



## An Analysis of Day to Day Activities of a Sample of Primary School Principals in Ireland

Martin STYNES<sup>1</sup>, Gerry MCNAMARA<sup>2</sup>, Joe O'HARA<sup>3</sup>

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received: 17 Feb. 2018

Received in revised form: 12 May 2018

Accepted: 5 Jul. 2018

DOI: 10.14689/ejer.2018.76.5

#### Keywords

School leadership, school management, diary research, case study, ireland

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** There is a vast quantity of research into principalship, mainly concentrating on macro level theorising about concepts such as 'instructional' leadership, 'distributed' leadership and a myriad of other notions of the role. In contrast there is very little work done on the messy and demanding day to day and hour to hour work of school principals and the experience, knowledge and skills that this requires and the intense stresses and strains placed on school leaders. In Ireland, as elsewhere, primary school

principals meet the challenges of teaching, community leadership and on-site management in an era of continual change, in most cases with limited or no formal preparation. The rationale for this work is to balance research in the field by focusing on the micro tasks that make up the bulk of the principal's role and to examine how school leaders cope with the job and how they respond to it. **Research methods:** A diverse group of 31 primary school principals from schools across Ireland generated data from the self-observed minutiae of researcher-driven diaries and from a colourful spectrum of personal reflections in follow-up semi-structured qualitative interviews. Coding in NVivo and the querying of emergent themes through conceptual frameworks provided detailed evidence of a myriad of daily activities and experiences. **Findings:** This paper offers an exploration, in narrative form and with supporting evidence, of principals' encounters with the constant minutiae of administration, dealing with the unexpected and interacting with staff. The daily practicalities of school governance and community leadership demand a considerable investment of time and personal interest and often little time for consideration of higher level macro theories of leadership. **Implications for Research and Practice:** As the boundaries between principals' professional and personal lives blur significantly in the narrative, the evidence supports a generally held understanding that life's journey as a school principal is demanding but worthwhile.

© 2018 Ani Publishing Ltd. All rights reserved

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection (EQI) DCU Institute of Education, Ireland, e-mail: mstynes62@gmail.com ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4924-2225>

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection (EQI) DCU Institute of Education, Ireland, e-mail: gerry.mcnamara@dcu.ie, ORCID: 0000-0002-9725-9304

<sup>3</sup> Corresponding Author: Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection (EQI) DCU Institute of Education, Ireland, e-mail: joe.ohara@dcu.ie, ORCID: 0000-0003-1956-7640

## Introduction

School leadership research has produced a remarkably vast number of studies but while the functioning of schools and the quality of leadership performance in them is studied commonly on a macro level, the microanalysis of lived leadership experiences with evidence of reflective capital is under-researched (Scott et al., 2004). With this in mind, we undertook a case study of the everyday work and life experiences of a group of Irish primary school principals. Our objective was to provide an original and critical analysis of the human experience of school leadership, as opposed to a showcasing of Irish practice or a generalised reasoning of the universal (Kuhn, 1996; Smith, 2009).

Academic research into the daily experiences of Irish primary principals was relatively thin on the ground and it offered only an ad-hoc range of perspectives. Morgan and Sugrue (2008) for example, who yielded significant information from attitudinal surveys, nonetheless concluded that 'we are still left very much in the dark as to what Principals actually do during their working day' (p.13). How they experienced such a working day and how they could voice this personally, gave rise to our particular curiosities.

It is significant that there is no mention of the principal in Coolahan's (1981) authoritative and seminal volume on the history of the Irish education system and that an absence of an historical perspective on the work of principals through the 20th century is abated only in works of biography and fiction. Today in Ireland, we know that 3,262 primary principals organise the education of 553,380 children (DES, 2016). A high proportion of small rural schools in parish-based settings gives rise to a situation where almost three quarters of Irish primary school principals teach full-time. Approximately one quarter, typically those in larger schools in urban settings, occupy full-time administrative posts. The roles of teaching and administrative principals differ significantly in their daily routines but in many respects, policy directives and the general responsibilities of administration, management and leadership apply equally to both.

The generations-old Irish language term 'príomhoide' is a predominant descriptor in common discourse. It translates as 'principal teacher' and as such, it signifies a heritage of instructional collegiality (LDS, 2007). The term 'school leader' on the other hand, while well established in the universal lexicon, is a relatively new arrival to ordinary conversation. It is actively promoted however in professional circles from different, if sometimes contrasting and politicised perspectives. Both the teachers' trade union The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO, 2017) and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) through its various manifestations, organise regional and national meetings, short courses, events, conferences, mentoring and support networks to promote the leadership dimension of the principal's role (IPPN, 2017; PDST, 2017; CSL, 2017).

Under the Education Act (Ireland, 1998), a school's Board of Management has a statutory responsibility to provide an appropriate education for its pupils and to this end, a Board appoints a principal to provide leadership to the school community.

While a Board serves a four-year term of office, a principal is appointed in a permanent capacity and typically acts as a link from one Board to the next.

Using both statutory provision and research, Drea and O'Brien (2003) on behalf of the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), identified seven categories that encapsulated the primary principal's responsibilities. Only one, that of delivering and developing high quality teaching, was school-specific. The remaining six, including administration, building external relationships and other management specific duties, could reasonably be applied to the CEO of any business or industry.

