

Unmasking School Leadership

STUDIES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Ciaran Sugrue

Unmasking School Leadership

A Longitudinal Life History
of School Leaders

 Springer

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*For Oscar, Jasper, Portia, Iseult, Fraser &
Mark: the next (next) generation of leaders*

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Acronyms

Acronyms included here are those particular to the Irish Education System and thus not commonly recognised internationally

BoM	Board of Management
CPSMA	Catholic Primary School Managers Association
DoE	Department of Education (1921–1997)
DES	Department of Education and Science (1997–2010)
DES	Department of Education and Skills (2010–present) (www.education.ie/)
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals’ Network (www.ippn.ie)
LDS	Leadership Development for Schools (www.lds21.ie)
LRC	The Labour Relations Commission (www.lrc.ie)
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputies (post-primary) (www.napd.ie)
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (www.ncca.ie)
NCSE	National Council for Special Education (www.ncse.ie)
NWCI	National Women’s Council of Ireland (www.nwci.ie)
PCSP	Primary Curriculum Support Programme
SDPS	School Development Planning Support
SENO	Special Education Needs Organiser
SNA	Special Needs Assistant

Introduction

School principals have occupied a place in popular imagination as well as the educational landscape since the foundation of State education systems, largely a nineteenth century phenomenon. The designation ‘head master’ or ‘head mistress’ continue to inhabit imagination, often being associated with authority and discipline. Contemporary principals are likely to say that ‘the buck stops with me’ while reform literature trumpets the importance of the leadership role, and the significance of having a vision that can be collectively created and pursued, preferably adopting a distributed leadership perspective. In a somewhat narcissistic manner, many principals have embraced the approbation inherent in the terms ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ since they are perceived to reflect enhanced images of the roles and responsibilities attaching to principalship; perhaps resonant with a romanticised attachment to the heroic—Laurence of Arabia, Don Quixote, or some appropriate culturally iconic Florence Nightingale; a sort of Sisyphean (heroic) tilting at windmills. During the past two decades in particular, as the ‘virtues’ of the private sector have been loudly commended to a highly criticised public sector, central to the persistent cries for reform has been the necessity for better leaders and leadership. As old verities fall out of favour, advocacy for leadership has become something of a modern mantra, something we need more of without being specific about what it might entail.

Turning to my trusty Chambers dictionary, I am informed that a principal may be a—main, major, chief, primary, prime, key, foremost, or fundamental person; ‘the leading or most highly ranked person’—though none of these words contain a strong sense of principal as being an active leader, communicator, mover and motivator. Rather, such words convey a sense of control, continuity and stability. By contrast, the same source informs that a leader is ‘someone whom people follow’, or is ‘in front of others’ ‘the head of’ something. Perhaps then there is a sense that leadership has been carefully hidden, dormant or camouflaged within the term principal, and as contexts have altered and gained in complexity, this embedded dimension has been foregrounded, thus emphasising the necessity for agency, direction and movement rather than stability and continuity. But it is likely fanciful to suggest

that (traditionally) principals have been closet leaders, waiting for the right moment to emerge from the chrysalis of office to extend instantly their leadership wings and take flight without the hindrance of a learning curve and unencumbered by systemic constraints.

In a more competitive, global educational landscape that has altered dramatically over the past two decades, and where international league tables have had a major shaping influence on education policies, school leadership too has risen to the policy mountain top as a significant influence on ‘performance’ of learners. The research literature on school reform and the necessity for more and better leadership, dominated largely by English language and Anglo-North American-Antipodean publications, has tended towards homogenisation, and a neo-positivist search for ‘best practice’ in a manner that eschews difference, history, culture and context.

Principals’ lives and work are situated within these lexical and policy force fields. The purpose of this text is to give voice to school leaders whose lived experience of leadership is rarely represented in large scale studies. Rather, their voices, views and versions of leadership are more typically silenced or ignored by these large scale, well-funded research projects, typically conducted in or out of major urban centres and major research centres, or ‘research intensive’ universities. Part of the purpose of this text then is to insert into the discourses on school leadership from the periphery, but in a manner that speaks to the centre, to the extant literature. In this way, it is intended to redress an imbalance in the extant literature while seeking simultaneously to make a distinct contribution. Espousing a longitudinal life history perspective strengthens this potential since it documents in detail how principal-leadership has been practised over time, thus lending a ‘change over time’ perspective to a research literature that is most often a ‘snapshot’ in time only.

