**Understanding school leadership**

**A mixed methods study of the context and needs of serving and aspiring post primary school principals**

A thesis presented to Dublin City University

for the Professional Doctorate in Education Leadership

By

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**DECLARATION**

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of for the Professional Doctorate in Education Leadership

is entirely my own work, that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**Table of Contents**

**Declaration…………………………………………………………………………..………ii**

**Acknowledgements……………………………………………………………………..…..iii**

**Contents……………………………………………………………………………………..iv**

**List of Figures……………………………………………………………………………....viii**

**List of Tables……………………………………………………………………………….ix**

1. **Introduction**

1.1 Factors that influenced this choice of study……………………………………...…....1

1.2 Principals and Research………………………………………………………………..1

1.3 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework………………………………………………3

1.4 The Research Question, methods, of data gathering and analysis………………….…5

Expected outcomes

**2. A survey of literature**

2.1 Introduction………………………………………………………………………...…7

**2.2 Theories of Leadership**

2.2.1 Great Man Theory and other trait theories……………………….………………...…8

2.2.2 Situational, contextual and transformational leadership……………………………..11

2.2.3 Leadership and organizational culture……………………………………………….12

**2.3 School Leadership Literature**

2.3.1 Understanding school leadership…………………………………………………….13

2.3.2 School evaluation and the importance of school leadership…………………………14

**2.4 Improving School Leadership**

2.4.1 The principal as a leader of learning……………………………………………..…..16

2.4.2 Distributed Leadership……………………………………………………................19

2.4.3 Developing Leadership Skills pre service, induction and in-service………………...20

2.4.4 Making school leadership more attractive…………………………………………...21

**2.5 The experiences of new principals**

2.5.1 The training of new school leaders………………………………………………...…23

2.5.2 New Principals ‘Don’t rock the boat’……………………………………………...…24

2.5.3 New Principals find it difficult to get feedback…………………………………...…24

2.5.4 Culture eats strategy for breakfast……………………………………….….………..25

2.5.5 The paradox of principalship………………………………………………….….…..25

**3. The Context of the Irish post primary school principal**

**3.1 The management of Post Primary schools…………………………………..……29**

3.1.1 An historical perspective……………………………………………………….…....31

3.1.2 A changing culture in the management of post primary schools…………………....32

3.1.3 Training and supporting post primary school principals……………………….........34

3.1.4 National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals……………………….….35

3.1.5 Leadership development for Schools…………………………………….……….…36

**3.2 Research on Irish School Principalship**

3.2.1 School evaluation………………………………………………………………….…38

3.2.2 *School Leadership Matters*…………………………………………….……………..40

3.2.3 Making the post more attractive………………………………………………….…..42

3.2.4 New models of Leadership…………………………………………………………...42

3.2.5 Succession Planning…………………………………………………………………42

3.2.6 Initial response to the report…………………………………………………………43

**3.3 Two other significant studies**

3.3.1 Leading and Managing Schools………………………………………………...……44

3.3.2 Distributive leadership and its impact on teaching and learning……………………..44

**3.4 The principal as a leader of learning**

3.4.1 PISA 2010………………………………………………………………………...…45

3.4.2 Responding to PISA………………………………………………………………….46

**4. Conceptual and Practical issues in the Research Design**

**4.1 Introduction**

4.1.1 The Research Question…………………………………………………………..…..51

**4.2 Research Design**

4.2.1 Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions……………………………………...52