While such findings demonstrate a significant advancement in the role and responsibility of the Irish principal, they also present somewhat of a dichotomy. While the current national school system, established from 1831 under Victorian structures of hierarchy and station, was intended purposefully to include formal management structures, at no time was it envisaged that the day-to-day manager should actually be the principal teacher (McDonald, 2008).

Another potential dichotomy emerges for Irish principals in a changing and increasingly secularised society where over 90% of primary schools operate under a Catholic ethos management authority (CPSMA, 2016). Potentially, principals face a dilemma in that their stated school leadership ethos is rooted in a sense of vocation and in working for a perceived higher purpose (Adair, 2000; Palmer, 1998; Ryan and Higginbottom, 2017). The practical implications of such an ideological underpinning may prove to be at odds with new forms of public management, given the globalised development of leadership theories and the scientific demands they bring to bear; particularly in relation to emergent forms of professionalisation within the work-force (The Teaching Council, 2016).

Establishing a position between objective and subjective polarities, balancing scales of opposites and intellectualising beyond the binary, provides researchers in school leadership with interesting challenges. Knowledge-work necessitates exploration beyond the influences of the mapped literature as we enter physically into communities of practice where management and leadership events actually happen, impact upon people and form part of life's realities (Potter et al., 2002; Addison, 2009; Fullan, 2014).

It must reasonably be acknowledged that schools are publicly funded and should therefore be accountable for some measurable return, but we would argue, in light of such escalating professionalisation and the associated philosophical redirectioning, that the provision of child-centered learning experiences and the development of fully socialised human beings are largely forgotten as the primary and central purposes of schooling in Ireland. Similarly, Taysum (2013) reflects a problematic dichotomy in the UK whereby the positivist influences of high-stakes testing and other measures of educational accountability are leapfrogged over the less tangible and more interpretive dimensions of education, such as values development and inclusiveness.

School leadership is a critical influencer and in Ireland, as elsewhere, the canons of instructional and transformative models for example have become accepted CDP

templates. Hall and Southworth (1997) and Fink (2005) however urge caution and call for sophisticated reflection on the practical implications of new and potentially superficial leadership practices. Similarly, Starrat (2005) and Saltman and Means (2017) criticise a dependence on leadership tool kits, lists of competencies and on one-size-fits-all checklists. Authors such as Thrupp and Wilmott (2003), Ryan (2012) and Anderson and Lopez (2017) paint the performativity paradigm vividly and warn of the dominance of managerialism in the education discourse. As management becomes the solution of our times they add, we are called upon not only to research a new perceived professionalisation of schools but more importantly perhaps, the influences that are brought to bear on the lives of those who work within them.

Sugrue (2003) traces the redefinition of the principal's role in Ireland to the 1970s and highlights a notable increase in administrative and managerial responsibilities since then. During the recent half century, Ireland's education policies have undoubtedly been influenced by the development of global leadership theory and by an international infatuation with higher performance standards (Hallinger, 2005). Gunter (2001) and Gunter and Fitzgerald (2003) trace a similar evolution in the UK where significant advancement is backed by a Government investment in school leadership that is reportedly the highest in the world (Day and Smethem (2009).

As in other developed countries, organisational theory and its associated lexicon have migrated steadily into educational discourse and practice (Glatter 2014; Hall et al, 2017; Niesche and Thomson, 2017). The business paradigm shifts that optimise the performances of CEOs and that reap rich financial rewards on global markets prove also to have powerful influences on the child-centered traditions of many schools and classrooms. Notwithstanding such influences, Ireland's schooling system presents with significantly fewer established structures and with school settings that are, as yet, devoid of formalised leadership acculturation. We propose therefore that the Irish schools offer significant potential for the ethnographic exploration of the organic and contextualised grounding of school leadership practices.

The problem is therefore that while macro level research and theorising presents valuable perspectives on school principalship this needs to be balanced by a much better understanding of the day to day challenges of the job and how school leaders react and cope with the endless stream minor but important issues and tasks which take up the vast bulk of their time. That is the focus of this research

## Method

### *Research Design*

Notwithstanding a vast corpus of work on the mastery of the principalship, Troman (2006) describes the principal as a shadowy figure and Ribbins and Marland (1994) assert that we know surprisingly little about headteachers as people. What it means for individuals personally to engage with school leadership is rarely if ever asked (Gronn, 2009). Other notable outliers to the mastery literature are Sugrue (2005),

Tomlinson et al. (1999) and Kelchtermans et al. (2011) whose research on school leadership is concerned not only with the formal structure of the role but with the ways in which it is experienced by the people who cope with the daily vicissitudes and multi-directional realities that school-life presents.

Protocol in the world of such knowledge-work demands a philosophical underpinning or rationale where ontological assumptions, concerning the nature of existence and of reality, are made explicit as an assumed starting point in the research (Bakker, 2010). We chose to employ a perspective beyond the objective in our study of principals and instead we sought sense-making in social processes enactive of the environment, those beyond a single apprehensible reality (Weick, 1995). While we acknowledged the existence of important factors that were demonstrably authentic, factually based and tangible within the edifice of the schoolhouse, we contended that the essential understanding of what is ontic, or what is really real, was constructed not within the institution but in the minds of individuals and groups who populated the structure (Eidlin, 2010).

