



Vol.7 No.1 (2024)

Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

ISSN : 2591-801X

Content Available at : <http://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/index>

Advice from retired secondary school principals in Ireland on how to lead as a principal

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Keywords

Ireland;
leaders;
principal;
secondary schools.

Abstract

At the core of this paper is a report on a study aimed at generating theory about the perspectives of recently retired secondary school principals in Ireland (n=15) on how beginning secondary principals in the nation should lead. The hope from the outset was that the result could be drawn upon to offer supporting insights to providers, including university-led programmes, so as to inform the pre-service and ongoing preparation of aspiring and appointed principals. What follows is presented in four parts. First, an exposition is provided on the rationale that informed that aim. Secondly, recent developments in relation to school leadership in Ireland are considered. Thirdly, details on the conduct of the study are presented. Fourthly, the study results are outlined.

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Article Info

Received 11 September 2023

Received in revised form 9 December 2023

Accepted 4 January 2024

Available online 15 January 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2024.7.1.6>

Rationale for the study

We were explicit from the outset that we subscribe to a view that while the most influential model of school leadership for many years has been focused on authority, power, structures, job descriptions, targets and performance management, it should no longer be the sole one advocated by policymakers. That, we hold, is partly because in a complex and multi-layered world, one should no longer accept the conventional idea of 'good' leadership – leadership that promises more success and less failure – as being the result of the effort of a single individual.

At the same time, we hold to the view that beginning school principals need to have a good grasp of the fundamental tenets of the range of leadership types, including managerial leadership (Henkel et al., 2019), instructional leadership (Hallinger et al., 2020), transactional leadership/transformational leadership (Purwanto, 2020; Da'as, 2023), moral leadership (Wise & Slater, 2020), invitational leadership (Egley, 2003), interpersonal leadership (Lamm et al., 2016) and distributed leadership (Spillane, 2012), amongst others. However, we are also clear on the necessity of understanding people's contextual realities before introducing changes aimed at improving the quality of education in any context. On that, we have long been influenced by the argument of Fullan (1982, p. 149) that "in order to effect improvement, that is, to effect an introduced change which has the promise of increasing success and decreasing failure, the world of the people most closely involved must be understood". He went on to say that those who are trying to promote change – amongst whom we include beginning school principals – there is great benefit to be gained from reflecting on interpretivist studies of the leadership views of leaders. This, he argued, is because to have 'good' leadership, the world of the people most closely involved in the education enterprise must be understood.

Around the same time, Hargreaves also held that engaging in interpretivist studies in order to construct theory is important. To contend thus, he argued, is to hold that generating concepts, categories, propositions, models, typologies, and the relationships between all five of these, can result in us having "a language for speaking about that which is not normally spoken about: the ineffable is rendered articulate" (Hargreaves, 1993). Professionals can then be introduced to that 'language', he went on, such that it can act as a mirror that "reflects man [sic] back to himself", thus providing one with "an opportunity to judge and appraise the reflection" one sees and, perhaps as a result, prompting one to seek to change oneself and one's professional world (p. 149).

We are clear too regarding the folly of those who expect that clear directives for practice can be deduced from theory generated. Over fifty years ago Entwistle argued that there never "can be a one-to-one relationship between theory and practice if by this we mean theory which predicts every contingency in a practical situation. A theory gains its relevance to every conceivable situation by being an exact account of none of them.... The fault for the theory-practice gap may lie not in the theory but in the unrealistic expectations of practitioners" (Entwistle,

1971, p. 98). Over ten years later, Eisner (1984) argued that due to the changing uniqueness of the practical situations that make up the domain of education, only a portion of professional practice can be approached as a prescriptive science. The gap between general prescriptive frameworks and successful practice is, he held, dependent more on the reflective intuition, the craft, and the art of the professional practitioner than on a prescriptive theory, method, or model.

