Universal Design for Learning: Is it Gaining Momentum in Irish Education?' in *Education Sciences*, vol. 11, pp. 1-11.

Forde (2016) 'Leadership Development' in J. O' Brien (ed.) *School Leadership*, 3rd ed. pp. 133-150. Edinburgh: Donedin Academic Press.

Forde, C., McMahon, M.A., Hamilton G., and Murray, R. (2016) 'Rethinking Professional Standards to Promote Professional Learning' in *Professional Development in Education*, vol. 42, no.1, pp. 19-35.

Forde, C. (2022) 'Building Middle Leadership Capacity in Irish Schools'. Available at: https://oide.ie/leadership/home/primary/research/ (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Forde, C. and Torrance, D. (2021)' Leadership at all Levels: System Alignment through Empowerment in Scottish Education?' in *School Leadership and Management*, vol. 41, no. 1-2, pp. 22-40.

Friedman, I. A. (2020) 'The Competent School Principals: Personality Traits and Professional Skills in *Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 6, pp. 823-844.

Fullan, M. (2006) *Quality Leadership: Quality Learning: Proof Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, Glounthaune, Co. Cork: Líonra Publications for Irish Primary Principals Network [IPPN].

Fullan, M. (2007) *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (Fourth Edition), CA: Routledge.

Gaffney, M (2011) *Flourishing*, Dublin: Penguin Ireland.

Ganon-Shilon, S. and Chen, S. (2019) 'No School Principal is an Island: From Individual to School Sense-Making Processes in Reform Implementation' in *Management in Education*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 77-85.

Geoghegan, C. (2022) 'A Case Study Analysis of Irish Primary Schools Principals: Perspectives of and Experiences in Their Role' [Thesis, Trinity College Dublin.

School of Education. Discipline of Education]. Available at: https://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/98662 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Government of Ireland (1998) The Education Act 1998. Available at: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/51/enacted/en/html (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Government of Ireland (2001) Children Act, 2001. Available at: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2001/act/24 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Government of Ireland (2015) Children First Act 2015. Available at: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/act/36/enacted/en/html (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Government of Ireland (2018a) Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018.. Available at: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2018/act/14/enacted/en/html (Last accessed 25 March 2024).

Government of Ireland (2018b) Data Protection Act 2018. Dublin: Government Publication. Available at: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2018/act/7/enacted/en/html (Last accessed 25 Match 2024).

Green Paper on Education (1992) 'Education for a Changing World'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/hefs8pn7 (Last accessed 10 March 2024).

Greene, J.A. and Yu, S. B. (2015) 'Education Critical Thinkers: The Role of Epistemic Cognition' in *Policy Insights from the Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 45-53.

Grissom, J. A., Mitani, H., & Woo, D. S. (2019) 'Principal Preparation Programs and Principal Outcomes' in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, vol. *55*, no. 1, pp. 73–115.

Gronn, P. (1996) 'From Transactions to Transformations, A New World Order in the Study of Leadership?' in *Educational Management and Administration*, vol. 24, no.1, pp. 7-30.

Gronn, P. (2002) 'Designer Leadership: The Emerging Global Adoption of Preparation Standards' in *Journal of School Leadership*, vol. 12, no. 5, pp. 552-578.

Gronn, P. (2003) *The New Work of Educational Leaders: Changing Leadership Practice in an Era of School Reform*, London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Guba, E. (1981) 'Criteria for Assessing the Trustworthiness of Naturalistic Inquiries' in *Educational Communication and Technology*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 75-91.

Guba, E. and Lincoln, Y. (1994) 'Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 105-117.

Gunter, H. (1999) 'Contracting Headteachers as Leaders: An Analysis of the NPQH' in *Journal of Education*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 251-264.

Gunter, H. (2006) 'Teacher Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities' in *Scottish Educational Review,* vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 114-123.

Gunter, H., Hall, D. and Bragg, J. (2013) 'Distributed Leadership: A Study in Knowledge Production' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol. 41, no. 5, pp. 555-580.

Gunter (2016) *An Intellectual History of Leadership Practice and Research*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.

Hamilton, G., Forde, C. and McMahon, M. (2018) 'Developing a Coherent Strategy to Build Leadership Capacity in Scottish Education' in *British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society* [BELMAS], vol. 32, no. 2, pp.72-78.

Hall, T., Byrne, D., Bryan, A., Kitching, K., Ní Chróinín, D., O'Toole, C. and Addley, J. (2021) 'COVID-19 and Education: Positioning the Pandemic; Facing the Future' in *Irish Educational Studies*, vol. 40. no. 2, pp. 147-149.

Hallinger, P. (2010) 'Leadership for Learning: Lessons from 40 Years of Empirical Research' in *Journal of Educational Leadership'*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 125-142.

Hargreaves, A. (2005) Sustainable Leadership in Brent Davies {Ed}, *The Essentials of School Leadership* (pp. 173-189), London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2012) *Professional Capital, Transforming Teaching in Every School*, New York and London: Teachers College Press and Ontario: Ontario Principals' Council.

Harris, A. (2003) 'Distributed Leadership in Schools: Leading or Misleading' in *Management in Education*, vol. 16, no. 5, pp. 10-13.

Harris, A. (2013) 'Distributed Leadership: Friend or Foe?' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol. 41, no. 5, pp. 543-693.

Harris, A. (2014) *Distributed Leadership Matters: Perspectives, Practicalities, and Potential*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Harris, A. and DeFlaminis, J. (2016) 'Distributed Leadership in Practice: Evidence, Misconceptions and Possibilities' in *Management in Education*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 141-146.

Harris, A. and Jones, M. (2020) 'COVID 19-School Leadership in Disruptive Times' in *School Leadership and Management*, vol, 40, no. 4, pp. 243-247.

Harris, A., Jones, M., and Hashim, N. (2021) 'System Leaders and System Leadership: Exploring the Contemporary Evidence Base' in *School Leadership & Management*, vol. 41, nos.4-5, pp. 387-408.