This book is in four parts. Although each part has a particular focus and its own integrity, the impact of the four parts is intended to be cumulative. There are 12 chapters in total. The remainder of the introduction indicates the content of each part and its respective chapters.

Part I (**Rhetorics, Realities and Research on School Leadership**) includes two chapters that set the scene and frame the remainder of the work.

Chapter 1 (School Leaders and Leadership: A Longitudinal Life History) situates the study in its contextual surroundings by indicating how the role of primary principal has evolved in the Irish context during the past half century, while situating this systemic change in emphasis over time within international discourses on leadership, and in particular the manner in which neo-liberal ideology has progressively become pervasive in policy rhetorics. While addressing this matter, the chapter indicates that attaching ‘leadership’ to the role of principal has been a rather recent phenomenon—largely grafted onto administrative and managerial responsibilities. Due to this trajectory, and its relatively recent provenance, the chapter also argues that for this reason a life history approach to this reality has potential to provide a contextualised insider perspective, grounded in the realities of principals’ lives and work, in contrast with much empirical work on the subject that largely provides a snapshot in time. Thus the chapter also provides justification for this approach, indicating the benefits it brings to the substantive

focus, while elaborating on the manner in which data were generated, analysed and the identification of ‘themes’ that make up the empirical chapters of this text. It concludes with an introduction of the informants that populate the study and the book’s subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 (School Leadership in Context: National Policies, International Influences) situates national policies on school leadership and reform within international discourses. It does this by indicating macro, meso and micro levels of leadership and how each is in dynamic inter-relationship with each other thus creating a particular leadership cocktail that is at once local, national and international; a ‘glocalisation’ of leadership literature. The lineage and importance of professional autonomy is indicated while over time it is suggested that it has been supplanted in terms of policy priority by externally imposed accountability controls regarding standards and outcomes, thus eroding the spaces and opportunities for school leaders to lead. Though the rhetoric is of leadership, the task is increasingly one of management, at the risk of oversimplification. The chapter indicates the extent to which over time, the language of NPM has pervaded wave after wave of policy initiatives, while allowing underlying structures to remain remarkably rooted in the nineteenth century, thus in many respects arresting leadership potential and capacity building while appearing to advocate otherwise. One of the more tangible initiatives undertaken was the creation of senior and middle management structures in schools as a means of distributing leadership responsibilities, but here too conservative and defensive implementation has limited leadership initiative and its capacity for development, while recent austerity measures have hollowed out this innovation. This is the evolving context in which the school leadership detailed in this book is practised.

Part II (**Career Trajectories of Primary Principals**) includes three chapters each of which connects the life histories of principals with themes in the wider leadership literature.

Chapter 3 (Perceptions of Principal’s Role: Insider Perspectives, Change Over Time) paints the first panel in a complex mosaic that is systematically extended through each subsequent chapter. It honours the commitment to espouse a change over time perspective. In recognising that taking on such a major task in one chapter would be impossible, it situates the micro politics of change at the level of the school within national policy reforms and international change forces, thus opening up an initial space in which to enable principals to indicate how change is experienced from a personal, professional and organisational perspective. Two themes are chosen for this purpose—changing social mores and their consequences for home-school relationships, parenting, and patterns of socialisation that impinge on school routines, pedagogies and relationships. The second theme addressed is the impact of changing communications technologies and how these too, though constantly evolving, create persistent challenges to principals and teachers that require re-thinking to long established as well as more recently created routines of practice, thus being a catalyst for a combination of uncertainty, instability and professional defensiveness as well as encouragements to be creative, innovative and pedagogically inspiring, while school leaders are expected to lead the charge or at

least set the tone for such dynamics. Within the broad canvas of conjuncture and disjuncture, the impact of these reforms is documented over time. In documenting the many policy shifts over a period of four decades, the chapter indicates how much change has been absorbed, while leaving open the extent to which such policy rhetorics have penetrated to core activities within school communities. Preparation for leadership in advance of being elevated to the role of principal emerges as an absolute necessity even if diversity rather than one fit for all requires adequate attention in the planning and delivery of such preparatory principal programmes.