4.2.2 The research perspective……………………………………………………………..54

**4.3 Gathering Data**

4.3.1 Quantitative Data gathering…………………………………………………………55

4.3.2 Using Qualitative Interviews………………………………………………………..56

4.3.3 The Delphi Method…………………………………………………………………..57

**4.4 Ensuring quality when using mixed methods**

4.4.1 Validity and triangulation…………………………………………………………….58

4.4.2 Multiple perspectives, Insiders-Outsiders…………………………………………....59

4.4.3 Weakness minimisation………………………………………………………………59

4.4.4 Sequential research…………………………………………………………………...59

**4.5 Data Analysis in Mixed Methods research**

4.5.1 Analysing Quantitative Data………………………………………………………....60

4.5.2 Qualitative Analysis……………………………………………………………….…61

4.5.3 Ethics………………………………………………………………………………....62

**5. Four phases of Research**

**5.1 Introduction**

5.1.1 The Pilot Study…………………………………………………………………….…65

5.1.2 A first round of interviews …………………………………………………...……...66

**5.2 Research Phase 1**

5.2.1 Gathering and collating statistical data…………………………………………...….69

5.2.2 Other sources of Data……………………………………………………………...…69

**5.3 Research Phase 2 A National Survey**

5.3.1 A summary of findings…………………………………………………………...…..72

5.3.2 The second part of the survey……………………………………………………..…74

**5.4 Research Phase 3 A second round of interviews**

5.4.1 Induction and training…………………………………………………………….….77

5.4.2 Issues with Middle Management Posts………………………………………………79

5.4.3 Sustainability…………………………………………………………………………81

5.4.4 The principal paradox………………………………………………………………..82

**5.5 Research Phase 4 Delphi**

5.5.1 Delphi Question 1…………………………………………………………………….84

5.5.2 Delphi Question 2…………………………………………………………………….85

5.5.3 Delphi Question 3…………………………………………………………………….86

5.5.4 Delphi Round two……………………………………………………………………86

**6. Discussion, recommendations and conclusion**

**6.1 Understanding the context**

6.1.1 Implications of the high level of turnover 2006-2011………………………………..92

6.1.2 The conflicting pressures on the role of the principal………………………………..93

6.1.3 The paradox of principalship…………………………………………………………94

6.1.4 Problems with middle management………………………………………………….94

**6.2 Responding to the needs of school principals**

6.2.1 Improving and focusing existing models of training………………………………...96

6.2.2 Training in organisational effectiveness……………………………………………..97

6.2.3 Distributive leadership / Reforming Middle management…………………………...99

6.2.4 The challenges of reform……………………………………………………………100

**6.4 Recommendations**

6.4.1 Further research……………………………………………………………………..101

6.4.2 Additional themes…………………………………………………………………..102

6.4.3 The value of this research……………………………………………………….…..103

6.4.4 Dissemination of findings…………………………………………………………..105

6.4.5 Concluding remarks………………………………………………………………...105

**BIBLIOGRPAHY………………………………………………………………………....107**

**APPENDICES……………………………………………………………………………..122**

**A list of Figures**

**Fig 1.1** A summary of the stages of the research………………………………………5

**Fig 2.1** Recommendations from the OECD study *Improving School Leadership…....*16

**Fig 2.2** Leithwood’s seven claims…............................................................................17

**Fig 2.3** Why prioritise leadership training ...................................................................20

**Fig 2.4** Four pillars of school leadership……………………………………………..27

**Fig 3.1** Challenges for school leadership (OECD 2008)..……………………….......41

**Fig 5.1** Pilot interview questions……………………………………………………..66

**Fig 5.2** The research question, the centre of an iterative process………………….....68

**Fig 5.3** Interview questions for phase three of the process…………………………...75

**Fig 5.4** Four themes emerging from the interviews…………………………………..77

**Fig 5.5**  Questions for Delphi Round One…………………………………………….83

**Fig 5.6** Delphi Round Two questions………………………………………………...87

**Fig 5.7** Themes from Delphi Round Two……………………………………………88

**A list of Tables**

**Table 1** Acts of parliament that impact on the work of the principals……………….30

**Table 2** DES circulars 2007-2011…………………………………………………….31

**Table 3.3** Post primary schools in the Republic of Ireland…………………………….33

**Table 3.4** Schools under Catholic Religious trusteeship………………………………..34

**Table 3.5** Findings of the North-South Study………………………………………......42

**Table 3.6** Literacy and Numeracy targets for 2020…………………………………….47

**Table 5.1** Data from the responses to Dail Question……………………………………69

**Table 5.2** A collation of data from data bases held by LDS and NAPD………….……70

**Table 5.3** Conclusions from phase one of quantitative data gathering……..…………..71

**Table 5.4** Respondents to the Survey (Gender)…………………………………………72

**Table 5.5** Respondents to the Survey (Age)….…………………………………………72

**Table 5.6** Respondents to the Survey (Years in current position).…………...…………73

**Table 5.7** Respondents to the Survey (Prior to appointment)………………………..…73

**Table 5.8** Respondents to the Survey (Promoted from within)…………………………74

**Table 5.9** Key results from the Survey (part two)………………………………………75

1. **Introduction**

**1.1 Factors that influenced this choice of study**

I was appointed acting principal in an all-girl’s voluntary secondary school in Dublin in September 2006. In 2008 I moved to Limerick to take up the role of school principal in a large co-educational comprehensive school. On appointment to both of these positions I attended induction and in-service training and availed of the support provided to newly appointed principals in the first place by Leadership Development for Schools (LDS), and the Joint Managerial Board (JMB) and later by the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS). I also attended conferences and seminars organised by the National Association of Principals and Deputies (NAPD).

It was while attending these courses and meeting with other school principals that I began to reflect on some of the broader issues of school leadership and the specific issues that affect newly appointed principals. It was evident that with such large numbers attending these induction programmes, the cohort of school principals was changing rapidly. Even at this early stage I began to consider the impact of what appeared to be a very high turnover on the system generally. This was the first influence that shaped the direction of this research. At this earliest stage of the research my question was defined as; *how can we best describe and understand the context of school principals in Irish post primary schools*.

The second significant influence on my choice of research area was my experience as a post-graduate student on the doctoral programme in Dublin City University. I found that the lectures, reading and the class discussions around the issues of leadership and management were directing me toward a specific area of interest. The targeted reading I did in preparation for the papers I completed in the first two years added to my interest. In particular the pilot study in year two helped to clarify and refine my research question to include reference t the fact that large numbers of the existing cohort of school principals had, lime me come to the position quite recently. My question now expanded to *how can we best describe and understand the context of serving and aspiring school principals*.

**1.2 Principals and Research**

Practitioner research is demanding on the researcher. Post primary school teachers have traditionally adopted a cautious and suspicious view of research but practitioner research is gaining more credibility and is becoming increasingly popular in education (Coleman 2007). In the UK especially there is a well-established research culture with teacher researcher projects not only helping to describe but also to inform policy changes (Cohen et al., 2000 page28).

Research carried out in Ireland shows that Irish teachers and schools are also becoming less sceptical of researchers and are increasingly more positive about research-led practice especially within the context of professional development (McNamara, O’Hara and Boyle, 2008). The recently published *Literacy and Numeracy Initiative Learning for Life* (DES 2011) and the *Guidelines for School Self Evaluation* (DES 2012) are explicit in their reference to the use of internally generated data in the planning process. Both initiatives are reflective of a growing trend in the popularity of research in education and the importance of evidence based planning and evaluation in Irish schools. All seven Irish Universities now offer post graduate diploma, masters and doctoral level programs in educational management and school leadership.

In 2002 the Department of Education and Science established Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) as a national programme for the promotion of the professional development of school leaders. Members of the LDS team were centrally involved in two research projects that are referred to throughout this study. In March 2007, LDS completed the *Country Background Report for Ireland* (LDS 2007) as part of the OECD project *Improving School Leadership* (OECD 2008)*.*  The reader should note that although both of these reports are inextricably linked and often overlap I will refer to them as distinct publications.

A second significant work from which I draw is *School Leadership Matters,* an empirical assessment of issues around attractiveness and retention of school leaders which was published by LDS in conjunction with the Regional Training Unit in Northern Ireland. (LDS 2010).

In its *Framework Document for Professional Development of School Leaders* (LDS 2003), LDS argues that research is a vital component of their mission. One of the central themes that emerged in this research is that there is a significant gap in the research base of Irish school leadership. Notwithstanding the contribution LDS has made to the training and support of school leaders in Ireland, it must be acknowledged from the outset that LDS has not yet developed fully as a research centre. Later I will show how the LDS programme *Forbairt* which targets experienced school leadership teams and the *Tóraíocht* programme for aspiring school leaders do involve limited exercises in evidence based planning. But there is no research component within the *Misneach* programme offered to newly appointed principals or the *Tánaiste* programme for newly appointed deputies. Although there is certainly increasing interest in leadership the lack of a centralised college of school leadership which could gather and promote research has been a significant impediment to this study

In contrast, The National College of School Leadership (NCSL) in the UK provides support and specific guidelines for educational researchers. The guidelines which are issued through the *Research Associate Programme* (Coles 2004) promote school leadership as an evidence-based and research informed profession. Through the *Research Associate Programme* NCSL models its commitment to the integration of action and research. These guidelines aim to improve the quality of research being undertaken by school leaders. One concrete example of this is *Tomorrow’s Leaders Today*, a National Succession Planning program which was coordinated by The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) (Bush2009). This programme first piloted in 2006-07 has been extended to all local authorities and aims to ensure that a sufficient number of candidates will be available to take up the role of headship and that those who emerge will be equipped with the skills they require for successful headship.