Informed by the positions outlined above, then, we take the view that the results of studies that lead to the generation of theory generated within a particular situation, or situations, or with a particular group of individuals, can be informative for the creation of professional development programmes. This is because they can be a source to assist in breaking away from a notion of continuing professional development as being concerned only with instrumental ends achievable through, "the recipes of tried and true practices legitimated by unexamined experiences or uncritically accepted research findings" and towards one of "developing reflective practitioners who are able to understand, challenge and transform" (Sachs & Logan, 1990, p. 479). In the language of Stenhouse (1975), this is a view that such studies can aid in the development of the capacity of educationists to understand relationships and make judgements by constituting frameworks for others within which they can think. Relatedly, it is a view that no claim can be made for the 'generalisability' of interpretivist theories generated in one situation to another. Instead, as Stake (1978) put it, theory generated through interpretive studies undertaken with small populations may be in harmony with the reader's experience and thus a natural basis for generalisation.

The view outlined above is that readers may be able to relate to a study and perhaps gain an understanding from it of their own and others' situations. As Kennedy (1979), in the same vein, put it, generalisability is ultimately related to what the reader is trying to learn from such studies. Strauss and Corbin (1994, p. 279) put it in similar terms when they stated that "those examining an interpretivist theory need to consider the extent to which their own situation fits the theory", along with how it might fit and how it might not. The demand, thus, of those engaged in professional development programmes in which theory is presented and where there is an acceptance that it consists of systematic statements of plausible relationships, is to have an openness based on the 'forever' provisional character of every educationist.

In relation to the latter matter, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) notion of 'transferability' is instructive. They contended that those who generate interpretivist theory cannot specify the external validity of an inquiry. Rather, alongside the theoretical constructs generated, he or she can provide "the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether the transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). Uhrmacher (1993) argued along similar lines that one can provide the reader with an understanding of the major themes that run through the cases under study. In turn, these themes can provide one with theories or guides for anticipating what may be found in other situations. To that, we add that when used in professional development programmes they can also suggest practices

to the participants that are worth putting to the test of practice to see if they lead to 'good' leadership on their part within their particular circumstances. We also hold that such suggestions from beginning school leaders are likely to be forthcoming when it is clear to them that what is being presented for cogitation is embedded in the realities of workplaces found in schools and in the environments in which they are located.

Recent developments in relation to school leadership preparation in Ireland

The study was conducted with recently retired school principals in the Republic of Ireland and is likely to have its greatest utility when used in such a setting for professional development programmes with aspiring and newly appointed principals. That said, there is no reason why it would not also be of some value to their peers in other countries. After all, it has been known for a long time that making comparisons and contrasts with one's own situation can be of great benefit in assisting one in reflecting on one's own situation. Both points, in turn, mean that there is a need to provide an exposition like that which follows on from the context within which studies of the type being promoted were conducted.

Across the 15 participants' timeframe of principalship, 1982-2018, policy expectations associated with the roles and responsibilities of school principals have evolved significantly, gaining considerable pace in more recent times. Of note is a movement that commenced by determining an understanding of what principals need to do, to an understanding of what supports are needed to enhance principals in their work. The origins of that movement were inspired by the authors of a 1991 OECD report on Ireland, a number of whose recommendations were captured in the Education Act of 1998. Relatedly, the following list of official responsibilities were required of principals; encourage and foster learning in students; regularly evaluate students and periodically report to the students and their parents, promote co-operation between the school and the community; be responsible for the day-to-day management of the school, including guidance and direction of the teachers and other staff of the school, and be accountable to the board for that management; provide leadership to the teachers and other staff and the students of the school; be responsible for the creation, together with the board, parents of students and the teachers, of a school environment which is supportive of learning among the students and which promotes the professional development of the teachers; set objectives for the school (under the direction of the board and, in consultation with the teachers, the parents and, to the extent appropriate to their age and experience, the students) and monitor their achievement; and encourage the involvement of parents of students in the school in the education of those students and in the achievement of the objectives of the school.