Chapter 4 (Being and Becoming a Principal: ‘Navi-Gotiating’ Roles and Responsibilities) focuses on the manner in which principals, when newly appointed, navigate the legacies inherited from their predecessors and the dominant contours of the school culture while seeking simultaneously to (re-)negotiate aspects of both with their colleagues as a means of establishing themselves as leaders of the school community. Thus there is a tension inherent in the ‘navi-gotiation’ of this role with significance for how leadership is exercised, particularly since none of the participants in the study had formal preparation for the role. The evidence appears to suggest that in the absence of preparation—though not a panacea—there is a very cautious approach to assuming authoritative leadership, thus legacies and dominant cultural norms and values emerge as a major constraint on the agency of principals. While legacies tend to predominate, what remains unanswered is whether or not these initial years in the role create hostages to fortune from which leadership of principals only partially escapes subsequently.

Chapter 5 (Principal Professional Learning: Sources of Sustenance?) indicates that until very recently, formal preparation for the role of school leader was significantly absent in the system. Thus, learning on the job, in a serendipitous opportunist and idiosyncratic manner, was elevated to a prominent and undeserved status, particularly as the role became more complex and diversified. The evidence in this chapter testifies that being ‘thrown in at the deep end’ pressures individuals to become self-reliant, to seek sources of sustenance where they can find them, often relying on empathetic and supportive partners as sounding boards. There is evidence too that they seek intellectual stimulation, often not directly connected to the responsibilities, but these emerge as vital and sustaining. More informally, the emergence more recently of networks and support groups have become important spaces and places for the exchange of practical wisdom, but there is a noticeable absence of more systematic support. The evidence convinces that when there is strong resonance between the personal and professional, a ‘per-fessional’ energy and enthusiasm is present that increases a sense of efficacy and job satisfaction. Nevertheless, in looking to the future, given the evidence presented here of the importance of informal learning, building systemic leadership capacity it appears cannot afford to ignore the significance of informal learning, nor to over-colonise it in an enthusiastic moment of seeking to scale up leadership learning. Other issues that emerge include a more sophisticated approach to career planning and progression—since it appears that learning on the job, though always necessary, is no longer adequate and belies the policy rhetorics of the significance of school leadership. Additionally, selection processes for the appointment of principals

appear to lack transparency, not helped by the autonomy of individual boards of management to conduct their own affairs. Consequently, the politics of the local tends to take precedence over a more strategic and systemic approach that seems more in tune with the complexity of the role.

Part III (**Policy, Practice & Principals**) includes four chapters, each contributing another element of the mosaic of leadership.

Chapter 6 (Doing Leadership: The Significance of Inter-personal Relationships?), as its title suggests, focuses on the significance of interpersonal relations for the exercise of leadership. The evidence indicates that, without prior preparation for the role, there is a tendency to be overly concerned with cultivating good relations as ends in themselves. However, as the policy environment alters more towards greater accountability and performativity, there is increasing awareness that a more sophisticated cocktail of purpose, passion, vision and a 'can do' attitude that is demanding of colleagues is necessary while the need for sensitivity to individual needs as well as greater awareness of what professional responsibility now entails requires sophisticated reflexivity and ongoing cultivation. Lack of differentiation between personal and professional relations, a commonplace among principals, complicates and compromises leaders and their leadership.