Hernández-Amorós, M.J. and Martínez Ruiz, M.A. (2018) 'Principals' Metaphors as a Lens to Understand How They Perceive Leadership' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 602-623.

Hickey, N., Flaherty, A. and Mannix McNamara, P. (2023) 'Distributed Leadership in Irish Post-Primary Schools: Policy versus Practitioner Interpretations' in *Education Sciences*, vol. 13, pp. 1-18.

Hilton, J. (2020) 'Resilient Leadership' in *Management in Education*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 24-25.

Hislop (2013) 'Applying an Evaluation and Assessment Framework: An Irish Perspective'. Was available at: https://tinyurl.com/5yee4ux3 (Last accessed 15 January 2022, no longer available).

Hislop, H. (2017) 'A Co-Professional Approach to Inspection for Accountability and Improvement' in *Irish Journal of Education*, vol. 42, pp. 3-27.

Hislop, H. (2018) 'Advancing Learning, Assessment and Evaluation in Irish Second Level Schools', Address to ACCS Convention. Was available at: https://tinyurl.com/5n8rct7u (Last accessed 30 January 2022, no longer available).

Hislop, H. (2022) 'Chief Inspector's Report: 2016-2020: Excellence in Learning for All'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5aeejb3f (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Hochschild, A.R. (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley (CA): University of California Press.

Holland, C., Hughes, J. and Leitch, R. (2016) 'Neoliberalism and Education: Spotlight on Ireland' in *Policy Futures in Education*, vol. 14, no. 8, pp. 1041-1045.

Houses of the Oireachtas (2023) 'Teacher Shortages'. Dáil Éireann Debate 7th December 2022. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mra7yn5v (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Huelin, R., Iheanacho, I., Payne, K. and Sandman, K. (2015) What's in a Name? Systematic and Non-Systematic Literature Reviews, and Why the Distinction Matters. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2bu85cxb (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Humphrey, C. (2013) 'Dilemmas in Doing Insider Research in Professional Education' in *Qualitative Social Work*, vol. 12*, no.* 5, pp. 572–586.

Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit (2015)' Self-Evaluation of School Leadership: Domains, Standards and Statements of Practice. Was available at: https://tinyurl.com/bdew79xv (Last accessed 15 November 2021, no longer available).

INTO [Irish National Teachers; Organisation] (2017) 'Response to Consultation Documents, A Professional Learning Continuum for School Leadership in the Irish Context and CSL Quality Assurance Pilot Process'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bdhpzrxp (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

INTO (2021)' Sustaining School Leadership: Principals' and Deputy Principals' Conference 2021'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/42s3t5rx (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

INTO (2023) INTO Survey Exposes Teacher Burnout. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/6rvd7p74 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

IPPN [Irish Primary Principals' Network] (2014) 'Priorities for Teachers-In Clear Focus' Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yw8m6u4w (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

IPPN (2015) 'Qualifications for Principalship: Recruiting the Most Effective School Leaders'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/tb7ytuj3 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

IPPN (2019) 'PIEW Empowering School Leaders through Prioritising', Available at: https://issuu.com/ippn/docs/piew_oct2019_formatted (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

IPPN (2022) 'Primary School Leadership: The Case for urgent Action. A Roadmap to Sustainability'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4f9cweed (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

IPPN (2023) Sustainable Leadership Project: Progress Report. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2xnskt7e (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Jacobsson, B. (2002) 'Standardization and Expert Knowledge: A World of Standards' in *Oxford Academic*, vol.1. pp. 40-49.

Kabaji, E. and Mukanzi, C. (2018) 'Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Science Research: Towards Relativist Ontology and Interpretivist-Constructivist Epistemology' in *The Strategic Journal of Business and Change Management*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp 1808-1815.

Kallio, H., Pietilä, A.-M., Johnson, M., and Kangasniemi, M. (2016) 'Systematic Methodological Review: Developing a Framework for a Qualitative Semi-structured Interview Guide' in *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 72, no. 12, pp. 2954–2965.

Khatri, K.K. (2020) 'Research Paradigm: A Philosophy of Educational Research' in *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 5, no. 5, pp. 1435-1440.

Kılınç, A.C. and Gümüş, S. (2021) 'What do we know about Novice Principals? A Systematic Review of Existing International Literature' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol. 49, no. 1, pp. 54-75.

Kilroy (2020) 'School Self-Evaluation: The Evolution of the Process in the Irish School Context' in *Ireland's Yearbook of Education* 2019-2020, pp. 152-157.

King, F. and Nihill, M. (2019) 'The Impact of Policy on Leadership Practice in the Irish Educational Context; Implications for Research' in *Irish Teachers' Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 57-73.

Kitt, J. (2017) *Positive Behaviours, Relationships and Emotions: The Heart of Leadership in a School*, Dublin: National Association of Principals and Deputies [NAPD]Publication.

Kivunja, C. and Bawa Kuyini, A. (2017) 'Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts', in *International Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 6, no. 5, pp. 26-41.

Kruse, S. D. (2021) 'Hiding in Plain Sight: Systems Thinking and School Organisation' in *Journal of Educational Administration*, vol. 59, no. 1, pp. 43-58.

LAOS [Looking at our School] (2016) A Quality Framework for Primary Schools. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3ftpf665 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

LAOS (2022) A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/msu8mr62 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Lee-Pigott, R. (2019) in I. Oplatka and K. Arar (eds) *Emotion Management and Feelings in Teaching and Educational Leadership: A Cultural Perspective*, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Leithwood, K. and Jantzi, D. (1990) 'Transformational Leadership: How Principals Can Help Reform School Cultures in *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 249-280.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A. and Hopkins, D. (2008) 'Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership' in *School Leadership and Management*, vol. 28, no.1, pp. 27-42.

Leithwood, K. and Mascall, B. (2008) 'Collective Leadership Effects on Student Achievement' in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, vol. 44, issue 4, pp. 455-597.