Centrally organised supports for school leadership soon followed and were made widely available in the first decade of the century with particular emphasis placed on distributed and instructional styles of leadership, albeit without any clear

and detailed explanation of what these concepts might mean at the national or local level. School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) initiatives were aimed at improving school practice in relation to a series of indicators which informed the publication of *Looking at our schools* (Department of Education and Science, Ireland, 2022). The later document focuses in particular on 'Teaching and Learning' and 'Leadership and Management' and informs not only the work of schools but also school inspections and the criteria used for appointments to positions of middle and senior leadership. Of note, the most recent edition of *Looking at our schools* (Department of Education and Science, Ireland, 2022) more explicitly details the role of school leadership and its connection to both school self-evaluation (SSE) and the criteria for leadership appointments.

Concurrently, work on engaging in internal school reviews and external school evaluations in search of school improvement also came to be emphasised and was supported at post-primary school level by a growing number of Department of Education (DE) schools' inspectors. In turn, those at the centre in the national Department of Education (DE) also lent their support to the establishment of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) in 1998 and the provision of support in the form of a suite of leadership development programmes for newly appointed principals. In more recent times, the latter has been supplemented by the work of a new Centre for School Leadership (CSL), established in 2015. Professionals at this centre offer guidance and support to those occupying different positions across the leadership strata in schools. Furthermore, largely through retired school principals they specifically offer coaching and mentoring support to newly appointed principals and to principals who feel that such may be of assistance to them at any particular time. In addition, they offer endorsement of a myriad of leadership programmes, provided by higher education institutions in order to encourage aspirant and appointed leaders to obtain accredited qualifications from a wide range of providers. That said, as highlighted by Murphy (2023):

Notably, formal leadership preparation for senior (the principalship or deputy principalship) or middle leadership (assistant principals, of which there are two categories, Assistant Principal 1 and Assistant Principal 2) is not, as yet, officially required (p. 30).

While not, as of yet, formally required to be appointed to leadership roles in Irish secondary schools, it is clear from Murphy's insightful research (2023) that it is now accepted by aspiring leaders that it is 'impossible to secure a senior leadership role without engaging in formal leadership preparation' (p. 30). However, the appetite to become or remain a school leader would appear to have waned in recent times (Clemens et al., 2016; National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, 2020). These two context-sensitive scenarios are interconnected and in such a context, the advice, in our small study, from recently retired principals may prove of value to those seeking to support and to design professional learning opportunities for aspiring and appointed school leaders.

Overall, a shift has taken place towards greater coherence in relation to school leadership and a broader interpretation of school leadership than previously held in Ireland. Middle leaders and those without formal roles (described as teacher leaders) have been part of that shift, especially since 2018. Such is captured with a renewed policy emphasis and entreaties associated with promoting both distributed and instructional leadership (Department of Education, 2018) among school personnel. The promotion of collaborative leadership practices within and across schools continues to be a policy imperative heightened more recently by responses to the Covid pandemic. Nevertheless, recruitment and retention of school principals continues to be a challenge. Thus, two days before the Covid-19 pandemic first closed schools in Ireland, the NAPD stated (Irish Times, March 10th 2020) that it was critical to address potential solutions and support, so as to ensure the position of school principals continued to attract the best talent and expertise into the future. Adding, that research from their own survey found that less than one in three school leaders predicted they would still be in a leadership role in five years (NAPD, 2020).

The conduct of the study

The study, it will be recalled, aimed at seeking insights to inform the pre-service and on-going preparation of neophytes for the position of second-level school principal in Ireland, was undertaken by the present writer and reported later in this thesis. To that end, the authors set out to generate a theory on the perspectives of recently retired second-level school principals in Ireland on how beginning second-level principals in the nation should lead. The associated central guiding research question was as follows: What is the most comprehensive theory that can be generated on the perspectives of recently retired second-level school principals in Ireland on how beginning second-level principals in the nation should lead. That in turn led to the generation of the following sub-research guiding questions based on the four component parts of 'perspectives' as explicated by Blackledge and Hunt (1985):

1. What intentions do recently retired second-level school principals in Ireland say that beginning second-level principals in the nation should have on how to lead in schools and what reasons do they give for having them?
2. What strategies do retired second-level school principals in Ireland say that beginning second-level principals in the nation should use when leading in schools and what reasons do they give for having them?
3. What significance do recently retired second-level school principals in Ireland say that beginning second-level principals in the nation should attach to their job of leading in schools and what reasons do they give for having them?
4. What outcomes do recently retired second-level school principals in Ireland say that beginning

second-level principals in the nation should expect as a result of how they lead in schools and what reasons do they give for having them?