**1.3 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The thesis is essentially in two parts. After this brief introduction, chapters two and three complete the first part by establishing the conceptual and theoretical framework of the research. The second part of this thesis contains details of the research practice.

Chapter two surveys literature on leadership and organisational effectiveness and defines four pillars that establish the theoretical framework of this study. The first pillar is an understanding of leadership as an interpersonal and social function (Stefkovich and Begley 2007, Ciulla 2003, Starratt 2005, Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2002).

The second section narrows the focus to a study of school leadership literature and more precisely to the role of the school principal. The second pillar of my theoretical framework is that above all else the prime function of post primary school principals is to be responsible for the quality of the delivery of education outcomes in their schools. I refer in detail to four central recommendations of the OECD report, *Improving School Leadership,* in which the authors argue that there is a need to redefine and narrow the focus of school leadership responsibilities in order to address student learning as the priority of all leadership practices (OECD 2008).

The third section of this chapter and third pillar of my theoretical framework explores how school principals exercise their leadership both directly and indirectly to influence student learning. I draw from a consensus within the literature of instructional leadership which defines the leadership of learning as the prime function of the school leader (Leithwood et Al. 2006) and show how school leaders need to be trained and supported to practice distributive leadership to be most effective as leaders of learning (Humphreys 2010).

The fourth theoretical pillar of this study is that school leadership can be learned and can be taught. The final section of this chapter examines literature around the training and induction of new principals. I refer to research which shows that principals learn best from each other and from other more experienced school leaders who act as role models, mentors and leadership coaches (West Burnham 2009). In conclusion I identify a paradox at the heart of much of the research on school leadership. There is a broad consensus that the pressures experienced by newly appointed and long established principals are significant and increasing. Nonetheless researchers consistently report high levels of job satisfaction among school principals across international studies (LDS 2010, Hogden and Wylie 2005).

Chapter three narrows the scope of the first section of this thesis to focus on the Irish context. I discuss elements of the historical and legislative framework for the management of Irish post primary schools. I show how the last decade has seen an increasing level of expectation of what school principals can and should do and a corresponding increase in the scrutiny of the role of the school principal (McNamara O’Hara 2012, McNamara, O Hara, Boyle, and Sullivan 2009, McNamara and O’Hara, 2006). I show how the recently published strategy *Literacy and Numeracy Learning for Life* (DES 2011) and the proposals for radical change to the junior cycle curriculum (NCCA 2011) make explicit an understanding of the primary role of the school principal as a leader of learning. I argue that it is now more important than ever that school leadership be better researched, understood and conceptualized.

**1.4 The Research Question, methods, of data gathering and analysis.**

The second part of this thesis begins by exploring theoretical and practical issues that shaped the research deign. I show how the pilot study carried out in 2009 led to the definition of the research question being expanded to include reference to the leadership of learning; *how can we best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for the leadership of learning?*

The chapter locates the research within the *Interpretivist/Constructivist* paradigm. A *mixed methods* approach is taken to data gathering and analysis and addresses other practical issues in detail including sampling, the identification and selection of research subjects, the choice of questions used in the interviews and the ethical considerations and protocols which underpinned the research design.

Chapter five begins by showing how the direction of this research was first determined by the findings of a Pilot Study conducted within the ‘taught phase’ of the doctoral programme in Dublin City University.

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| **Fig1.1 A summary of the stages of the research** |

The chapter summarises the research chronologically and shows how the data that was gathered and analysed in each of the four distinct phases determined the direction taken by the researcher in the phases that followed. The chapter describes the processes used for the sampling in all four phases showing how the focus narrowed progressively from the survey which was sent to all serving school principals, to the interviews which involved a representative sample of school principals and finally to those who work with school principals in positions of strategic significance.

Chapter six draws conclusions from the process as a whole and focuses on the answers to the research question with precise recommendations as to *how we can best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for the leadership of learning.* In answering the questions I synthesise the themes from the literature review and other phases of the research process to present a definition of the role of the school principal as a leader of learning.

In this study I outline an understanding of the needs of school principals which is defined from the perspective of those currently in the position and those who work closely with them. I suggest a number of specific responses in terms of improvements to existing systems of induction and training offered to school principals, the need to focus these supports around the concepts of organisational effectiveness and distributed leadership and the need to reform middle management in post primary schools.

**1.5 Expected outcomes**

The goal of all social research is to better understand the complexity of human experience. Education is one field of social science about which most people feel qualified to speak. We all have first-hand experience and knowledge of the world of the school. Talking about education is one thing. Theorising about education and contributing to the body of knowledge that will inform future education policy is quite another.

This study sets out to explore the context and needs of school principals. It begins with a review of literature and research which establishes a theoretical framework. I use quantitative methods to present a detailed summary of the context of my study before

In the course of this research I hope to further my own professional development and make a contribution to the on-going discourse on school leadership. As a research practitioner I hope that this study will inform and improve my own practice as a school principal. I also hope that it will deepen my appreciation of the needs of other serving and aspiring school principals. I want to broaden my understanding of school leadership. In doing so I hope that this thesis will contribute to the understanding of the complexity of issues around leadership in Irish post primary schools and help to provide a coherent answer to the question of *how we can best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for the leadership of learning.*

**2. A survey of Literature**

**2.1 Introduction**

This chapter is the first of two chapters which address the context of my study. The relative paucity of research available from Ireland necessitates an initial focus on international research literature. This chapter therefore surveys international research evidence to establish the theoretical context for the author while the chapter that follows completes the conceptual framework of my study by addressing the Irish context.

The opening section of this review addresses broad issues within the vast corpus of literature on leadership and organisational effectiveness. The first pillar of the theoretical framework of my study is an understanding of leadership as an interpersonal and social function. I refer to literature which conceptualises leadership ethically with the leadership qualities understood as a set of human qualities (Stefkovich and Begley 2007, Ciulla 2003, Starratt 2005). I show how many have linked leadership effectiveness to emotional intelligence and to the personality of the leaders (Goleman 2002).

The second section narrows the focus to a study of school leadership literature and more precisely to the role of the school principal. I refer in detail to four central recommendations of the OECD report *Improving School Leadership* which argue that there is a need to redefine and narrow the focus of school leadership responsibilities to address student learning as the priority of all leadership practices (OECD 2008). The second pillar of my theoretical framework is that above all else school principals are responsible for the quality of the delivery of education outcomes in schools.