The most fundamental epistemological questions of whether and how we can know anything underpinned our approach to the gathering of data through the use of credible processes (Burgess et al., 2006). A case study approach aimed to construct knowledge about the experiences of principals through personal, subjective and unique interactions (Stake, 1995). Our objectives in the research were not determined by the proof of testable scientific theories. We moved instead, beyond a modernist perspective of totalising theory where the role of the principal might be clearly defined in policy and practice, to seek a post-modern rationalising; one that attempted to understand uniquely human experiences through an engagement in local narratives (Linstead, 2010).

The process of engaging individual principals in the study and of unearthing data of any quality was complicated by a number of factors. Principals operate in both public and private arenas, engaging in a fluid but constant process of decision-making (Janesick, 2010; O'Leary, 2005). Principals may be suspicious or even uncomfortable about providing information, particularly if they perceive any sense of intrusion, scrutiny or potential exposure (Gillham, 2000; Cohen et al, 2007). *Research Sample*

#### *Research Sample*

Given therefore, that the principal's office may reasonably be considered as a difficult site to access, an approach was chosen that incorporated multiple forms of data gathering. Case study, with a revelatory rationale, offered the potential for native point of view, naturalistic context and over-rapport. A sample group of 31 principals responded to on-line requests for research volunteers through professional membership sites and all 31 principals participated in all stages of the research thereafter (INTO, 2016; IPPN, 2016). The sample was self selecting but represented a good representation of school types in terms of gender, size and location. The study was built on the cornerstone of ethical assurances. Participants shared information on the understanding that crude reporting categories and micro-aggregation would

ensure complete confidentiality. By proving each completed diary and interview transcript with a code known only to the researchers and being extremely careful that none of the material used could identify a particular school of principal complete anonymity was assured.

A broad span of professional experience and a range of different school settings were represented in the study. The following table provides an overview.

**Table 1**

*Participants' Demographics*

<i>Participants' Gender</i>	<i>Experience as a Teacher</i>	<i>Experience as Principal</i>	<i>School Setting</i>	<i>School Staffing</i>	<i>School Type</i>
Male <b>11</b>	1-20 yrs <b>7</b>	1-10 yrs <b>19</b>	Urban <b>23</b>	10-20 <b>11</b>	Co-Education <b>22</b>
Female <b>20</b>	20+ yrs <b>24</b>	10-20 yrs <b>12</b>	Rural <b>8</b>	20+ staff <b>20</b>	Single gender <b>9</b>

Note (n=31)

Data were collected in structured researcher-driven diaries, with two pages per day.

*Research Instruments and Procedures*

Designed with Hinds' (2000) recommendation in mind, the information sought initially was not complex. To ease them into the recording process we asked them simply to note their noting arrival and departure times, as well as the times spent with colleagues at break and lunch periods. A survey-type item followed in which principals indicated their involvement with daily management duties. An open-response section allowed for elaboration.

Experience sampling prompted action of a different nature. On each day of the study, the principals received a text message at a random time, asking them to report on the activity in which they were directly engaged. Lemmens et al. (1988) and Camburn et al. (2010) demonstrated the effectiveness of experience sampling techniques and how time-related self-reporting strategies reduced reporting errors associated with brief or non-continuous events. Significant and meaningful activities may often be excluded from diary reports if recording is unprompted or left until the end of the school day. Interestingly, principals commented that experience sampling, built purposefully but unobtrusively into the diary, offered significant opportunities for professional self-reflection.

The focus shifted in the remaining sections to principals' experiences of leadership events. A survey-type item allowed principals to consider their leadership

involvement with pupils, staff, families or others. An open-response section prompted comments and personal reflection. Finally, there was an option to comment about work that was taken home. The periodic arrival of chocolate by post, in a process described by Cohen et al. (2007, p.223) as 'polite reminders', helped maintain a focus during the period of the diary keeping.

The complete set of diary entries were collated into a single anonymised volume and then returned to the participants with an invitation to participate in a second round of data gathering. Bryman (2001) observes that diary research is sometimes supplemented by personal interviews in which diarists add significantly to the richness of the data. Interviewing, when employed as a form of guided conversation, generates further insights and offers opportunities for the joint construction of meaning (Yin, 2009; Janesick, 2010).

Appointments were arranged, interviews were conducted by phone and conversations were digitally recorded. The audio files were transcribed verbatim without tidying up and were then returned to participants for member checking (Poland, 2002). The schedule of questions reviewed the narrative of the researcher-driven diaries with basic descriptive, clarifying, structural/paradigmatic and closing questions (Janesick, 2010). The responses, as with Dubin's (2006) conversations with Principals, provided a detailed narrative.

#### *Data Analysis*

While credible investigation techniques may generate worthwhile data, credible analysis required that such data were analysed systematically with strict adherence to the chain of evidence and to the case study protocol (Yin, 2009). Patterns were extracted using QSR's NVivo and as codes and code combinations were organised, emerging themes were categorised and information links were drawn. A narrative analysis allowed for explanation building and for theory building (Yin, 2009). Validity and reliability of findings was ensured by constant comparison of the data across respondents. While breaking the data into codes we carefully documented which view of a topic was delivered by which principal, in order to examine the strength of consensus and support, as well as the comprehensiveness of the data. The open coding was followed by axial coding allowing partially overlapping or related codes to be consolidated into one code. Finally the data were re-analysed through the lens of the emerging codes to ensure that saturation had been reached and the codes could be regarded as valid and reliable.

In formulating our findings, Miles and Huberman's (1994) matrices and visual thematic structures enabled us to organise our codes and to cluster them into sub-categories. In this paper, we elaborate on the evidence that offered insights into the categories which emerged from this data analysis process, namely, administrative work, dealing with the unexpected, interacting with staff, work ethic, out of hours work and a willingness to do whatever is necessary. Each of these is considered in the following section.