Grounded theory was the associated research methodology adopted. That was because it makes its greatest contribution in areas like that studied in which little research has been undertaken (Bryant, 2013). Fernandez (in Walsh et al., 2015) put the associated argument well in explaining that grounded theory is an approach to research that "privileges context" over academic theory, and thus is particularly applicable when the impacts of specific cultural contexts are at the heart of a study. Levina (in Walsh et al., 2015) developed it further, stating that grounded theory "embraces the richness and uniqueness of the context without necessarily ignoring the development of theory applicable to other phenomena and contexts" (p. 592).

Consistent with the grounded theory research approach, the researcher selected the research methods of semi-structured interviews with individuals and the analytical approach of open coding. Purposeful participant selection was used to ensure that information-rich participants were interviewed (Patton, 1990). On that, as the study aimed to generate theory not yet developed it was not necessary to work with large numbers of participants (Author 2). It was realised too that collecting too much data could impede analysis and lead to 'conceptual blindness' (Morse, 2010). Therefore, it was held that it was important for participants to be chosen whose responses would be likely to maximise the quality, rather than the quantity of data.

In total, 15 principals were involved in the study. Of those researched, 5 had been appointed to their first position as principal in the 1980s. The other 10 took up their first position as principal just before the turn of the century. All had been retired for less than 3 years. Following being contacted by email and invited to participate in the study, each participant who volunteered received a letter outlining the research.

An interview schedule was developed based on the four guiding questions outlined above. The principals participated in individual interviews. The actual order of the questions was partly determined by the interviewee, with the interviewer allowing him or her to take the lead. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participant and then transcribed to allow ease of analysis according to procedures outlined by Jamshed (2014).

In accordance with grounded theory approaches to analysis (Punch & Oancea, 2014), the authors interrogated the data to generate conceptual categories, found relationships between them, and conceptualised these relationships. Coding was undertaken at three levels: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The authors engaged in these processes until they considered they had reached 'saturation'.

Overview of results

The following 'story-line' (ref.) was generated in relation to the results:

All of the practices advocated by retired teachers for beginning principals have already been highlighted in the academic literature as being necessary for engaging in successful leadership. Moreover, they do not neglect to highlight any of the practices that have prominence in that body of work. While not offering any new insights in relation to each of them, they express, both explicitly and implicitly, a view that there is a hierarchy in terms of practices to which leaders should attend. On that, there is an emphasis much greater than what one gets in the current literature on the importance of maintaining a physically healthy and psychologically balanced life if one is to be a successful leader, and one that is seen to override all other considerations that one should address when approaching the job.

Next in line in terms of a hierarchy of considerations, and again very prominent, is the importance attached to taking context into consideration and showing appreciation before one takes up one's position of what one has inherited. Unlike in relation to other aspects of education, including curriculum and pedagogy, the 'understanding of context' element of this is something that has come to be advocated with great strength in the field of leadership only in recent years. Even then, it is highlighted in their writing by only a handful of scholars.

Third in line in terms of a hierarchy of considerations is a clear notion of how having taken steps to ensure one can maintain a physically healthy and psychologically balanced life and to understand the context in which one is operating is that in subsequently adopting leadership practices, one should engage in associated considerations in a particular logically structured manner. Such an approach, it is indicated is necessary if one is to provide leadership that is systematic and effective and is likely to maximise the achievement of positive results. It involves, it is held, first establishing clearly the overall aims one is trying to achieve, then engaging in comprehensive preparation, then putting in place what are termed 'necessary safeguards', then engaging in 'positive action', and then setting out to harness as much positive action as one can to realise one's aims.

The three main aspects of this storyline are now elaborated upon.

Maintaining a balanced life

Retired principals in the advice they give to neophytes highlight above all else the importance of maintaining a balanced lifestyle at all times. On that, they draw attention to three practices they consider new principals should utilise. They are maintaining a balanced life, maintaining a sense of one's own mortality, and taking steps to not only take pleasure from the achievements of the schools' students, but also from communicating them widely. These matters have been receiving attention in the academic literature, albeit only in recent years and also by only a handful of scholars. Each is now outlined in turn.