Leithwood, K. and Sun, J. (2012) 'The Nature and Effects of Transformational School Leadership: A Meta-Analytic Review of Unpublished Research' in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 3, pp. 387-423.

Lester, S. (2004) 'Conceptualising the Practitioner Doctorate' in *Studies in Higher Education,* vol. 29, no. 6, pp. 757-770.

Levers, M. J. D. (2013) 'Philosophical Paradigms, Grounded Theory, and Perspectives on Emergence' in *Sage Open* (October -December 2013), pp. 1-6.

Levy, Y. and Ellis, T.J. (2006) 'A Systems Approach to Conduct an Effective Literature Review in Support of Information Systems Research' in *Informing Science Journal*, vol. 9, pp. 1-32.

Lincoln, Y. S. and Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Lingam, G. I. and Lingam, N. (2016) 'Developing School Heads as Instructional Leaders in School-Based Assessment: Challenges and Next Steps' in *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 90-105.

Lumby, J. (2013) 'Distributed Leadership: The Uses and Abuses of Power' in *Educational Management Administration and Leadership,* vol. 41, no. 5, pp. 581-597.

Lynch, J., Daly, D., Lafferty, N, and Mannix McNamara, P. (2022) 'The Real Deal: A Qualitative Investigation of Authentic Leadership in Irish Primary School Leaders' in *Societies*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 1-20.

MacBeath, J., Gronn, P., Opfer, D., Lowden, K., Forde, C., Cowie, M, and O' Brien, J. (2009) 'The Recruitment and Retention of Head Teachers in Scotland'. Report to the Scottish Government. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yc534mjn (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Mac Giolla Phádraig, B. (2010) 'Towards Partnership: The Development of Parental Involvement in Irish Primary Education since 1970' in The Irish Journal of Education, xxxviii, pp. 73-93.

MacRuairc (2010) 'This Way Please! Improving School Leadership: The OECD Way' in *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 223-246.

Maguire, M. and Delahunt, B. (2017) 'Doing a Thematic Analysis: A Practical Step-by-Step Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars' in *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 3, pp. 3351-3364.

Mahfouz, J. and Gordon, D.P. (2021) 'The Case for Focusing on School Principals' Social-Emotional Competencies' in *Management in Education*, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 189-193.

Mannix-Mc Namara, P., Hickey, N., MacCurtain, S. and Blom, N. (2021) 'The Dark Side of School Culture' in *Societies*, vol. 11, no. 87, pp. 1-19.

Maslach, C. and Leiter, M.P. (1997) *The Truth About Burnout: How Organisations Cause Personal Stress and What to Do About It,* New York: Jossey-Bass.

Matthews. P., Rea, S., Hill, R. and Gu, Q. (2014) 'Freedom to Lead: A Study of Outstanding Primary School Leadership in England'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5n8xctrp (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Maxwell, A. and Riley, P. (2016) 'Emotional Demands, Emotional Labour and Occupational Outcomes in School Principals' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol, 45, no. 3, pp. 484-502.

Maynooth University (MU) (2024) 'PG DIP in Educational Leadership and Management (Future Leaders Programme)' Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ytmkk3t8 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

McAleavy, T., Riggall, A., Korin, A., Ndaruhutse, S. and Naylor. R. (2021) 'Learning Renewed: Ten Lessons from the Pandemic'. Education Development Trust. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3vxn7dx5 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

McBride, M. The Irish Times (2022) 'The Great Resignation: Principals Work Weekends, Nights and Holidays . . .There's No Break'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2atkk8b5 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

McCabe, B. (2020) 'The Moral Purpose of School Leaders' in *Leadership+,* Cork: Irish Primary Principals' Network Publication.

McClintock, D., Ison, R. and Armson, R. (2003) 'Metaphors for Reflecting on Research Practice: Researching with People' in *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, vol. 46, no. 5 pp. 715-731.

McCloskey, S. (2020) 'COVID-19 has Exposed Neoliberal-Driven "Development": How can Developmental Education Respond?' in *Policy and Practice*, vol. 30, pp. 174-188.

McGovern, É. (2015) 'From Aspiration to Succession and Transition: An Exploratory Study of the Fundamental Principles of Sustainable Leadership from the Perspectives of Newly Appointed Principals in Irish Primary Education'. Doctoral Dissertation, Dublin City University. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ykthap9h (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

McGuinness, S. and Cunningham, V. (2015) 'Primary School Leadership: Understanding Preparation in the Tóraíocht Programme' in *Irish Educaíonal Studies*, volume 34, no. 2, pp. 207-223.

McKay, A., MacDonald, K. and Longmuir, F. (2022) 'The Emotional Intensity of Educational Leadership: A Scoping Review' in *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, pp. 1-23.

McKenzie, D. (2021) 'The Big Seven' in *New Zealand Principal*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 27-29. Wellington, New Zealand: Cervin Media Ltd.

McMahon, M. (2016) 'Leadership for Learning, Learning for Leadership' in J. O' Brien (ed.) *School Leadership*, 3rd ed. pp. 133-150. Edinburgh: Donedin Academic Press.

McNamara, G., Brown, M., Gardezi, S., O' Hara, J., O' Brien, S. and Skerritt, C. (2021a) 'Embedding Self-Evaluation in School Routines' in *Sage Open*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 1-10.

McNamara, G., Skerritt, C., O' Hara, J., O' Brien, S. and Brown, M. (2021b) 'For Improvement, Accountability or the Economy? Reflecting on the Purpose(s) of School Self-Evaluation in Ireland' in *Journal of Educational Administration and History,* vol. 54, no.2, pp. 158-173.

Medford, J.A. and Brown, T. (2022) 'Newly Appointed Principals' Challenges in Learning and Adjusting to School Culture' in *Heliyon*, vol. 8, no. 9, pp. 1-13.