Chapter 7 (Inclusive Schools: Challenging Leadership?) documents in detail how the promotion of a policy of inclusion internationally and reflected in the reform efforts of national agenda, has had enormous if significantly uneven impact on the lives and work of school principals and their colleagues. While this is frequently attributed to 'geography' or 'the luck of the draw', such sanitised sensibilities ignore that the manner in which such policies play out are hugely shaped by wider structural issues regarding employment and housing. Within the confines of schools, principals have had to engage with a much wider audience in vindicating rights and attendant entitlements of SEN children or recent immigrants. Consistent with testimony in other chapters, there is enormous variation in terms of demand on individual schools. When demand is manifest, a positive disposition on the part of the principal is critical but the evidence reveals too that such a disposition leads to moral commitment but without systemic support to build necessary professional capacity. Thus principals and colleagues, predisposed to care, are more inclined to 'muddle through' or 'make do' in the absence of systemic support. And, though unintended, this commitment may be undermining professionalism rather than enhancing it. Additionally, the most committed principals, by being welcoming, turn their schools into 'beacons' thus unintentionally allowing other schools to shirk more equitable distribution of responsibility. The evidence attests to heroism not just being confined to the principal's office, but rather commitment to care may result in caring too much leading to professional exploitation. In such circumstances, who cares for teachers and principals while the rights of learners and their parents are being vindicated? Overwhelmingly, the evidence here indicates extraordinary commitment on the part of principals 'against the odds' while tension between heroism and professional responsibility remain unattended, and many policy makers ignore their responsibilities.

Chapter 8 (More Leaders: Dissipated or Distributed Leadership?) provides another panel in the mosaic of leadership by focusing attention on the impact of a shift in policy whereby leadership responsibilities were to be distributed among colleagues by the creation of middle-management structures with potential also to build leadership capacity throughout the school community thus enabling that school to deal with change in a more coherent and sustainable manner that contributed to thriving rather than trashing to get by. In doing so, this chapter builds further on the evidence of previous chapters that while trust and good interpersonal relations are vital, in the absence of authority, passion and purpose, they will not be sufficient to transform schools. Regardless of the different cohort's experience and expertise, in a minority of cases only did middle management appear to be harnessed in a systematic manner to build leadership capacity. Rather, for the most part, it was a managerial strategy to distribute the burdens of office. In the absence of greater sense of its potential to transform schools, while there are many more 'leaders' this does not necessarily equate with greater leadership capacity.

Chapter 9 ('Performing' Leadership: Professional Responsibility in a Climate of Accountability) indicates that at a time when the downstream impacts of neo-liberal ideas permeate much of the educational landscape internationally, 'performativity' has become something of a byword and 'technologies of control' collectively impose regimes of accountability, it is legitimate to ask: 'what does professionally responsible leadership entail in such circumstances?' This chapter establishes that there is a long history and consequent legacy of school inspection in the system. This is not the most fertile ground for the promotion of school self-evaluation, the latest in an ongoing process most frequently perceived as a demand of 'more for less'. Additionally, loss of trust and autonomy has been replaced by intensifying demands for more policies and paper trails that much of the time are perceived as bureaucratic requirements rather than professionally enhancing. Due to lack of mobility in the system, there is a premium on 'good' interpersonal relations within school communities, and their long-term maintenance at local level are mostly to the fore when principals are promoting change. Part of this premium, which is finite, is that soft power is exercised by means of appealing to colleague's goodwill. At a time of rapid change and policy churn, principals are likely to thread warily even where relationships are very positive so as to avoid tipping the balance in more toxic directions. In such circumstances, change is most likely to be incremental, while a positive climate also enables collective decisions that seek to wrest control of change processes from policy-makers submitting them instead to the will of the school community, a collective confidence that paradoxically is empowering and facilitative of change that is more likely to endure than superficial adoption that is less likely to be sustained and become embedded in the school's culture. The evidence does not suggest that there is an unwillingness to be accountable; far from it. Rather, there is awareness that trust, leadership capacity and agency are inextricably intertwined with good interpersonal communication and that in their absence conformity and compliance, though ticking the boxes of accountability, on their own they are significantly less likely to cultivate sustainable leadership. Sustained

commitment to building leadership capacity rather than imposing accountability measures emerges as a major challenge in a system with shrinking resources.