## Results

### *Administration*

The findings yielded considerable differences in principals' attitudes to school administration and to the many tasks involved. For some, administration was seen as a key component of the role. Principal six declared it 'very positive to tick off items in the diary and to clear the desk' and in general, in-house administration duties such as sorting correspondence and drafting school policies were considered positively. Principal seventeen described such work as 'absolutely vital to the smooth and efficient running of the school'. Some even appeared to enjoy an oasis of calm at times, with the office door closed and the over-busyness of the school corridors kept at bay outside. Others saved administration for the evenings, when the building had emptied.

There was general negative commentary however about certain administration work. Managing pay-roll, organising local teacher-employment clusters and calculating relevant contractors' tax for school repairs were all described typically as frustrating, in that they drew principals' time and energies away from the core functions of teaching and learning. Their sentiment echoes Harris's (2007) description of principals paddling against an administration current that is 'heartbreaking and soul-destroying' (p.2). Principal twenty-six commented: 'I find that I have all the responsibility to deal with whatever is in hand, but effectively I have no power or control'.

### *Dealing with the Unexpected*

Aspects of 'firefighting', as described by principal fifteen, arose throughout the narrative, particularly with principals in schools in socially disadvantaged areas and with those operating integrated Additional Learning Needs (ALN) units. Unpredictable, random and uncontrolled events were a workplace reality for some:

I suppose, I'd say the worst that can happen in our school is being lifted out of it or being attacked by an angry parent. It is the unannounced attack, the unannounced vicious attack where you are not used to it and not used to being ranting and roared at, that is what I find the worst (principal one).

In ALN units, principals were called upon as the first line of defence in dealing with problematic pupils. In one possibly extreme case in the research, principal eighteen reported on fears for her personal safety and on the risk of being 'beaten, kicked or stabbed' by an out-of-control pupil. There was a general expectation that the principal would physically manage, negotiate outcomes and support traumatised staff where and when necessary. Such encounters, while no-doubt challenging when they occurred, actually appeared to enhance authentic leadership-followership relationships at times (Crippen, 2012).



While some principals were quite positive and described dealing with the unexpected as an interesting and appealing aspect of the work, others were less so. The tone of principal thirteen's comment 'God only knows what I'm facing today', expressed a clear sense of personal vulnerability. High levels of unpredictability in some work contexts, combined with high levels of self-expectation, raised tensions when principals were called upon to face challenging circumstances, particularly as the public face of a school.

Schools in Ireland operate as part of a national public service and are subject to national austerity measures known as the Croke Park, Haddington Road and Lansdowne Road Agreements (LRC, 2016). New productivity initiatives and the timetabling of staff for a longer working week posed significant challenges for school leaders in the narrative. Furthermore, as senior staff retired, it was reported that an embargo on recruitment to middle management or special duties posts left principals feeling somewhat isolated and unsupported. Some considered their continued performance in the role unsustainable.

The Deputy Principal and I are the only two post holders left in a school of 19 teachers, so this makes things very tough in terms of planning and teamwork ... There was an overwhelming sense of being a bit of a headless chicken today: I was trying to manage the school self-evaluation process, resource teaching hours, union issues with an ancillary staff member, plumbing problems, band practice, preparation for First Holy Communion, to name but a few issues. It left me feeling as if I did lots but achieved very little today. Overall, I am feeling very tired, which is worrying after a week off ... The trick is to figure out how to mind my physical and mental health. (principal nineteen).

### *Interacting with Staff*

Our findings supported Bubb and Earley's (2004) assertion that management is characterised by a fragmentation of tasks and a myriad of activities, each one taking up a relatively short period of time; much like a series of spinning plates on poles. Principals' language suggested a preference for a collegial synergy in maintaining an overall momentum. A sense of approachability and trust was deliberately fostered in many cases. Principals advised, supported, explained and mentored. Significantly, when a positive and work-related focus dominated and when school successes ensued, staffs looked to principals to express appreciation and to affirm their achievements. In such instances, staffs were typically 'incredible', 'wonderful', 'positive' and 'professional'.

Some less-than-positive staff experiences were also recorded and in these cases, principals faced an altogether different set of daily realities. Principal thirteen's anxious assertion that 'the buck lands with the principal no matter what happens in the school' may explain the exasperation that led others to describe a minority of unsupportive staff as 'wingers', 'lazy' or 'incompetent'. One principal elaborated:

The other thing that ... could be upsetting and that could make a day horrible is having to deal with a member of staff who maybe is not doing what they should be ... I mean being constantly late ... always out of their room and it's not on school business ... you are not used to correcting adults like that and you don't expect to have to correct them.

Some principals inherited long-standing interpersonal difficulties on appointment. In one such scenario and lacking staff support, principal twenty described himself 'hiding amongst the children' to find satisfaction in the job. Principal eleven reported similar experiences among colleagues:

Some principals ... working in bigger schools, had to jack in the job. They had been brought in from outside when there were three or four internal candidates who had applied and who didn't get the job ... their life was hell I can tell you. It was absolutely hell on earth.