Staying physically and mentally fit

One can only maintain a balanced life, retired principals say, if one is physically and mentally fit. Thus, they advise neophytes to plan and maintain a regular and sensible physical exercise regime. Equally, they stress the need for one to arrange to make an appointment with one's general practitioner twice a year for appropriate blood tests. That, they hold, is important not just in case there are any threats that one may likely to contract a major illness, but also to discuss and get advice on anything that may be resulting in stress and sleep deprivation, sleep issues and stress.

Retired principals equally stress the need for one to monitor what they term one's 'mental fitness'. This is put forward as having both a positive and negative dimension. The former relates to the need, as it is put, for one "to be true to oneself" and to be able to benefit from the satisfaction one can get from positive comments made by members of the school community regarding one's role as a leader when one presents oneself as someone they "see as human". Equally, it is argued, in order to bring enthusiasm and energy to one's work, one needs to maintain regular friendships with non-work-related peers, regularly have holidays, and maintain at least one major non-work-related interest or hobby.

A negative matter raised by retired school principals regarding the disposition that neophytes should cultivate is that one should not take home one's work. By this is meant that one should not take administrative work home to address in after-work hours. That is proposed so that one has an opportunity to refresh oneself in mind and body for the next day's work. It is, however, also proposed so that, as it is put, one does not in the case of those with partners and possibly other family members "burden those at home". For one to do so is seen not only to be unfair to those in one's care on the home front, but also because one would be turning one's back on the possibility of being refreshed through the dynamics of post-interpersonal relationships and thus return to one's workplace emotionally refreshed and in a good state of mind to have a positive influence on others.

Maintaining a sense of one's own mortality

A second way of maintaining a balanced lifestyle so that one continues to be a positive-minded and effective school leaders, retired principals say, is to ensure one maintains a sense of one's own mortality. A valuable attitude to adopt in that regard, one argued, is to "remind oneself that one is a cog on a wheel and that cogs can wear out". Another, in like manner, stated that it is helpful to adopt a view that "principals only borrow their schools for a limited period of time".

Further, regarding this matter of maintaining a sense of one's own mortality, retired principals state also that one needs to regularly work hard with oneself on staying calm, and especially when under pressure. Regarding the latter, they add, one needs to recognise what many term the "stress indicators and triggers" that could make one deviate from such a demeanour. That, in turn, they contend, means

putting oneself in a situation where one can listen with an open mind to what those under one's authority are saying. As one put it, "once you understand where people are coming from, you may feel less angry towards them and can create a gap within yourself between stimulus and reaction to produce a better response – or to do nothing." "So", she concluded, "mind the gap".

Taking pleasure from students' achievements and broadcasting them

A third way of maintaining a balanced lifestyle so that one continues to be a positive-minded and effective school leaders, retired principals say, is to take pleasure from students' achievements and broadcasting them. That, it is asserted, should involve attending and enjoying their participation in sporting events and concerts. Moreover, it is added, one should generate means for celebrating their achievements and those of staff. Amongst many approaches advocated in this regard is the creation of a gallery of photos for one's end-of year report in which one should detail everyone and everything that appears within it. All of this, it is implied, will help in the generation and re-generation of one's enthusiasm for one's work as a school leader as a result of both the intrinsic joy, one can experience by acting along such lines and also from the positive feedback one is likely to get from students and staff members.

Paying attention to context

Next in prominence in the hierarchy of considerations promoted by recently retired school principals for adoption by neophytes is the importance attached to taking context into consideration and making public one's appreciation of it before one takes up one's position. This matter has also been given increased emphasis in the academic literature in recent years, again albeit by only a handful of scholars. Moreover, the notion of recently retired principals that it should take precedence over addressing such other aspects of education as curriculum and pedagogy, has not been a feature of the corpus of academic works in the field. Overall, they also articulate the importance they attach to the position, identify issues that might act as obstacles to putting it into practice, and identify what they see as a set of practices on how to proceed.