The third section of this chapter and third pillar of my theoretical framework explores how school principals exercise their leadership both directly and indirectly to influence student learning. I draw from a consensus within the literature of instructional leadership which defines the leadership of learning as the prime function of the school leader (Leithwood et Al. 2006) and show how school leaders need to be trained and supported to practice distributive leadership in order to optimise their effectiveness as leaders of learning (Humphries 2010).

The final section of this chapter examines some of the available literature on the training and induction of new principals. The fourth theoretical pillar of this study is that school leadership can be taught and can always be improved (Bush 2011). I refer to research which shows that principals learn best from each other and from other more experienced school leaders who act as role models, mentors and leadership coaches (West Burnham 2009). In conclusion I identify a paradox at the heart of much of the research on school leadership. There is a broad consensus that the pressures experienced by newly appointed and long established principals are especially significant and certainly increasing. Nonetheless researchers consistently report high levels of job satisfaction among school principals across international studies (LDS 2011, Hogden and Wylie 2005).

This chapter prepares the reader for a more targeted look at the contextual framework of the study by exploring the issue of post primary school leadership in Ireland.

**2.2 Theories of Leadership**

Scholarly writing and theorizing on the issue of leadership has a history that dates back to Aristotle (Shay 2000). Fifty years ago the renowned leadership expert Warren Bennis bemoaned the fact that ‘…probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than any other topic in the behavioral sciences’ (Bennis 1959, in Sergiovanni and Corbally 1986 page 13). A survey of more contemporary literature on leadership reveals a tendency for authors to present leadership theory as an evolving area of inquiry which parallels developments in business and organisational theory, psychology and theories of human resource management. The reader is directed to four texts which are representative of this trend. Ciulla’s study of *The ethics of Leadership* (Ciulla 2003) contains a detailed analysis of the fifty years of development of leadership thought. John Storey’s *Leadership in Organisations, Current Issues and Trends* (Storey 2006) provides an excellent summary of the key issues and contemporize trends in leadership thinking. *The Future of Leadership* (Bennis, Spreitzer and Cummings 2001) contains essays from some of the leading thinkers and writers in Management and Leadership theory who address the challenges that face leaders in the twenty first century. The 4th edition of the seminal *Handbook of Leadership theory research and managerial applications* (Bass and Bass 2008) is a comprehensive overview of theories, models and methods of leadership.

**2.2.1 Great Man Theory and other trait theories**

It is common within the literature to trace the origins of leadership thinking to the Great Man Theory (Carlyle 1888) and concepts such as Trait Theory advanced by theorists like Bernard, Bowden and Scehnk, advanced in the early part of the twentieth century (Storey 2006). Max Weber was the first to conceptualise the charismatic leader as one who possessed ‘…supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities’ who enjoys loyalty and authority by virtue of a mission believed to be embodied in him. (Weber 1947, p 358).

Many trait theorists have sought to define taxonomy of leadership traits based on the premise that a leader’s ability to achieve success in particular contexts around specific tasks may be determined by whether or not they are a particular personality type or possess certain characteristics (Zaccro 2007). Because leadership is fundamentally about people and the influence one has over others some writers highlight the interpersonal skills required for effective leadership (Stefkovich and Begley 2007, Ciulla 2003, Starratt 2005). Similarly, concepts such as personal integrity or authenticity and the role played by values in influencing leadership behaviour have been addressed by many authors (Branson 2007, Avolio and Gardiner 2005).

There is no consensus as to whether or not these leadership traits are innate. In the 19th century authors like Carlyle and Galton wrote of the traits and personalities of those who rose to power. They argued that leadership was an innate personality type and that it may even be hereditary (Carlyle 1841, Galton 1869). More contemporary authors have tended to focus attention on repertoires of leadership skills that are common in effective leaders rather than personality traits. One meta-analysis of studies of leadership identifies four skills categories; interpersonal skills, business skills, strategic skills and cognitive skills (Mumford, Marks, Connelly, Zaccaro, & Reiter-Palmon, (2000). What distinguishes this new approach to leadership characteristics is the feeling that these skills far from being innate are learned through experience and can even be taught especially through formal leadership development programmes. It has been suggested that leadership qualities are essentially human qualities that grow within a personality in so far as they are reinforced by the experience, knowledge and understanding which gives the leader the confidence to act (West Burnham 2009).

Since the 1990s a popular corpus of leadership literature has grown up around the work of Ronald Goleman and the notion of emotionally intelligent leadership (Goleman 1995, George, 2000, Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002, Vitello-Cicciu J.2002, Harm & Credé 2010). Emotional Intelligence theory finds its origins in the theory of multiple intelligences contained within the work of Howard Gardner (Gardner 1983, 1993). Building on Gardner’s notion of inter and intra personal intelligences the term emotional intelligence or E.Q., first rose to prominence with the publication in 1995 of Goleman's bestseller; *Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman 1995). In his 2002 work entitled *Primal Leadership, realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002) Goleman developed and applied his ground-breaking work on emotional intelligence to the topic of organizational leadership.

The central premise of Goleman’s argument is that good leaders must be emotionally intelligent. To be effective, leaders must understand and know how to manage their own emotions and the emotions of others. Goleman describes a list of traits or competencies distinguishable in emotionally intelligent leaders and idenifies four domains, social awarerness, self awareness, self management and social skill in which this intelligence can be observed in successful leaders (Goleman 2000 p. 6).

Goleman is popular among those who emphasize the personality of the leader within their theoretical construction of leadership. The notion of the emotionally intelligent leader has found resonance in a vast array of contexts from the school to the battlefield and the boardroom. Lieutenant General J.E. Deverell for example has written that ‘… Leadership is more than just doing. It is also about being. It is about who you are…’ (J.E. Deverell (1999) in Storey (2006) p 86). An article on leadership published in the Harvard Business review speaks of the personal warmth of Charles Armstrong, the CEO of the US telecom company AT&T and how natural it was for those who worked around him to follow him. The analysis claims that it was Armstrong’s personal warmth that was a major factor in the transformation of AT&T’s profits. (Sonnenfeld, in Bennis Spreitzer and Cummings 2001 p 172). Elsewhere it has been noted that the identities of corporations, organizations and institutions are increasingly seen as reflections of the personalities of their leaders as; ‘…Investors join journalists in the personification of corporations focusing on the characters, biographies, and alleged charisma of CEOs. As a result, American business organisations are more often than not portrayed as shadows of the ‘Great men who sit in the Chief Executives chair’ (O’Toole 2001 in Bennis Spreitzer and Cummings 2001 p 158.)