Part IV (**Sustaining Leaders, Sustainable Leadership: Future Directions**) takes up more cross-cutting themes and concludes with the distinct legacies to leaders and leadership that a longitudinal life history provides.

Chapter 10 (Leadership Capacity: Cohorts, Continuity, Change) provides evidence that the major continuity over time is the necessity for very good interpersonal relations with colleagues as the basis of building trust, to allow for principled disagreement and the realisation that these need sustained attention and renewal. While inevitably newly appointed principals must in the first instance deal with legacies, these can be perceived as nostalgic remembrances in ways that imprison the future and impede possible cultural shifts or they can be framed more positively as the basis on which the future is created. Crucial to whether or not romantic rather than realistic nostalgia predominates is how challenges are engaged with thus enabling principals to overcome resistance while recognising that some degree of cultural rupture is necessary. Nevertheless, when negotiated successfully, change becomes a continuity and a gateway to constructing a better future. The evidence also suggests that given the accelerating pace of change, incrementalism may no longer be an adequate means of creating continuity, thus without much more systematic and systemic attention to leadership capacity building the gap between leadership rhetoric and schools' capacity to develop and sustain quality teaching, learning and leadership may retreat rather than being advanced. Here too lack of differentiation between personal and professional relationships re-emerges as a significant constraint on more authoritative leadership as well as on leadership capacity building, inhibited by lack of attention to systemic structures.

Chapter 11 (Leadership: Succession, Recruitment, Retirement) reveals that recruitment, retention and retirement/ succession of school leaders is increasingly being recognised internationally as worthy of more attention than heretofore since several decades of research point to the significance of school leadership for the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Against this general backdrop, this chapter charts the perspectives over time of the principal participants. The good news is that they are positive about the role and would not hesitate to recommend it to other teachers even if there is recognition also that it may not be for all teachers. Despite this positive attitude, there is considerable ambiguity about how much time in the role in any one school is appropriate, while this hesitation is most likely rooted in the realities that systemically procedures for recruitment and retention are no longer fit for purpose. Nevertheless, there appears to be a view that is rooted more in the perpetuation of heroic forms of leadership—of replacing the school leader rather than a more considered systemic necessity to build leadership capacity at all levels of the system, while the practice of 'learning on the job' without preparation for the role does a considerable disservice to schools and renders the rhetoric of the importance of leadership rather hollow when leaping from classroom to principal's office without a developed leadership portfolio.

Chapter 12 (School Leadership Unmasked: ‘Forming’ Leaders, Trans-forming Leadership?), the concluding chapter, brings together various strands of the leadership mosaic that are provided in the preceding chapters. It does this in a sequence of seven ‘leadership lessons’ that are grounded in the lives and work of the 16 participants in the study while the purpose is to synthesise in a coherent yet open-ended manner these lessons that make up the Irish case. These lessons are discussed and connected with extant literature while there is an emphasis throughout on the necessity for leadership formation to be addressed systematically and a concomitant requirement to alter significant aspects of systemic structures in order to build leadership capacity in a sustainable yet relatively unrestrained manner. These lessons, supported by international research, indicate clearly that an entire panoply of measures is required that includes early identification of leadership talent, the development of professional portfolios, greater mobility and flexibility within the system as well as greater attention to the whole selection and recruitment process and an appropriate term of office. Nevertheless, at the heart of these reforms will be professional learning of leadership that is no longer overly focused on individual leaders but a system whereby everyone will learn about leadership.

Toward the end of the chapter, the focus shifts to using these lessons as the basis for leadership formation for a more transformative leadership agenda, and connects this with contemporary international literature thus identifying key concerns as appropriate programme content, with important caveats to avoid prescription despite the prevalence of performativity policy scripts. One important means of avoiding such overly prescriptive leadership formation programmes is to have multiple providers while their programmes will need to recognise the importance of intellectual input that is evidence-informed partnered by the wisdom of practice, of mentoring and shadowing, but in a manner that leaves spaces also for informal learning. In the absence of such an encompassing programme of leader formation, the transformative potential of leadership will remain under-developed.