On a somewhat different note, principals acknowledged that staff members can experience their own personal difficulties and may operate out of stressful circumstances at times. In particular, staff illnesses, bereavements and preoccupation with difficult home or personal circumstances effected teachers' performances and were noted in the research. In such accounts, principals demonstrated an overarching complement dualism, that of showing care and concern for colleagues while attempting to successfully manage the daily practicalities (Scarlett, 2015). Principal twenty-four offers the following diary entry:

A colleague is out on long-term sick leave and is worried about her entitlement. I can't talk to anyone else about her condition and it's not widely known. It is difficult to keep these things inside. I cleaned the floor of the 4th class toilets. Somebody is making a mess. I think it's the unruly pupil but I can't be sure - yet.

### *Work Ethic*

Spindler and Biott (2005) describe principals' enormous personal investment of time and energies in their schools and their willingness to go beyond the call of duty. A strong work ethic was evident in this research also, particularly in interactions with parents and families. In high-achieving school communities, it was noted that principals drove school performance in key areas and actively supported parents' aspirations for successes. In the case of children with ALNs, principals organised meetings with service providers and acted as advocates for child and family supports.

On school discipline issues, they engaged actively in protracted processes and worked towards optimum attendance and school completion targets.

Across the spectrum, principals were cognisant of the cost of their investments and they accepted the physical implications of being constantly available to everyone and of feeling responsible for just about everything. In a role where duties were entirely uncontracted, it appeared that every aspect of the principal's work was taken for granted by everyone, including the principal.

Principals do put in an awful lot of their own time and we are all the same I think. I treat my school like my home, with how much I respect and care I have for it., It came through with a lot of Principals (in their diaries) that that's how they feel about their schools as well. They would do anything to keep this show on the road even if it does impede on their day (principal thirteen).

#### *Out-of-hours Demands*

Evidence here, as elsewhere, indicated that performing a principal's duties involved more than simply taking on a time-consuming occupation. A sense of personal engagement, whether driven by vocation or simply a sense of the common good, appeared to underpin principals' attitudes. In their stories of family life, newborn babies, dinners and evening routines, principals described how important aspects of the home became secondary at times to the mental and physical demands of out-of-hours work. Principal eighteen elaborated:

I think that you need some kind of discipline because it is all encompassing. ... I put all of my energy into the job to the detriment of everything else you know, including family life and everything else. Yes, I think it would be good advice for principals to have a time and to go. Get it off your mind and definitely don't bring physical work home. It will be in your head anyway. You cannot get rid of that but with discipline, you could lessen it.

After-school engagements typically involved administrative duties, CPD and returning to attend evening meetings. Principal seventeen explained that 'someone has to do it'. In some cases, there appeared to be no discernible boundaries and principals prioritised work-place duties alongside those of their family housekeeping. Principal seven reported being in the school attic on a particular afternoon inspecting roof damage. When asked "*why?*" she replied somewhat bemusedly:

Yes, why was I in the attic? It's a little bit like when I find myself in the supermarket buying toilet rolls. I'm buying 500 toilet rolls and I ask, "how did this happen?" (Laughs).

The most significant after-hours demands were found when principals were occupied mentally with problems of staff relations or with child protection concerns. Some expressed a sense of guilt about returning home to the family and facing into the evening 'worn out' or 'wrecked'. Principal twenty-one told of how she avoids talking about the 'woes' with her family and only reports the 'good bits'. With a similar outlook, principal eighteen was actually pleased that her family was out when she arrived home. She enjoyed the solitude of an empty house:

I had a relaxing bath when I came home. There was nobody in at all and I was glad, as I had nothing left to give anyone. I sat down in the chair exhausted and I fell asleep. When I awoke I had the bath. Then, I felt human again.

Personal approaches to the role were undoubtedly varied but there was general agreement that school communities demanded certain visible leadership characteristics to be demonstrated. Kelchtermans et al. (2011) describe an expectation that principals should present a good face and appear strong. For some, this experience was highly demanding and feelings of personal vulnerability and isolation became an endemic and chronic condition of leadership life.

I find the personal end of the role difficult. By nature, I'm more introverted than extrovert and I find the public nature of the job difficult. I find I bury my feelings about it quite a bit or I wouldn't be able to do it at all (principal twenty-one).

Irrespective of their individual personality traits and circumstances, the principals in the research demonstrated a positive not-for-profit work-ethic, accompanied by high levels of self-expectation. This was evident in their commentaries about school governance where a possible over-involvement in day-to-day management responsibilities was noted.

#### *A Willingness to Tackle Everything*

The law in Ireland establishes the direct accountability of the principal to the Board of Management and in theory at least, this suggests that a hierarchical model of vertical relationships should exist (Bush, 2003). The evidence found in this research was that a flat organisational structure operated in practice and that volunteer members of Boards of Management were almost entirely dependent upon the professional guidance and expertise of their principals. Principal five offered the following perspective:

We have a new Chairperson on the Board this year who has no education background. His only experience of it was when he was at school and that was not good. So, I have had to change approaches and try to lead him too. He is a nice man but it is weird trying to lead your boss.

Principals also reported on the difficulties of constituting school Boards, a difficulty highlighted nationally by the LDS (2007). Volunteers, particularly those in areas of social disadvantage, were reluctant to take on the long-term and significant managerial responsibilities. One such responsibility was school finances and in cases where Boards failed to actively engage an appointed Treasurer, principals undertook the duties and responsibilities themselves (CPSMA, 2016). Principals wrote cheques, calculated taxes, negotiated insurance premiums, organised the payment of staff and advised Treasurers on the preparation of statements of accounts for meetings. In cases where finances fell short, it was the principal who organised fundraising events and who prioritised the fundraised spending.