This trend in leadership thinking echoes Carlyle’s Great Man Theory (Carlyle 1881) and is given a more modern expression in Lowney’s exploration of ‘Heroic’ Leadership (Lowney 2003). The scope of this study does not allow for a detailed critique of these theories but it should be noted that a number of writers view ‘Great Man’ thinking as a dysfunctional form of leadership (Solomon 2003, Senge, P. 2002, Gronn, 2003a) which can promote a dependency culture within companies and organizations (Storey 2006, p.31). Later in this study I will show how such theories are anathema to what is widely accepted as best practice in school leadership in terms of distributive leadership.

**2.2.2 Situational, contextual and transformational leadership**

From the middle of the twentieth century advances in behavioural sciences began to have an impact on the way people thought and wrote about leadership. Behavioural and situational theories of leadership became more popular from the 1960s as writers began to explore how the culture of a society or an organisation can shape its leaders and in turn how the culture of an organisation can be shaped by its leaders (McGregor 1960, Katz and Kahn 1978, Bass 1985) Leadership was now being conceptualised as situational and contextual with writers contending that what is required of effective leaders is determined at least as much by the context and needs of the situation they find themselves in as it may be by any pre-defined and definitive leadership qualities or personality ( Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson 2007).

Many of these situational theories of leadership show the influence of the work of Fred Fielder (Fielder 1964, 1967) and the Path Goal theory of Martin Evans (Evans 1970). Although both writers essentially conform to the dominant thinking of their time as advocates of the primacy of traits and innate leadership abilities, both Evans and Fielder hold that the effectiveness of a leader must also be assessed in terms of their ability to achieve their goals in different contexts.

According to Evans’ Path Goal Theory the challenge for the effective leader is to adapt their knowledge and skills and if necessary modify their leadership styles and knowledge according to the situation in which they find themselves. A core issue is the extent to which the leader can adapt what they do so that they will be acceptable to others. By delivering satisfaction **within** their organisation the leader can be more effective in achieving the goals have **for** the organisation. (Evans 1970 in Neider and Schriesheim 2002 pages 115-138).

According to Fielder there is no ideal leader *per se*. Fiedler’s contingency model of leadership suggests that different types of leaders are required for different tasks and different contexts. Fiedler quantified and explored the dimensions other than the personality of the leader which influence the leader’s effectiveness and developed a contingency theory of leadership. In short, certain contexts require certain types of leaders and certain leadership styles. The challenge therefore is for the leader to discern what the context requires. A leader must not only act but must re-act and adapt either his or her own style or else change or transform the culture or context so that it can be more suited to his own style (Storey 2006 pp 107-109).

The terms Transactional and Transformational Leadership have evolved out of Fielder’s and Evans’ work. Transactional leadership is the term used for that pragmatic style in which the leaders learn how to work within an existing culture and achieve their own goals by a process of exchange, ‘…jobs for votes or subsidies for campaign contributions.’ (Burns 1978 p 4. in Bass and Riggio 2008). Transformational leadership in contrast addresses culture with a view to change and focuses on the growth needs of the organization and the individuals in it. Central to the success of both the transactional or transformational approaches to leadership is an appreciation for the significance of organizational culture.

**2.2.3 Leadership and Organizational Culture**

Organizational culture has been defined as, ‘…both a dynamic phenomenon that surrounds us at all times, being constantly enacted and created by our interactions with others and shaped by our leadership behaviour and a set of structures, routines rules and norms that guide and constrain behavior’(Schein 2004. p1). Throughout the literature leadership and culture are closely related concepts. The relationship is symbiotic in that the culture of an organization develops over time shaped in large part by its leadership and the culture of the organization itself is a significant factor in the development of its leadership. (Bass and Bass, 2008).

A key understanding of the transactional approach to leadership is that no strategy, no matter how well thought out or planned, can succeed unless it takes into account the needs of the people within the organisation. The phrase *Culture eats Strategy for Breakfast* is attributed to the management theorist and consultant Peter Drucker and was popularized by Mark Fields soon after his appointment as CEO of the Ford Motor Company (Edersheim 2007). The phrase points to the limitations of strategic leadership styles that do not take in account what others get from it**.** The task of the transactional leader is to get others to buy in to his plans. To be effective in this he must align his strategy with the culture of the organization and the needs of the individuals (Hersey and Blanchard 1985).

Within the transformational paradigm of leadership the primary function of the leader is to be creative and to focus on improvement and change of the culture of an organisation (McGuire and Rhodes 2009). Such change and improvement are not possible without due consideration for the dynamic phenomenon that is the culture of an organisation. Leaders have the power to challenge the constraining structures of a culture but equally need to be aware of how the existing culture and norms in turn limit the options available to them to enact change. A [2005 Harvard Business Review study](http://hbr.org/2005/05/culture-matters-most/ar/1%20\%20_blank) of more than 100 corporations and thousands of executive assessments showed that culture influences leadership more than any other factor. A similar study published in the Wall Street Journal in 2006 identified three significant cultural roadblocks for new business leaders in large companies; the time that it takes for any outsider to understand the culture of an organization, the fact that new leadership styles may not fit the culture and the importance for the new leaders to clearly articulate their aspirations for the organization (McCracken 2006).

**2.3 School Leadership Literature**

Although in the lexicon of organizational effectiveness and general leadership theory, research into school leadership is a relatively new phenomenon there has been a significant increase in the volume of research published in the last twenty years. Within this growing research base there is a consensus that the quality of school leadership is significant in determining the quality of educational outcomes delivered by our schools.

**2.3.1 Understanding School Leadership**

More attention is being paid to the importance of school leadership and especially on how the work of the school principal influences the climate and culture of a school and ultimately how it impacts of the quality of education delivered in the school (Darling-Hammond, La Pointe. Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen (2007); Waters, Marzano, McNulty (2003); Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins (2008); Leithwood Jantzi 2000).

Huber and Muijs have drawn this literature together to classify three categories of the leadership influence of school principals. They define the direct effects of the leadership of the principal, the mediated effects and other reciprocal effects of leadership practices (Huber and Muijs 2010) which are central to the perceived efficiency of schools. The most effective school leaders focus their efforts on the leadership of learning. Effective school leaders exercise direct, mediated and reciprocal leadership to create a school climate in which teachers can be optimally effective. This ultimately impacts on the well-being of students. Hargreaves has argued that when schools are well led there are improvements in participation rates of students and their general engagement with school life (Hargreaves and Fink 2006).