Mediani, H. and Ungar, M. (2021) 'The Dark Side of Resilience' in *Adversity and Resilience Science,* vol. 2, pp. 147-155.

Melesse, S. and Molla, S. (2015) 'The Contribution of School Culture to Students' Academic Achievement: The Case of Secondary and Preparatory Schools of Assosa Zone, Benshangul Gumuz Regional State, Ethiopia' in *Research in Pedagogy*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 190-203.

Mercer, J. (2007) 'The Challenges of Insider Research in Educational Institutions: Wielding a Double-edged Sword and Resolving Delicate Dilemma' in *Oxford Review of Education*, vol. 33, no.1, pp.1-17.

Miller, P. (2017) 'The Nature of School Leadership: Global Practice Perspectives', Inaugural Professorial Lecture, University of Huddersfield. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/vfez4ra6 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Milligan, L. (2016) 'Insider-outsider-inbetweener? Researcher Positioning, Participative Methods and Cross-Cultural Educational Research' in *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education,* vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 235-250.

Mills, J., Bonner, A. and Francis, K. (2006) 'The Development of Constructivist Grounded Theory' in *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 5, no. 1. pp. 25-35.

Montecinos, C., Galdames, S., Flessa, J. and Valenzuela, J. P. (2022) 'Pathways to the School Principalship: An International Scoping Review' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 285-306.

Mooney, B. The Irish Times (2023) 'I Feel Burnt Out After Just Four Years of Working as a school Principal'. What Can I Do?'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4asrwdnc (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Mooney Simmie, G. M. (2014) 'The Neo-Liberal Turn in Understanding Teachers and School Leaders' Work Practices in Curriculum Innovation and Change: A Critical Discourse Analysis of a Newly Proposed Reform Policy in Lower Secondary Education in the Republic of Ireland', in *Citizenship, Social and Economic Education*, vol. 13, no.3, pp. 185–198.

Morrison, M.A.., Haley, E., Bartel Sheehan, K. and Taylor, R.E. (2002) *Using Qualitative Research in Advertising: Strategies, Techniques, and Applications*, London: Sage.

Moynihan, J. and O'Donovan, M. (2021) 'Learning and Teaching: The Extent to which School Principals in Irish Voluntary Secondary Schools Enable Collaborative Practice' in *Irish Educational Studies,* vol, 41, no. 8, pp 1-18.

Mulconry, S. (2018) 'The Devil's Advocate: Saying No to Non-Essential Change' in *Education Matters* 2017-2018, pp. 145-150. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4cvbjh8e (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Mulford, B. (2003) 'School Leaders: Challenging Roles and Impact on Teacher and School Effectiveness'. OECD Commissioned Paper. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/438ybe39 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Munby, S. and Bretherton, M. (2019) *Imperfect Leadership*, Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.

Murphy, G. (2012) '2011-2012-at a Glance: The Genie is out of the Bottle' Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5n6wacn8 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Murphy, J. F., and Louis, K. S. (2018) *Positive School Leadership: Building Capacity and Strengthening Relationships*, Teachers College Press.

Murphy, G. (2019) 'A Systematic Review and Thematic Synthesis of Research on School Leadership in the Republic of Ireland 2008-2018' in *Journal of Educational Administration*, vol. 57, no. 6, pp. 675-689.

Murphy, M. (2021) 'Belief Without Evidence? A Policy Research Note on Universal Design for Learning' in *Policy Futures in Education*, vol. 19, issue 1, pp. 1-12.

Murphy, G. (2023) 'Leadership Preparation, Career Pathways and the Policy Context: Irish Novice Principals' Perceptions of their Experiences' in *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 30–51.

Murphy, G., and Devine, D. (2023) 'Sensemaking In and For Times of Crisis and Change: Irish Primary School Principals and the Covid-19 Pandemic' in *School Leadership and Management*, vol, 43, no. 2, pp. 125–144.

National Parents' Council [NPC] (2024) 'Partnership Schools Ireland'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/rt3tzp4b (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

National Principals' Forum [NPF] (2021) 'Critical Analysis of Supports for Pupils with Additional Educational Needs and their School Leaders in Irish Primary Schools' Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bde7k69z (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

NPF (2024) 'National Principals' Forum'. Available at: https://www.principalsforum.org/ (Last accessed 16 April 2024).

NCCA [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment] (1999) 'Primary School
    Curriculum Introduction'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/y8s95cpe (Last accessed
    16 March 2025).

NCCA (2009) 'Leading and Supporting Change in Schools'. Available at:
    https://tinyurl.com/5ptdy7ew (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

NCCA (2020) 'Draft Primary Curriculum Framework'. Available at:
    https://tinyurl.com/579fbucn (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

NCCA (2022) 'Supporting Systemwide Primary Curriculum Change'. Available at:
    https://tinyurl.com/yrj5j692 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

NCCA (2023) *Primary Curriculum Framework*. Available at: https://ncca.ie/en/updates-and-
    events/latest-news/2023/may/the-primary-curriculum-framework/ (Last accessed 16
    March 2025).

Ng, D. (2019) Instructional Leadership. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/22h34779 (Last
    accessed 16 March 2025).

Ng, S. and Szeta, S.E. (2016) 'Preparing School Leaders: The Professional Development
    Needs of Newly Appointed Principals' in *Educational Management, Administration
    and Leadership*, vol. 44, no, 4, pp. 540-557.

Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E. and Moules, N.J. (2017) 'Thematic Analysis: Striving
    to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria' in *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*,
    vol. 16, pp. 1-13.

Nussbaum, M. (2001) *Upheavals of Thought*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Nussbaum, M. (2011) *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, USA:
    Harvard University Press

O' Connor, A. (2022) 'Well-being of Principals in Small Schools' in *Leadership+,* Issue 121,
    Irish Primary Principals' Network [IPPN] Publication.

O'Brien, B. The Irish Times (2021) 'Crisis in Recruitment and Retention of School Principals
    will only Worsen'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/355ybhzj (Last accessed 16 March
    2025).