The importance they attach to this position

Three matters are highlighted by retired principals on the importance of paying attention to the context of the school in which one is employed and why one needs to make this known to those who make up the school community. First, they point out that while a newly appointed school leader is likely to have a range of competencies in relation to such matters as teaching and learning, and administration, such skills, as one stated, "must be allied to the wise review and understanding of the socio-emotional context of the organisation". That, in turn, it is asserted, requires that one knows the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Moreover, it is maintained that this requires that one not

only comes to such an understanding with the perspective of an outsider and makes judgments according to one's own criteria but just, if not even more important, in terms of how participants see themselves, the school culture, and why, within it, they say that things are justifiably done as they are.

Perceived potential obstacles

The second matter highlighted by retired principals on the importance of paying attention to the context of the school in which one is employed is that one should not assume that all schools are the same. On that, they stress how vital it is that one works hard on trying to avoid making comparisons with previous school(s) both in doing one's own assessment and in sharing one's perspectives with staff and community members. A school's culture, as a participant declared, can be like an iceberg in the sense that only a small amount of it is readily visible. To view the rest accurately, she went on, requires that one engages in a lot of difficult and open-minded work. And in doing that, she concluded, one should not assume that one's values are the same as the school's deputy principal and other members of staff, and also that one is always correct if there are differences of view.

Suggested practices on how to proceed

Thirdly, retired principals suggest useful practices in which one can engage in order to arrive at both outsider and insider perspectives on the context of a school. At a most basic level, it is important, as alleged, that one meets staff members individually and regularly, albeit not in regular situations socially. That could commence by adopting a practice of greeting each every day. Relatedly, it is recommended that from the outset, one needs to show appreciation for what one has inherited. On that, for example, it is likely that the timetable for teaching is in place at the time of one's arrival. A qualifier is added though. One person put that well in proposing that "one should try to avoid remodelling all institutional practices. Brush the cobwebs off the furniture rather than throw it all out".

It is argued too that it is important to develop a habit of showing interest regularly in what staff members do and what competencies they possess, and that that interest in the staff not only be genuine interest but also be seen as such. A start can be made in that regard by having a major involvement in drawing up the school timetable. To that is added that all staff members, including ancillary staff, as well as students, parents, members of the school's board of management, need to be listened to, to know that they are being listened to, and to know that it is done in a non-judgmental manner. The importance of getting to know caretakers is given special mention on the grounds that they will help one to know much about the school buildings, which can influence school performance in many ways and thus need to be managed in the interest of providing leadership aimed at generating positive learning communities. Getting to know the views of other school support staff is also stressed, especially in view of the wealth of institutional knowledge they often possess that one can harness. To that is added a need to know what approach is taken by those

support staff who are the first anyone meets on entry to the school. Having an open-door policy is also promoted as being conducive to fostering a positive learning community in which there are trust and openness, two properties, it is asserted, of good leadership.

Retired principals also allege that, while it can be a mammoth task, it is well worthwhile trying to remember each student's name and addressing him or her wherever possible by his or her first name. A constant refrain is that one should regularly engage with the students in groups in public places during recess period, listen to their stories, and ask them how they are getting on with their schoolwork and in life in general. The value in that practice, it is added, can be amplified if one can teach a number of classes oneself since, among other advantages, it can help in the process, as more than one stated, "of listening closely to the students".

Approaching leadership tasks in a logical manner

Third in line in terms of a hierarchy of considerations is a clear notion of how having taken steps to ensure one can maintain a physically healthy and psychologically balanced life and understanding the context in which one is operating is that in subsequently adopting leadership practices, one should engage in associated considerations in a particular logically structured manner. Such an approach, it is indicated is necessary if one is to provide leadership that is systematic and effective and is likely to maximise the achievement of positive results. It involves, it is held, first establishing clearly the overall aims one is trying to achieve, then engaging in comprehensive preparation, and then engaging in comprehensive planning. Furthermore, they identify in relation to the latter activities a range of practices concerned with putting in place what they view as necessary safeguards and harnessing as much positive action as one can to realise one's aims.