School principals work within a complex matrix of relationships and are pressurized by increasingly raised expectations of what they can and should achieve. Later my research will show evidence from interviews with school principals who express how they find their work particularly challenging because they must routinely deal with the often conflicting interests and demands of different stakeholders. The school principal has to make daily judgments about priorities for his time and make decisions about how to allocate time and energy to address the demands of curriculum leadership, bureaucracy and the management of people as well as financial and other resources (Fenwick and Pierce, 2001; Howley et al., 2005). One powerful expression of this struggle is presented by Hess (2003) who notes that school leaders are expected to ‘...leverage accountability and revolutionary technology, devise performance-based evaluation systems, reengineer outdated management structures, recruit and cultivate non-traditional staff, drive decisions with data, build professional cultures, and ensure that every child is served’ (Hess 2003, p. 1).

At different times school principals may be expected to be educational visionar­ies, instructional and curriculum leaders, experts in assessment, adolescent intellectual and personal development, communication, discipline, public relations, human resource management, budgeting and financial management. In addition, school principals need to be skillful managers of the needs and interests of the many stakehold­ers in education. For schools in the Republic of Ireland this means managing the care and learning needs of students and the often conflicting demands and requirements of parents, teachers, Trustees, Department of Education officials and Trades Unions. It is hard to argue with the conclusion drawn in one study of school principals in Canada which held that; ‘*…*the dominant modern myth portrays the school principal as an underpaid workhorse tangling with the conflicting demands of instructional leadership, bureaucracy, official mandates and adverse interest groups’(Walker and Qian 2006p. 298).

**2.3.2 School Evaluation and the importance of school leadership**

At a time when the world is experiencing an economic downturn funding for all public services is understandably called into question. In spite of the economic difficulties most countries continue to invest large portions of their GDP in education based on the premise that the long term benefits of investment in education considerably exceed their costs (Levin, 2009). It has also become common for countries to use transnational standardised testing such as the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment PISA tests as the ultimate reference on the quality of education (Mortimer, 2009). In many countries the scrutiny, evaluation and inspection of public services including schools are now functions of central government with with value for money now being to the fore (McNamara 2009, McNamara & O’Hara 2004; MacBeath & McGlynn, 2003). Governments worldwide are paying more attention to the performance of their education systems (Nevo 2006). Assessing the leadership and management of schools in terms of the how they promote the improvement of academic standards and student achievement is now an intrinsic part of the evaluation of education systems worldwide Gronn, (2003), Goldring, Cravens, Murphy, Porter, Elliot and Carson (2009), Marzano, Waters, McNulty (2005), Reeves (2009).

Much has been written about ‘the Finish Miracle’ (Simola 2005) and the successes achieved by the Finish education system in response to failing academic standards. A number of factors have been highlighted as critical to their success in climbing to the top of the league tables of PISA scores which included a broad commitment to social equality in society in general; the high status of teachers and support for education among the wider population and the high quality of teacher education. (Kupiainen et al.,(2009); Simola, (2005); Lavonen and Laaksonen, (2009). Another key point that has been cited as significant in the delivery of improved educational outcomes in Finland was the fact that school leaders became increasingly prominent in the reform agenda.

Sahlberg notes how ‘…the image of the nostalgic head of the school had changed. Major educational changes- such as the curriculum reforms of 1994 have been implemented successfully particularly due to professional attitude and pedagogical leadership by the school principals (sic)’ (Sahlberg 2011). In Finland school leaders became drivers of curriculum change at local level and even took responsibility for the management of budgets including in some cases, the payment of teachers.

Researchers in different countries worldwide have emphasized the importance of attracting and developing a professional cohort of school leaders and teachers to improve the quality of the education provision in the schools (OECD 2008). The point is succinctly made by Tony Bush who notes that*…’*As the global economy gathers pace, more governments are realising that their main assets are their people and that remaining, or becoming, competitive depends increasingly on the development of a highly skilled workforce. This requires trained and committed teachers but they in turn need the leadership of highly effective principals with the support of other senior and middle managers’. (Bush 2008 p. 1)

**2.4 Improving School Leadership**

Against the backdrop of increasing scrutiny of the performance of our schools research has tended to focus on the importance of the training and delivery of teachers. The two McKinsey reports (McKinsey & Co., 2007; Mourshed et al., 2010) for example have emphasised the fact that the recruitment of good teachers and the continuous improvement of their pedagogical skills are the key building blocks of world class education systems.

*Improving School Leadership* published by the OECD in 2008 acknowledges this fact but also argues that the role of the school principal is expanding and that school principals have a key role to play in delivering quality outcomes for the State. The two volume report draws on case studies and comparative analyses of evidence gathered in 19 countries. The report explicitly identifies the improvement of learning for students as the primary purpose of school leadership.

Although the many differences that exist across the different cultures are discussed the researchers reach four key recommendations common to all that will improve the quality of school leadership:

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| **Fig 2**.1 **Recommendations from OECD 2008.**   |  | | --- | | Redefine and narrow the focus of school leadership responsibilities to address student learning as the priority  Train school leaders to practice distributive leadership  Develop leadership skills at three stages pre-service, induction and the on-going training of existing leaders.  Make school leadership a more attractive profession.  *Source : Improving School Leadership (OECD 2008)* | |

**2.4.1 The principal as a leader of learning**

Within the expanding corpus of school leadership literature there is a now well established ever-growing endless list of advice, sloganism and what Hodgkinson (In Ribbins (1993) page 23) refers to as ‘word magic’ as to what precisely defines the core tasks of school leaders. Davies *the Essentials of School Leadership* (Davies 2005) for example contains no less than eleven chapters each with its own adjective to describe core practice. These range from the more conventional such as Strategic (Davies 2005 page 10-30), Transformational (Leithwood and Janzi in Davies 2005 pages31-43) and Ethical (Starratt in ibid pages 61-74) to the more obtuse Poetical, Political (Deal in ibid pages 110-121) and Entrepreneurial (Henschtke and Caldwell ibid pages 145-159). One of the themes that emerged from some of the interviews I carried in the course of this study shows evidence of school leaders sometimes overpowered and confused by the jargon of educational leadership.