O'Brien, C. The Irish Times (2021) 'Lessons Learned: How to Improve our Education System Post-Pandemic'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2y8k4ju9 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

O' Donnell, C. (2023) 'Teachers Seconded to Continuing Teacher Education: Professional Development and the Paradox of Reaching Proficiency' in *Irish Educational Studies*, pp. 1-24.

O'Donovan, M. (2015) 'The Challenges of Distributing Leadership in Irish Post-Primary Schools' in *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education,* vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 243-266.

OECD (2008a) 'Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice', Beatriz Pont, Deborah Nusche, Hunter Moorman [eds]. Available at: Improving School Leadership, Volume 1 | OECD (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

OECD (2008b) 'Improving School Leadership, Volume 2: Case Studies on System Leadership', Beatriz Pont, Deborah Nusche and David Hopkins [eds]. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3nj42u27 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

OECD (2016) 'School Leadership for Learning: Insights from TALIS 2013'. Available at: School Leadership for Learning: Insights from TALIS 2013 | READ online (oecd-ilibrary.org) (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

OECD (2019) Improving School Quality in Norway: The New Competence Development Model, Implementing Education Policies, Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/179d4ded-en (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

OECD (2020) 'Education Policy Outlook Ireland'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3dtfbrt3 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

OECD (2022) 'Multi-Stakeholder Approach for Better Integration of Refugee Students: Stakeholder Engagement in the Practice-Research-Policy Transfer in Refugee Education Policy'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yc5s94nk (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

OECD (2023) 'Equity and Inclusion in Education: Finding Strength Through Diversity'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3rc5uywv (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

O'Hara, J., McNamara, G., Brown, M. and O'Brien, S. (2016) 'National Survey of Principals' Attitudes Towards School Self-Evaluation (2014-2015)'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/47kpk8ns (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Oplatka, I. (2004) 'The Principal's Career Stage: An Absent Element in Leadership Perspectives' in *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, vol. 7, no.1, pp. 43-55.

O' Rourke, B. The Irish Times (2018) 'Leadership Crisis: Why Do So Few Teachers Want to be Principals?' Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4vkws4df (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

O'Sullivan, J., and MacRuairc, G. (2023). 'The Promotion of Distributed Leadership in Education at National Level: Discursive Change to Maintain the Old Order – Lessons from Ireland in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, pp. 1-22.

Paré, G. and Kitsiou, S. (2017) in F. Lau and C. Kuziemsky [eds] Handbook of eHealth Evaluation: An Evidence-based Approach, pp. 157-179, Canada: University of Victoria.

Pashiardis, P. and Johannson, D. (2021) 'Successful and Effective Schools: Bridging the Gap' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol. 49, no. 5, pp. 690-707.

Psychogios, A. and Dimitriadis, N. (2021) 'Brain-Adjusted Relational Leadership: A Social-Constructed Consciousness Approach to Leader-Follower Interaction in *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 12, pp. 1-11.

Quin, J., Deris, A., Bischoff, G., and Johnson, J.T. (2015) 'Comparison of Transformational Leadership Practices: Implications for School Districts and Principal Preparation Programmes' in *Journal of Leadership Education*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 71-85.

Racher, F.E. and Robinson S. (2003) 'Are Phenomenology and Postpositivism Strange Bedfellows?' in *Western Journal of Nursing Research,* vol. 25, no. 5, pp. 464-481.

Raftery, M. (2019) 'Distributed Leadership-A Happily Ever After for the Post-Primary School?' in *Student Teacher Educational Research E-Journal*, vol. 2, pp. 62-70.

Raftery, A. (2021) 'Leading the New Special Education Teaching Allocation Model: Examining the Perspectives and Experiences of School Leaders in Leading Special

and Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools'. Dublin City University Master's Thesis. Available at: https://reachjournal.ie/index.php/reach/article/view/320 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Rahimi, M. and Arnold, B. (2022) 'The Irish Primary Principal and Deputy Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Well-being Survey: 2022 Data'. Melbourne: Research for Educational Impact (REDI), Deakin University. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2bcbmptk (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Redmond, M. (2016) 'Affective Attunement'. The Open University. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ywrf4ssj (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Reynolds, R. (2020) 'Exploring Primary School Principals' Attitudes and Experiences of School Self-Evaluation'. Letterkenny Institute of Technology Master's Thesis. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/muhu42hb (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Riley, P. (2015) 'Irish Principals and Deputy Principals Occupational Health, Safety and Well-being Survey' Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yyk9wzwj (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Robinson, O.C. (2014) 'Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide' in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 25-41.

Ruitenburg, C. (2009) 'The Question of Method in Philosophy of Education' in *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 315-323.

Ryan, G.W. and Bernard, H. R. (2003) 'Techniques to Identify Themes' in *Field Methods*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 85-109.

Sahlin, S. (2023)' Professional Development of School Principals-How do Experienced School Leaders Make Sense of their Professional Learning?' in *Educational Management and Administration*, pp. 1-18.

Saul, J.R. (2004) *On Equilibrium: Six Qualities of the New Humanism*, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press.

Schmitt, R. (2005) 'Systematic Metaphor Analysis as a Method of Qualitative Research' in *The Qualitative Report*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 358-394.

Scottish Government (2016) 'National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education: Achieving Excellence and Equity'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3bh74njr (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Shah, S. and Corley, K. (2006) 'Building Better Theory by Bridging the Quantitative-Qualitative Divide' in *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 43, no. 8, pp. 1821-1835.

Shaheen, M., Pradhan, S., Ranajee. (2019) 'Sampling in Qualitative Research' in Gupta, M., Shaheen, M. and Reddy, K. [eds] *Qualitative Techniques for Workplace Data Analysis,* Chicago: IGI Global Scientific Publishing.