Step one

A first step outlined by retired principals for approaching what they deem to be the most important tasks associated with the role of a principal is that one needs to clearly establish one's associated overall aims. Indeed, they go on to state what those aims should be. That was put succinctly by one participant:

It is vital that one seeks to build an institutional identity and culture that has the capacity to build and adapt to challenges and uncertainty. Thus, the principal has to try to provide direction and clarity on the one hand, while at the same time seeking to encourage the school individuals and teams to be creative and developmental. It requires that one works to balance the demands of metrics, examinations, and internal and external evaluations with trying to be inspirational.

It is accepted that the task is not an easy one since school life is always very busy. Accordingly, it is concluded, one needs to encourage habits within oneself to ensure that one

never loses sight of such an aim.

A number of associated practices are also recommended by the retired principals. One of those is that one should set aside some time each day to reflect on how one is progressing in relation to the school mission. Some recommend keeping a diary which can be revisited at different times and support reflection and subsequent actions. One should also use such occasions to set related short-term goals. In a similar vein, one should seek out opportunities to regularly clarify and reinforce the mission ideals amongst all members of the school community. That could involve having outlines of the mission in the staff handbook and drawing attention to it at staff meetings, assemblies, open nights, and award ceremonies.

Step two

The second step outlined by retired principals for approaching what they deem to be the most important tasks associated with the role of a principal is that one should engage in comprehensive preparation aimed at putting in place what they term "necessary safeguards" in relation to "vision destroyers." To that end, it is held, having a 'significant other', with whom one can regularly confide is valuable. The notion is that such an individual should be a mentor located outside the organisation who can offer support and debriefing sessions. Ideally, it is argued, such individuals should be detached and resilient and be able to provide guidance when required without mandating.

Retired principals also argue that it is helpful to cogitate ways in which staff members can operate to destroy a school's vision. One way detailed is "by maintaining a detached disposition involving denying and disconnecting from feelings" and "allowing your school to become emotionally anorexic". Another is by groups colluding and distributing degrees of responsibility and irresponsibility. That, as a former principal voiced it, can involve "locating incompetence and poor-quality teaching away from where it is visible, but not addressing the core issue". Another way yet again is through what is termed "purposeful obscurity". That is defined as acting to avoid locating where responsibility lies". A final and related way identified by retired school principals that staff members can operate to destroy a school's vision is by reducing the impact of responsibility by delegating upwards, to the principal. Moreover, it is added, one is likely to maximise such threats to one's efforts if one is ever "heard talking either within or outside the school about work being a casual affair" even though one may not mean it.

It is also stressed that in anticipating negative actions one needs to be careful in establishing one's relationship with the deputy principal who is already working in the school on one's arrival. Sometimes one might find out he or she is aggrieved at not having won one's post. The issue as one individual voiced it, "the deputy principal is an essential component of your leadership role. Thus, any concerns should be managed in a professional manner". "This person", it is added, "really has the capacity to make your first year smooth or very bumpy". One needs, it is stated, "to always

indicate positive regard for the individual in question” while not “handing over your power and not adopting an attitude that the individual in question knows because he or she was there before you arrived”. Overall, it is concluded, what is required is that one strikes a very delicate balance in relation to the matters detailed and that this can be made possible through having formal daily meetings with the deputy principal and regular ones with those involved in middle management.

It is crucial too, it is held, that one be seen not to identify with any one group within the school community. Accordingly, one should send all information to all staff at the same time via email. In addition, it is recommended that one will have more time to get established and have the energy to address ‘detractors’ if one does not try to do too much in one’s first year or two. Indeed, it is held that one should not attempt any initiatives until mid-way through one’s first year and that that should be only one initiative and one should lead it oneself. On that, more than one person concluded that any changes one envisages should be pursued gradually and be seen to be beneficial for the whole school community. To that end, they added, the principal needs to “anticipate who is going to be affected by a change and consult with them beforehand”.