I feel a reduction in funding to schools, through the capitation grant and in particular the minor works, has led to a constant need for fundraising with the Principal leading this process. Over the last 8 years I have been involved in fundraising for (sports, literacy and ICT resources). In all, this can be extremely demanding in addition to the normal job (principal twenty-nine).

Principals also prepared and submitted detailed and time-consuming funding applications to the Department for summer building renovations and for school extension works. In the event of trouble-shooting, they acted as the point of contact for architects, engineers, solicitors and even rogue-builders. For general maintenance, they assumed responsibility for tendering, organising and overseeing painting, landscaping, heating, electrical, security and minor construction projects. It could reasonably be asserted that principals were inclined not only to lead and manage, but to assume the full working responsibility and role of the entire Board of Management at times. As principal eighteen explained:

By the time the BOM meeting comes around ... issues may sort themselves. What inevitably happens is that I solve them with the help of the Chairperson of the BOM and they need never take up time on the BOM.

### **Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations**

Gunter's (2001) description of school leadership as a difficult but worthwhile journey is worth considering afresh. Despite an overwhelmingly positive response from principals in the study, some difficulties are undeniable. Principals in this study spoke at times of frustration, exhaustion and stress. They described the health impacts of sleep problems, of weight gain, of feelings isolated and of lacking support in daily

management and leadership experiences. Southworth (2002) and Kelchtermans et al. (2011) reported similar difficulties with principals' work-life balance in their depictions of the implicit loneliness of the school gatekeeping role.

The difficulties highlighted in this Irish study were undoubtedly exacerbated by contextual factors. Principals juggled the adverse effects of pay-cuts, increased workload and worsening conditions of service (LRC, 2016). Principals reported that a perceived 'battering' of teachers in the national media only compounded their demoralisation.

Yet, while all such difficulties were recorded, more worthwhile and positive aspects of the journey dominated the narrative. Southworth (2002) argues that for many, being a Principal is more an identity than a role, one that is socially constructed by the expectations of others. Communication, occupational socialisation and interactions with children influence the development of this identity.

Principals perceived their leadership role positively and provided details of leadership engagement under clearly discernible headings. These involved motivating staff, improving the fabric and appearance of the school and enabling the school to play an active and public role in local community life:

We support Iszatt-White's (2011) assertion that leadership must be seen through ethnomethodology and through emphasising the situated real-time nature of action. Leadership is only leadership because the members of a particular setting inter-subjectively negotiate a shared understanding and appreciate collectively that certain actions undertaken by a chosen individual in a setting constitute leadership.

We conclude by acknowledging a key limitation of the paper. Journal wordcount allowed us provide only a partial treatment of a broad case study. Within the limitations of a narrative synopsis, we selected only some of our findings. We concentrated our attentions on those that offered possible commonalities in the experiences of principals in Ireland and those elsewhere and we sought, with the inclusion of diary and interview comments, to provide a focus on the material conditions of principals' lives (Thomson, 2009).

The full text of the narrative, including the content of the researcher-driven diaries as appendices, is available for further study through the University portal (Stynes and McNamara 2014). Our aim in the broader case study was to shift the focus of leadership research from the anti-intellectual philosophical dominance of a value-for-money economic imperative and to focus instead on case-study naturalistic generalization.

In an occupation where contextualised and sustainable leadership is required to maintain the person-centeredness of the endeavour, we concur with Taysum (2003), Ribbins (2008), Gunter (2001, 2016) and Bottery (2016) who stress the need for a deep, intellectual, ethical and holistic treatment of what it is to be a school leader.

A challenging but worthwhile career journey is aptly drawn in Green's comment: 'it's a great life, if you don't weaken' (2000, p.10). In Ireland, McGovern (2016)

identifies that the career trajectory from teacher to principal is dependent largely on the influences of serving principals who recognise and promote leadership talent. A paucity of formalised leadership development structures leaves aspirants reliant therefore upon circumstance, personality and life experience. While this has been sufficient in times past and may be sufficient for some within the contexts of supportive school communities, concerns arise when the range and complexity of external influences on schools are considered. The pressures they exert pose significant challenges to principals who juggle professional, societal and personal expectations in a hurricane of accountabilities (Moos et al., 2011). It is appropriate to conclude with the very striking of words of one principal

I am consistently called upon each day to demonstrate leadership in a myriad of situations. I love the opportunities this presents but sometimes find myself exhausted from the emotion of it all. I believe this exhaustion and emotion build barriers in my personal life. The current climate has pushed leadership to its limits (principal thirty one).

Amid a vast sea of information on how to successfully enact the principalship, Wood (2002) argues that the education community neglects the investigation of the affective dimensions of the work and of what the job does to those who undertake it. As principals engage in daily cycles of perpetual motion with a willingness and desire to do all that is humanly possible and as they manage and lead in circumstances where they place children first in the universal order of importance over everything else imaginable, what of the principals themselves? We propose that this is a question of significant importance to us all.

The implication of this research is, in our view, that a fuller understanding of the reality of the role of the principal requires closely grounded study of the actuality of their daily life. Principals understand the nature of the role and are deeply committed to it but policy makers and education authorities must be careful about the ever increasing expectations and burdens paced on the shoulders of school leaders. A greater emphasis on administrative support and the encouragement and development of distributed leadership in a genuine sense are vital ways of easing the burden.