Shaked, H. and Schechter, C. (2017) *Systems Thinking for School Leaders: Holistic Leadership for Excellence in Education*, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

Schmitt, R. (2005) 'Systematic Metaphor Analysis as a Method of Qualitative Research' in *The Qualitative Report*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 358-394.

Skerritt, C. (2019) 'Privatization and "Destatization": School Autonomy as the "Anglo Neoliberalization" of Irish Education Policy' in *Irish Educational Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp.263-279.

Skerritt, C. (2023) 'Is Critical Scholarship Being Reflected in Policy? A Critical Response to Looking at our School 2022: A Quality Framework' in *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, vol. 55, no. 4, pp. 499-511.

Spillane, J.P. (2005) 'Distributed Leadership' in *Education Forum*, vol. 69, no. 2, pp. 143-150.

Spillane, J.P. and Lee, L.C. (2014) 'Novice School Principals' Sense of Ultimate Responsibility: Problems of Practice in Transitioning to the Principal's Office' in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 431-465.

Spillane, J.P. and Lowenhaupt, R. (2019) *Navigating the Principalship: Key Insights for New and Aspiring School Leaders*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD].

Steward, J. (2014) 'Sustaining Emotional Resilience for School Leadership' in *School Leadership and Management*, vol. 34, pp. 1-30.

Stynes, M. and McNamara, G, (2018) 'The Challenge of Perpetual Motion; The Willingness and Desire of Irish Primary School Principals to Juggle Everything' in *Irish Educational Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 25-42.

Sugrue, C. (2009) 'Performativity and Professionalism: Irish Primary Principals' Experience of Building Leadership Capacity' in *European Educational Research Journal*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 372-386.

Sugrue, C. (2015) *Unmasking School Leadership*, Dordrecht: Springer Publications.

Szot, J. (2021) 'Open the Doors: Returning to School with New Perspective' Available at: https://tinyurl.com/fyhdfcpn (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

The Teaching Council (2007) Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/zypy5e3x (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

The Teaching Council (2012) Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/a6ke3f83 (Last accessed 26 March 2024).

The Teaching Council (2013) 'Droichead: Teaching Council Policy on a New Model of Induction and Probation for Newly Qualified Teachers, following Consultation with Stakeholders'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/35t9zur6 (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

The Teaching Council (2016a) Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yc7n5rsf (Last accessed 15 March 2015).

The Teaching Council (2016b) *Cosán, Framework for Teachers*. Learning. Maynooth: Teaching Council Publication.

Thompson, R. (2010) *People Skills for Principals*, Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Education.

Thomson, P. (2023) *Refining your Academic Writing: Strategies for Reading, Revising and Rewriting*, New York: Routledge.

Thomson, P. (2024) 'Limitations, Part 2-The Thesis Conclusion' Available at: https://patthomson.net (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Thompson, P. and Gunter, H. (2011) 'Inside, Outside, Upside Down: The Fluidity of Academic Researcher "Identity" in Working with/in School' in *International Journal of Research and Method in Education,* vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 17-30.

Torrance, D. (2013) 'Distributed Leadership: Challenging Five Generally Held Assumptions' in *School Leadership and Management,* vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 354-372.

Torrance, D. and Humes, W. (2015) 'The Shifting Discourses of Educational Leadership: International Trends and Scotland's Response' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol. 43, no. 5, pp. 792-810.

Torrance, D. and Forde, C. (2017) 'Redefining what it means to be a Teacher through Professional Standards: Implications for Continuing Teacher Education' in *European Journal of Teacher Education,* vol. 40, no. 1 pp. 110-126.

Torrance, D., Mifsud, D., Niesche, R. and Fertig, M. (2023) 'Headteachers and the Pandemic: Themes from a Review of Literature on Leadership for Professional Learning in Complex Times' in *Professional Development in Education*, pp. 1-14.

Uí Choistealbha, J. and Ní Dhuinn, M. (2021) 'Droichead: Exploring and Eliciting Perspectives, Experiences and Narratives' [DEEPEN]. Final Report to the Teaching Council. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/hjvxy3w8 (Last accessed 16 March 2025).

Uiterwijk-Luijk, L., Krüger M. and Volman, M. (2019) 'Promoting Inquiry-based Working: Exploring the Interplay Between School Boards, School Leaders and Teachers' in *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 475-497.

Wallace Foundation (2013) 'The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/32ymsfdj (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Walsh, C. (2020) 'How can Support Teachers Contribute to the Leadership and Management of Special Educational Needs Provision in Mainstream Schools?' Dublin City University Doctoral Thesis. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3dne8k5m (Last accessed 15 March 2025).

Wang, L.H., Gurr, D. and Drysdale, L. (2016) 'Successful School Leadership: Case Studies of Four Singapore Primary Schools' in *Journal of Educational Administration*, vol. 54, no.3, pp 1-22.

Weaver, K. and Olson, J. (2006) 'Understanding Paradigms Used for Nursing Research' in *Journal of Advanced Nursing: Leading Global Nursing Research*, vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 459-469.

Wenger, E. (2000) 'Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems' in *Organization*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 225–246.

White, D. (2020) 'Conference 2020: Input on Friday 24th January 2020' in *Leadership+,* Issue 112, IPPN Publication.

White Paper on Education (1995) 'Charting our Education Future'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ycycjxzn (Last accessed 10 March 2024).

Whitmore, J. (2009) *Coaching for Performance*, London: Nicolas Brealey Publishing.

Wilson Heenan, I., De Paor, D., Lafferty, N. and Mannix McNamara, P. (2023) 'The Impact of Transformational School Leadership on School Staff and School Culture in Primary Schools: A Systematic Review of International Literature' in *Societies*, vol. 13, no. 6, pp. 1-27.

Woods, P. A., Cowie, M. and Woods, G.J. (2007) 'HeadTeachers' Professional Development: Provision, Barriers and Needs'. Commissioned by Learning and Teaching Scotland, in *School Leadership and Management*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 253-275.