The country report for Ireland which was prepared by LDS for the OECD note that the leadership of learning (termed instructional leadership) is the most neglected aspect of the principal’s work in Ireland. (LDS 2007, p. 41). In contrast to our lack of research evidence in the UK the National College for School Leadership published *What we know about school Leadership,* (NCSL 2008) provides the researcher with an excellent summary of the main findings of empirical studies undertaken in the field of school leadership in the UK and other Anglophone countries (excluding the Republic of Ireland). The study is informed by the earlier work of Leithwood and his colleagues in 2006 who defined seven claims about school leadership from the available empirical research. Leithwood’s work clearly prioritizes instructional leadership as the core tasks of school leaders:

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| **Fig 2.2.** **Leithwood’s seven claims**  1. School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.  2. Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices.  3. The ways in which leaders select and apply these basic leadership practices, not the practices themselves are the key  4. School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation.  5. School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.  6. Some patterns of distribution are more effective than others.  7. A small handful of personal traits explain a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness.  *Source Leithwood et al. 2008* |

A precise definition of what constitutes the leadership of learning is elusive. Across the literature the terms pedagogical leadership, instructional leadership and leadership of learning appear to be interchangeable and refer to an understanding of a set of responsibilities that rest on the shoulders of the school principal. When first used the term instructional leadership meant that the direct responsibility for improving instruction and learning in the school lay with the school principal. (Smith and Andrews 1989) Later Krug’s understanding of instructional leadership extended to five dimensions. Krug used the term instructional leadership to include the responsibility for defining the school’s mission; responsibility for the management of the curriculum; the supervision of teachers and teaching; the monitoring of student progress and the promotion of a positive and instructional climate (Krug 1992).

Others have argued that principals improve student learning in their schools by supporting and developing effective teachers and through the implementation of effective organizational processes (LaPointe, Meyerson & Darling-Hammond 2006). School principals can use their influence to motivate, enable and support teachers who wish to learn more about teaching and improve their own practice. (Spillane, Hallet, and Diamond 2003).

The OECD report *Improving School Leadership* states that school leaders can contribute to improved student learning by “…shaping the conditions and climate in which teaching and learning occur” (OECD 2008 page19). Another very useful summary definition of the principal as the leader of learning contained within the 2010 McKinsay report states that prioritising the leadership of learning in a school means a shift ‘…away from largely administrative roles to focus on instructional leadership by setting learning expectations, supporting teachers in developing teaching plans, observing classes and coaching teachers…and thus relentlessly focusing the school culture on improving instruction to improve student outcomes’*.* (Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber 2010).

More recently research from Finland shows how pedagogical leadership is one of the key areas of responsibility for the school leader and can extend beyond the classroom and even outside the school (Sahlberg 2011). In a passage that is particularly resonant in the Irish context Sahlberg points to the quality of school leadership as a key factor in the successes of the Finnish education system reforms during a major economic crisis. He suggests that it was the fact that school principals were focused on learning that enabled them to be ‘…a critical voice in shaping education policies and steering school improvement based on the needs of teachers, students and the society. Based on these experiences it is difficult to imagine that market-based education reforms that often undermine the central role of pedagogical leadership could have been implemented in Finland’. (Sahlberg 2011 p 93.)

Although the role of school principal is multi-faceted and complex there is a consensus that school leadership needs to be redefined and re focussed on the leadership of learning. A major theme that emerges within the literature is that school principals are most effective when they can operate leadership teams within their schools.

**2.4.2 Distributed Leadership**

The notion that the core tasks of school leaders are more effectively achieved through distributed leadership has become increasingly commonplace and popular within the corpus of international school leadership literature (Harris, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2005). By practicing distributive leadership effective school principals not only improve the quality of teaching and learning in their school but also promote ‘a culture which fosters leadership development’ (Brundrett and Crawford, 2008, p.17). In this way the school can achieve what Hargreaves calls planned continuity in the face of change where new leaders are continually being developed. (Hargreaves 2005)

A paper delivered by Howard Youngs (2007) to the 2007 ACEL & ASCD International Conference in Sydney Australia makes reference to more than 30 international studies of distributed school leadership practice from 2002 to 2007 and is an excellent compendium of research on distributed leadership. Youngs quotes a study of a group of principals in schools with outstanding education outcomes in State schools in New South Wales (Dinham 2005), an investigation of co-principalship within three Australian Catholic schools where a male and female co-lead the school (Gronn & Hamilton 2004), an examination of ten Canadian schools which demonstrated alternative ways of organising work that is traditionally carried out by a single school principal (Grubb & Flessa 2006), and a study of the day to day work of 52 High School principals’ in south-eastern United States. (Spillane et al 2007).

In the UK, MacBeath’s *Leadership as distributed: a matter of practice* ( Mac Beath2005) is an exploration of the experiences of school principals and teachers working on distributive leadership in 11 different schools across England and Wales and defines six forms of distributed leadership (formal, pragmatic, strategic, incremental, opportunistic and cultural.

In Ireland, Eilis Humphreys’ recent Doctoral Thesis *Distributed Leadership and its impact on Teaching and Learning* is a rare piece of Irish research worthy of note in this literature review (Humphreys 2010). Humphries makes detailed references to the 2008 OECD study and addresses the question of how Irish post primary school principals who do not actually teach can exercise their influence and leadership to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. In her study Humphreys draws heavily on the work of Spillane (2006) who has explored the ways in which leadership when distributed can enable the school principal to lead others most effectively. She also offers an account of one of the critics of the rhetoric of distributed leadership Patrick Duignan who has argued that distributed leadership cannot be practised in schools which operate within a hierarchical and or control paradigm. (Duignan 2006 p15. In Humphries 2011) One of the key findings of Humphreys’ research is that it is important for school principals to promote leadership development within their own schools. They do this best when they focus the work of middle leaders on to the teaching and learning (Humphries 2011).

**2.4.3 Developing Leadership Skills pre service, induction and in-service**

Professor Tony Bush of Warwick University is among the most widely published and respected researchers in the field of school leadership. As an advocate of the need for more attention to leadership development and training, Bush has identified four key arguments.

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| **Fig 2.3 Why prioritise leadership training ?**   1. The expansion of the role of the principal. 2. The increased diversity and complexity of school contexts. 3. The moral obligation to train leaders. 4. The recognition that training makes a difference   *Theories of Educational Leadership and Management* Bush 2011 |

Throughout the research there is evidence that high performing school leaders are not just ‘born’ and that those with potential can be identified, trained and sustained in the early years of leadership and throughout their careers. (Huber and Hiltmann 2010). Leadership development programs need to focus on developing leadership capacities among the participants and to focus on developing their confidence through a wide range of relationships and experiences rather than leadership content alone. (West Burnham 2009)

In the US *School Leadership Study: Developing Successful Principals* is a major piece of research commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and un­dertaken by the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute (Davis, Darling Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson Orr and Cohen 2007). This study explored and evaluated eight pre- service and in-service leadership program models in five US states. The aim of the study was to provide empirical data and to make recommendations to state and federal policy makers about the governing and fi­nancial policies needed to sustain good leadership programming (See pages 19-23).