Step three

The third step outlined by retired principals for approaching what they deem to be most important tasks associated with the role of principal is that one should harness as much positive action as one can to realise one’s aims. For that, it is contended, one needs to prepare by reading regularly on how a school functions while not trying to know everything there is to know, including about the school. That means that one needs to be committed to engaging in inclusive action and delegating responsibility. One also needs, it is added, to adopt and be seen to maintain a positive work ethic. The latter could include being the first to meet deadlines set for various tasks. It can also include being the first to arrive at the school each morning, being available and approachable with staff and students, and being visible through constantly wandering about the school.

Retired principals also say that positive actions one can take to try to realise one’s aims can involve joining school principals’ associations, attending regional and national management body meetings and continuing professional development days, and sharing management body material with the members of the school’s board of management. Indeed, it is added that such actions can impress on the individuals concerned the importance of the principal’s role and that those who embrace that view can be an invaluable resource available when planning each school year in advance.

Having regular meetings of the school’s teaching staff is also recommended. Those, it is held, should be geared towards promoting a collaborative and self-reflective practice that reduces the strain and onus on the individual leader to be the one with all the answers. That can be part of a strategy, it is argued, aimed at building trust amongst oneself and

one’s colleagues. Mutual trust, it is argued, can also grow when teachers are asked for their cooperation. As one retired principal put it, “that can serve as an antidote to the situation whereby teachers have been affirmed as sole traders all of their lives and where working together was often seen as contrived collegiality”. At the same time, it is recognised that sometimes there is value in engaging ‘outside experts’ to facilitate planning days aimed at reviewing challenges. Those could include, for example, giving staff opportunities to be part of core school teams and to benefit from a change of posts.

Core to the practices proposed, it is suggested, is principals communicating regularly with all, including parents and students. Equally, they should be decisive through engaging in critical dialogue and not be afraid to be creative and innovative. Moreover, they should be forgiving of their own mistakes and should not let the fear of making mistakes hinder the school’s teachers in executing their creativity as long as they do so responsibly. Added to that, they should be prepared to admit when they have made mistakes and be not afraid of making apologies.

Conclusion

At the core of this paper is a report on a study aimed at generating theory about the perspectives of recently retired secondary school principals in Ireland on how beginning principals in the nation should lead. The hope from the outset was that the result could be drawn upon to offer supporting research to providers so as to inform the pre-service and ongoing preparation of aspiring and appointed principals. What followed was presented in four parts. First, an exposition is provided on the rationale that informed that aim. Secondly, recent developments in relation to school leadership in Ireland were considered. Thirdly, details on the conduct of the study were presented. Fourthly, the study results were outlined.

The exposition on the results generated, does not contain copious details. Instead, influenced by Weber’s (1994) notion of ‘ideal types’, we set out to produce an account that would be helpful for comparative study by virtue of being a synthesis of “diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena which are arranged . . . into a unified analytical construct” (p. 92) In saying this, we recognise that there are retired principals whose perspectives most likely differ from those we foreground. Accordingly, we invite readers to be open to the possibility that the efficacy of our interpretations lies not only in their capacity to describe patterns of actions and interactions of those studied but also in their potential to prompt one to ask questions regarding possible different perspectives and thus contribute to sharpening thinking that can equally contribute to professional development.

However, we are also clear on the necessity of understanding people’s contextual realities before introducing changes aimed at improving the quality of education in any context. To that, we add that when used in professional development programmes they can also suggest practices to the participants that are worth putting to the test of practice to

see if they lead to 'good' leadership on their part within their particular circumstances. We also hold that such suggestions from beginning school leaders are likely to be forthcoming when it is clear to them that what is being presented for cogitation is embedded in the realities of workplaces found in schools and in the environments in which they are located.

An example of such an invitation to readers is to explore the strong emphasis and value placed on the relational dimensions that emerge from the advice offered by principals in this small study. In turn, it might be of value to begin to explore the interplay between the well-being of principals and their ability to promote a culture of distributed leadership among their colleagues. A culture which in turn might instil both confidence and competence among the next generation of leaders and assist in making the position of principal more attractive than would currently seem to be the case. Yet, as always, such invitations are issued safe in the knowledge that one's current perceptions of one's context are key.

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