Woods, P.A., Torrance, D., Donnelly, C., Hamilton, T., Jones, K. and Potter, I. (2021) 'Constructions and Purposes of School Leadership in the UK' in *School Leadership and Management*, vol. 41, no. 1-2, pp. 152-170.

Woods, P. and Sikes, P. (2022) *Successful Writing for Qualitative Researchers* (Third Edition), London: Routledge,

Yilmaz, D. and Kılıçoğlu, G, (2013) 'Resistance to Change and Ways of Reducing Resistance in Educational Organisations' in *European Journal of Research in Education*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 14-21.

Young, M. D. and Crow, G. M. (Eds.). (2017). *The Handbook of Research on the Education of School Leaders*. Routledge.

11. Appendices

11.1. Appendix 1: Learning to be A School Leader in Ireland

11.2. Appendix 2: The Qualities of Principalship

Note: The following words and phrases come directly from the data and constitute the participants descriptions of themselves.

11.2.1. Positive

Strong	Task-focused	Understanding	Relaxed	Far
Give 100 per cent	Tolerant	Patient	Approachable	Confidential
Able to eat the frog	Enthusiastic	Accepting of mistakes	Good at prioritising	Have a desire to give back
Inclusive	Have a desire to share knowledge	Skilled in problem-solving	Skilled in mediation	A good listener
A people's person	A hard worker	Not afraid to speak	An advocate for doing the right thing	Aware of my own core values and moral purpose
Calm	Passionate about leadership	A skilled resource manager	Able to work to deadlines	Decisive
Organised	Able to manage a crisis	Energetic	Reflective	Vibrant
Driven	Ability to finish tasks	Enjoy a sense of belonging	Take ownership	Have charisma
Inspiring	Attention to detail	The ability to park things and switch off	The ability to desensitise from vicarious trauma	The ability to know when to say nothing
An open book	The ability to suppress and release emotions	The ability to know when time is needed, to heal, to rest	The ability to manage personal trauma alongside the role	An acceptance of who I am as a person
The ability to develop a shared vision with buy-in	The ability to align your school's culture with your own values	The ability to manage conflict	Honest and able/willing to show vulnerability	The ability to manage challenging conversations

11.2.2. Potentially Problematic

Cynical	Perfectionist	Suffer from imposter syndrome	Listen to an inner critic
A need to control	A need for reassurance	Procrastinator	Must have a deadline and pressure to complete tasks
Too full on	Worried about judgement	Worried that my own standards are not good enough	Try to avoid conflict

11.3. Appendix 3 My Hat Metaphor

From a young age, I have always been fascinated by hats and what they symbolise, creativity, a specific sense of style or occasion, a nod to culture and tradition, the 'icing on the cake' of the rest of one's attire.

When considering this study and the various processes involved, I found myself yearning to reach towards creativity and fun, hoping that my hat metaphor would help maintain my focus and reduce my uncertainty. The processes of data collection and analysis were incredibly daunting but its reporting as the 'the finishing touch' of the research process, and the potential sharing of leadership insights and unexpected findings with the education system excited and interested me, giving me a sense of purpose (Ausband, 2006:770). More significantly, aligning the process to the creation and modelling of a hat, relaxed my thinking and eased my sense of challenge.

When considering the perfect hat, I considered the finished product, how it would look exactly, what impact it would have at the occasion, how it would enhance my outfit, reflect current fashion trends, and add to the celebration of a special occasion. I imagined compliments, expected to capture interest and attention, and perhaps inspire others for future occasions! A milliner must consider fabric, design, colour, size and fashion trends and the time it takes from design and production to completion. This is how my hat metaphor inspired me through the challenges of this study.

As a practitioner in the classroom for thirteen years, occupying the dual role of school leader and teacher for eight years, the administrative role of school leader for a further seven years, and of system leader for the last ten, the main ingredient of my day-to-day work has been my relationships with people. Research is about working with people on issues of concern and stepping out of our own understandings (McClintock et al. 2003). With 38 years of experience in education, McClintock et al. (2003) remind me of how such a trajectory can incur blind spots but be rescued 'via the process of becoming aware of metaphor' (p. 716). I aspired for my research to be a tiny part of a narrative that will inspire change and development in leadership and assist in some small way to bridge the ever-present gap between practitioner and researcher.

I also however, considered the work of Schmitt (2005) who warns against the reduction of the research process to one metaphor being 'a forced simplification' (p. 362). He advises on how to systematically analyse metaphors, arguing that such an analysis must be underpinned by reflection and has the ability to bring about 'a second order of understanding' (p. 383). 38 years of experience including five and a half on the EdD Programme ensures a multitude of blind spots and the need for this second layer of understanding. I am arriving at the end of this study conscious of the significant learning it has entailed for me.

11.4. Appendix 4: The Participants' Metaphors for School Leadership

Pseudonym	Metaphor
Ava	*'Principalship is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow'.*
Brendan	*'Becoming a Principal is like riding a bike for the first time. You know all the theory, but you've never used the breaks and gears before, and you're flying down the hill trying to figure it out as you go'.*
Mollie	*'Being a Principal is like being a juggler and trying to keep all the balls in the air'.*
Katie	*'Being a Principal is like being a mentee rather than a mentor, you need to continually be able to ask for help'.*
Kay	*'As a Principal, you are the positive conduit and a facilitator of learning and teaching in a supported system'.*
Andrew	*'Principalship is like being on a roller coaster with highs and lows, easier bits and challenges'.*
Kevin	*'Principalship is like a set of strong boulders across the beach with lots of wet sticky sand in between'.*
Gemma	*'Being a Principal is about seeing everything, overlooking a great deal and hoping to improve a little'.*
Cora	1. *'Principalship is like a forest with sunshine, safety, darkness, danger and full of different types of wildlife'.* 2. *'Being a Principal is like bobbing along in the water and suddenly finding yourself in the deep end'.*