## References

- Adair, J. (2000). *How to find your vocation*. Norwich: Canterbury Press.
- Addison, B. (2009). A feel for the game – a Bourdieuan analysis of principal leadership: A study of Queensland secondary school principals. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 41(4), 327-341.
- Anderson, G. L., & López, A. (2017). Resisting and reclaiming the global discourse of leadership. In D. Waite & I. Bogotch (Ed.), *The Wiley international handbook of educational leadership* (pp. 157-174). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

- Bakker, J.I. (2010). Ontology In A.J. Mills, G. Durepos, & E. Wiebe (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of case study research volume 2* (pp. 628-631). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bottery, M. (2016). *Educational leadership for a more sustainable world*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bryman, A. (2001). *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bubb, S., & Earley, P. (2004). *Managing teacher workload: Work-life balance and wellbeing*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Burgess, H. Sieminski, S., & Arthur, L. (2006). *Achieving your doctorate in education*. London: Sage Publications.
- Bush, T. (2003). *Theories of educational leadership and management*. London: Sage.
- Camburn, E.M., Spillane, J.P., & Sebastian, J. (2010). Assessing the utility of a daily log for measuring principal leadership practice. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(5), 707-737.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education*. London: Routledge.
- Coolahan, J. (1981). *Irish education: History and structure*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- CPSMA. (2017). Catholic primary school management association. Retrieved November, 7, 2017, from <https://www.cpsma.ie/>
- Crippen, C. (2012). Enhancing authentic leadership-followership: Strengthening school relationships. *Management in Education* 26(4), 192-198.
- CSL. (2017). *The centre for school leadership*. Retrieved November, 7, 2017, from <http://www.csfireland.ie/>
- Day, C. (2007). What being a successful principal really means: An international perspective. *Educational Leadership and Administration*, 19, 13-24.
- Day, C., & Smethem, L. (2009). The effects of reform: have teachers really lost their sense of professionalism? *Journal of Educational Change*, 10(2-3), 141-157.
- DES Department of Education and Skills. (2016). *Annual statistics report 2015/2016*. Retrieved August, 17, 2016, from <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/>
- Drea, E., & O'Brien, J. (2003). *Defining the role of the primary principal in Ireland*. Dublin: HayGroup Management Consultants.
- Dubin, A.E. (2006). Conversations with principals: Issues, values and politics. *Educational Leadership and Administration*, 18, 85-97.
- Eidlin, F. (2010). Reality In A.J. Mills, G. Durepos, & E. Wiebe (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of case study research volume 2* (pp. 781-783). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



- Fink, D. (2005). *Leadership for mortals*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Fullan, M. (2014). *Leading in a culture of change: Personal action guide and workbook*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Gillham, B. (2000). *Case study research methods*. London: Continuum.
- Glatter, R. (2014). Educational administration 1969-2014: Reflections on pragmatism, agency and reform. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 46(3), 351-366. doi:10.1080/00220620.2014.919904
- Green, F. (2000). *The head teacher in the 21st century: Being a successful school leader*. London: Pearson Education.
- Gunter, H. (2001). *Leaders and leadership in education*. London: Paul Chapman publishing.
- Gunter, H. M., & Fitzgerald, T. (2013). *New Public Management and the modernisation of education systems 1*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Gunter, H. (2016). *An intellectual history of school leadership practice and research*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hall, V. & Southworth, G. (1997). Headship. *School Leadership and Management*, 17(2), 151-170.
- Hall, D., Møller, J., Schratz, M., & Serpieri, R. (2017). From Welfarism to Neo-Liberalism: Conceptualizing the diversity in leadership models in Europe. In D. Waite & I. Bogotch (Ed.), *The Wiley international handbook of educational leadership* (pp. 311-334). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hallinger, P. (2005). Instructional leadership and the school principal: A passing fancy that refuses to fade away. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 4(3), 221-239.
- Harris, B. (2007). *Supporting the emotional work of school leaders*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Hinds, D. (2000). Research instruments. In D. Wilkinson, *The researcher's toolkit: A complete guide to practitioner research* (p.41-54). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- INTO. (2017). *Irish national teachers' organisation*. Retrieved November, 1, 2017, from <https://www.into.ie/ROI/>
- IPP. (2017). *Irish primary principals' network*. Retrieved November, 1, 2017, from <http://www.ippn.ie/>
- Ireland. (1998). *The education act*. Retrieved November, 7, 2017 from <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1998/en/act/pub/0051/index.html>
- Iszatt-White, M. (2011). Methodological crises and contextual solutions: An ethnomethodologically informed approach to understanding leadership. *Leadership*, 7(119), 119-135.

- Janesick, V.E. (2010). *Oral history for the qualitative researcher: Choreographing the story*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Kelchtermans, G., Piot, L. & Ballet, K. (2011). The lucid loneliness of the gatekeeper: Exploring the emotional dimension in principals' work lives. *Oxford Review of Education*, 37(1), 93-108.
- Kuhn, T.S. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LDS Leadership Development for Schools. (2007). *Improving school leadership: country background report – Ireland. OECD activity*. Ennis: Clare Education Centre.
- Lemmens, P., Knibbe, R.A., & Tan, F. (1988). Weekly recall and daily estimates of alcohol consumption in a general population survey. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 53, 476-486.
- Linstead, S.A. (2010). Postmodernism In A.J. Mills, G. Durepos, & E. Wiebe (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of case study research volume 2* (pp. 694-700). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- LRC Labour Relations Commission. (2017). The Lansdowne Road Agreement. Retrieved January, 29, 2017 from <http://www.into.ie/ROI/LansdowneRoadAgreement/Downloads/LansdowneRdAgreement.pdf>
- McDonald, V. (2008). Leadership issues for principal teachers. *Oideas*, 53, 27-40. Dublin: Department of Education and Science.
- McGovern, E.M. (2016). *From aspiration to succession and transition: An exploration study of the fundamental principles of sustainable school leadership from the perspectives of newly appointed principals in Irish primary education*. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation. Dublin: Dublin City University.
- Miles, M.B., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. London: Sage.
- Moos, L., Johansson, O., & Day, C. (2011). *How school principals sustain success over time: international perspectives*. Dordrecht NL: Springer.
- Morgan, M., & Sugrue, C. (2008). The Seven challenges and four rewards of being a school principal: Results of a national survey. *Oideas* 53, 8-26. Dublin: Department of Education and Science.
- Niesche, R., & Thomson, P. (2017). Freedom to what ends? – School autonomy in neoliberal times. In D. Waite & I. Bogotch (Eds.), *The Wiley international handbook of educational leadership* (pp. 193-206). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons
- O'Leary, Z. (2005). *Researching real world problems: A guide to methods of inquiry*. London: Sage Publications.

- Palmer, P.J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- PDST. (2017). *Professional development service for teachers*. Retrieved January, 29, 2017 from <http://www.pdst.ie/>
- Poland, B.D. (2002). Transcription quality. In J. Gubrium, & J. Holstein (Ed.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 629-651). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Potter, D., Reynolds, D. & Chapman, C. (2002). School improvement for schools facing challenging circumstances: A review of research and practice. *School Leadership & Management*, 22(3), 243-256.
- Ribbins, P., & Marland, M. (1994). *Headship matters: Conversations with seven secondary school headteachers*. Harlow: Longman.
- Ryan, J., & Higginbottom, K. (2017). Politics, activism, and leadership for social justice in education. In D. Waite & I. Bogotch (Eds.), *The Wiley international handbook of educational leadership* (pp. 103-124). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons
- Ribbins, P. (2008). A life and career based framework for the study of leaders in education: problems, possibilities and prescriptions. In J. Lumby, G. Crow & P. Paschiardis (Ed.), *Educational management: refining theory, policy and practice* (pp. 61-81). London: Paul Chapman.
- Ryan, J. (2012). *Struggling for inclusion: Educational leadership in a neo-liberal world*. Charlotte, North Carolina: IAP.
- Saltman, K. J., & Means, A. J. (2017). From "data-driven" to "democracy-driven" educational leadership: Navigating market bureaucracy and new technology in a 248 Post-Fordist era. In D. Waite & I. Bogotch (Eds.), *The Wiley international handbook of educational leadership* (pp. 125-138). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons
- Scarlett, W.G. (2015). *The sage encyclopedia of classroom management*. London: Sage.
- Scott, D., Brown, A., Lunt, I., & Thorne, L. (2004). *Professional doctorates: Integrating professional and academic knowledge*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Smith, N.J. (2009). *Achieving your professional doctorate*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Southworth, G. (2002). School leadership in English schools: Portraits, puzzles and identity. In A. Walker & C. Dimmock (Ed.) *School leadership and administration: Adopting a cultural perspective* (pp. 187-205). New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Spindler, J. & Biott, C. (2005). Immediacy and distance: Intergenerational professional learning. In C. Sugrue (Ed.) *Passionate principalship: Learning from the life histories of school leaders* (pp. 123-135). London: Routledge.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. London: Sage.

- Stynes, M. & McNamara, G. (2014). *Walk a mile in my shoes: A case study of the everyday lives and work experiences of a group of Irish primary school principals*. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation. Dublin: Dublin City University. Retrieved November, 7, 2017 from <http://doras.dcu.ie/20154/>
- Starrat, R.J. (2005). Foreword. In C. Sugrue (Ed.) *Passionate principalship: Learning from the life histories of school leaders* (pp. xi-xiii). London: Routledge.
- Sugrue, C. (2003). Principals' professional development: Realities, perspectives and possibilities. *Oideas*, 50, 8-39. Dublin: Department of Education and Science.
- Sugrue, C. (2005). (Ed.) *Passionate principalship: Learning from the life histories of school leaders*. London: Routledge.
- Taysum, A. (2003). In search of the holistic leader. *Management in Education* 17(5), 9-12.
- Taysum, A. (2013). The impact of doctoral study on educational leaders' work for students' participation in education systems and society. *Educational Review* 65(4), 432-446.
- The Teaching Council. (2016). *The teaching council*. Retrieved November, 7, 2017 from <http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/>
- Thomson, P. (2009). *School leadership: Heads on the block*. New York: Routledge.
- Thrupp, M., & Willmott, R. (2003). *Educational management in managerialist times*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Tomlinson, H., Gunter, H., & Smith, P. (1999). *Living headship: Voices, values and visions*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Troman, G. (2006). Headmasters, collaborative school cultures and school improvement: A changing relationship? *Educational action research*, 4(1), 119-144.
- Weick, K.E. (1995). *Sense making in organisations*. London: Sage.
- Woods, R. (2002). *Enchanted headteachers: Sustainability in primary school headship*. Nottingham: NCSL.
- Yin, R.K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.