Adele	*'Being a Principal is like being a juggler and keeping everything going at the same time'.*
Bella	1. *'Principalship is like pushing a large boulder up a hill'.* 2. *'Being a Principal is like being a swan, gliding on the water but paddling furiously underneath'.*
Evan	*'Currently for me, being a Principal is feeling as sick as a parrot'.*
Fergus	*'Principalship in Ireland right now is like being the Captain of the Titanic and knowing that people are actually drowning in the role'.*
Tara	*'Principalship is like firefighting, trying to put one out before the next one begins'.*
Janet	*'Principalship is like the story of the swan and the ugly duckling. It's about the confidence of the Principal building as they progress through their career'.*

11.5. Appendix 5: Indicative Interview Themes

Individual Interview Themes

- The significance of the person of the leader and the affective domain of leadership
- Examining the personal qualities, dispositions and emotional development of the principal to illuminate and understand their significance in achieving effective and sustainable leadership
- Examining the link between positive personal engagement and transformational leadership
- Looking at what happens when positivity meets accountability and uncertainty
- Querying the essence of positive leadership and inspiring those who aspire to leadership and those newly appointed to the role
- Connecting the affective domain with key emerging concepts-distributed or collaborative leadership, the significance of individual school culture and context, the importance of openness, trust, autonomy and agency, and shared talents and vulnerabilities
- Examining the intersection of the person of the leader with their engagement in quality professional learning and key system supports

11.6. Appendix 6: Ethics Approval

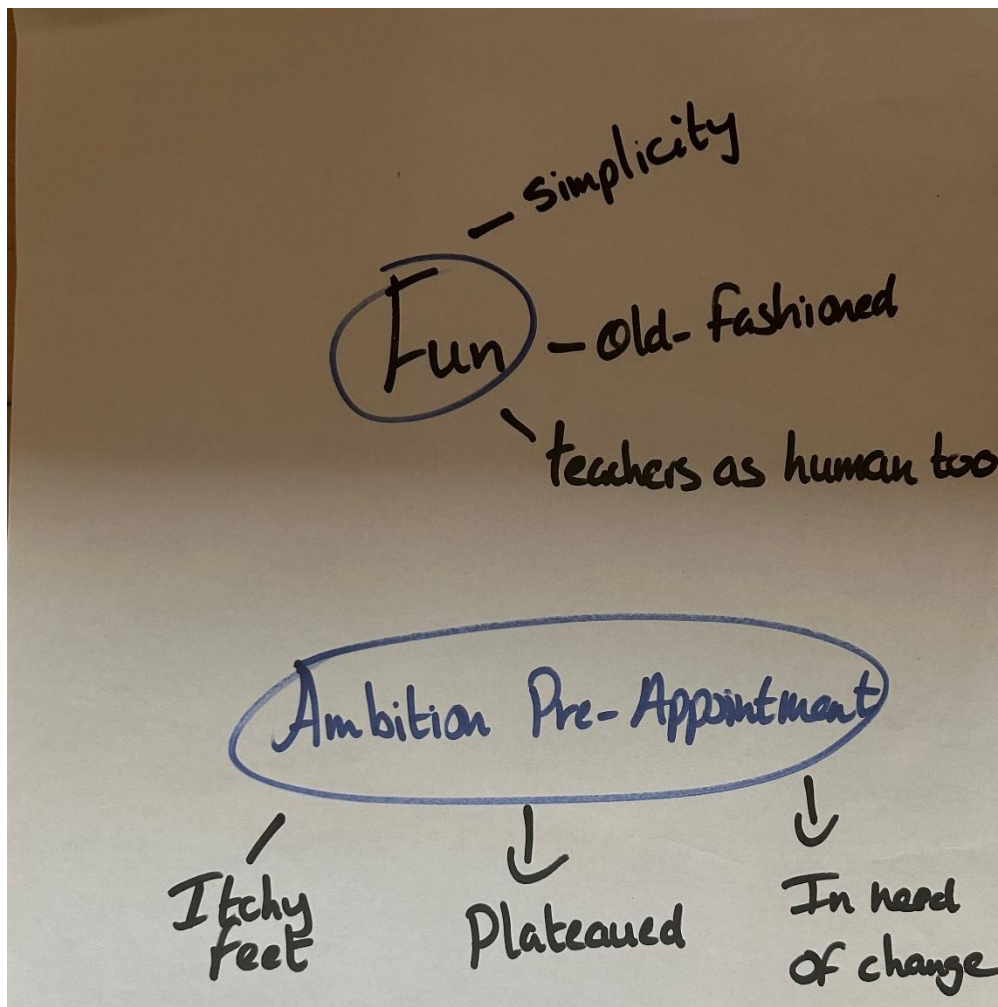ResearchEthicsSystem@glasgow.ac.uk

Anna Mai Rooney (PGR)

Tue 12/21/2021 10:10 AM

Dear Anna Mai Rooney (PGR),

The following research ethics application has been approved:

Project Title	Positivity in the role of primary school Principal: what is its essence and what part might it play in the future sustainability of the role?
Application Number	400210066
Committee	College of Social Sciences
Submitted By	Professor Nicki Hedge

Impact of → good

bad ← former Principals

School Community
→ listening
→ understanding
— pride
→ relationships
→ open door

'go to' people

duty of care

having people's back

Circumstances of Appointment

① - When in their lives
   ↳ Sudden
        Haphazard

② Lack of Knowledge / Understanding of the Role

③ Why? ~~Not~~ → (Naively)
          → (Youth)
      ↳ (Lack of fear)

④ Reasons for Role Opp?
   (Job Came Up)   (Unhappiness with their own school's leadership)
        (Needed to Move)

⑤ Self-Confidence   (Skills of leadership)
      (Belief in themselves)
        (Teaching confidence)

⑥ Background in Leadership? Education
      (Middle Leadership)   (Volunteering)
   (Being involved in CPD) (Enjoyed processes, goals, vision, orgs)   (Working as a group - a hotel)