Echoing Leithwood’s seven claims referred to earlier (Leithwood et al 2006) the Wallace Foundation study shows that the influence of success­ful school leaders is particularly evident in student achievement. The conclusions emphasized that school principals need to be trained to exercise instructional leadership through two important pathways; supporting and developing effective teachers and where necessary redesigning and implementing ef­fective organizational processes. The successful school principal is seen to have been trained to have a dual focus, organizational and pedagogical.

The term *Organisationspedagog* (Hiltmann and Huber 2010) has been used to define this dual role for the school principal as the administrator / organizer of the system and the pedagogue whose focus is on learning and the support of good teaching.

**2.4.4 Making school leadership more attractive**

Research has shown that in many countries there are concerns about the recruitment, training, support and retention of school leaders (Anderson, Brien, McNamara, O’Hara, and Mc.Isaac, 2011, LDS 2010, OECD 2008). An article in the Times Education Supplement on the topic in January 2005 summed up the challenge as ‘desperate times for headhunters (Lepkowska 2005).

The International Study of Principal Preparation (ISPP), is major a study involving researchers and recently appointed principals from Australia, Canada, England, Germany, Jamaica, Mexico, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa, Tanzania, Turkey, the United States, and China.

One of the already published components of the ISPP was a comparative study of principals in their first 3 years in Australia and Turkey. In both countries the principals reported that their biggest challenges came from the practical demands of managing the budget and the responsibility of school finances. The study also clearly showed that the principals believed that achieving work/life balance was a significant challenge. Day to day work with students and parents was far less challenging and indeed even provided a degree of satisfaction. Overall the study showed that at least in Turkey and Australia principals in their first three years felt that they were well prepared for the tasks they faced (Wildy Clarke Styles and Beycioglu 2007).

The results of research into the challenges faced by newly appointed principals in the UK and elsewhere in northern Europe are well summarised in a compendium of studies of leadership in Scottish schools published in 2005 (Fidler and Alton 2005). That school leadership is rewarding is not contested but the picture that emerges from many of these studies in Fidler and Alton is that for many the pain of school leadership outweighs the gain (Howley, Andrianaivo and Perry, 2005).

The evidence that exists from smaller scale and informal studies in Ireland suggests a similar difficulty with poor numbers of applications for leadership positions in primary and post primary schools in the first decade of the 21st century (OECD 2008, IPPN 2006, JMB 2005, 2006). This is particularly challenging for Ireland when considered that the fall off in numbers applying developed at a time when there was a spike in the numbers of principals retiring from Irish primary and post primary schools. My research shows more than 50% of all post primary schools have had to recruit a new principal in the last six years. The pattern is reflective of an international reality in which leadership development and succession planning have never been more important (Levine 2005, Hargreaves and Fink 2006).

In order to clarify the theoretical context of my study I have identified three major themes emerging within the literature of school leadership. Researchers in different countries worldwide have shown the importance of attracting, training and developing a professional cohort of school leaders to improve the quality of the education provision in the schools. It is also clear that although the tasks set for school principals are many and complex they must be trained to focus their attention and energies on instructional leadership. It has also been show how school principals are more likely to succeed when they practice distributive leadership models.

In the third and final section of this chapter I will address the literature on the experiences of newly appointed principals.

**2.5 The experiences of newly appointed Principals**

Newly appointed principals begin their career within an increasingly challenging and demanding context. In this chapter I have surveyed what is a rapidly expanding body of research on the work of the school principal. Literature on the concerns of beginning principals is more limited (Sayce and Lavery 2010). The third and final section of this literature review explores some of the themes that have emerged from studies of newly appointed principals and directs the reader toward the next section of this study.

**2.5.1 The training of new school leaders**

Although in some countries such as Cyprus and Malta, for example, school Principals have continued to be appointed largely on the basis of seniority (Bezzina, 2002, Pashiardis, 2003) it is now widely accepted that school leadership requires a more sophisticated succession planning approach to identify and encourage promising teachers with leadership potential. (Bush 2011). For example Stevenson has argued that more research is needed to develop our understanding of the factors that attract or deter individuals from applying for principalships so that more targeted programmes can be designed to support their career paths as they move from aspiring to new leaders and throughout their career (Stevenson 2006) .

It has been suggested that principals are difficult to train in the conventional sense because they are more accustomed to leading than being led (Barth 1986). The literature suggests that standard instructional methods of leadership training may be problematic with alternative models of in-service training such as peer coaching and mentoring proving more effective (Wise and Jacobo 2010, Bush & Glover, 2003 Robertson 2008). Principals have spoken about how attendance at professional meetings, seminars and conferences and the corresponding conversations with other principals are more beneficial than instructional leadership lectures or courses (Rich and Jackson 2005, Browne-Ferrigno and Muth 2004). The NCSL study of the life stories of outstanding head teachers reported that school principals learn from professional relationships with other teachers and other principals. The inspiration and role modelling of other school principals was identified as a very significant factor in their own growth by outstanding school leaders. The report goes on to recommend that all aspiring school leaders need access to high quality coaching, mentoring and critical friendships. (West Burnham 2009)

Data gathered from my survey, and research interviews which I will refer to later will concur with these findings with strong support for mentoring, coaching and other relational methods of training.

**2.5.2 New Principals ‘Don’t rock the boat’.**

International research results present a rather challenging consensus that the world of the new principal is filled with considerable anxiety, frustration and professional isolation (Browne-Ferrigno 2003; Young et al., 2002). Walker and Qian (2006) put it more forcefully when they described the school principal as an *underpaid workhorse* who is forced to tangle with constantly conflicting demands of other interest groups. (p. 298).

For the new principal this pressure can be even more intense when they seek to initiate change. New principals have reported that they often face the subtle yet distinct message that they should not *make waves* (Rooney, 2000, p. 77). Evidence from my studies show how some newly appointed principals find that simply getting to know the people they share their work place with takes time. Administration and management of department of education allocations, budgets, timetables and student enrolments have to take priority over any other desire to focus on instructional leadership or strategies to improve or challenge the organisation or structures in the school. Different schools have particular ways of doing things at the start of the year and a set of rituals you might say, protocols for distributing results, and organising the new first years and starting the first week back. In some ways the new Principal can feel like the new teacher who wants the class to be quiet. In this regard it is not surprising that research suggests that there is a tendency for new principals to err on the side of stability rather than jumping into any form of transformative behaviour (Weindling and Dimmock 2006).

**2.5.3 New Principals find it difficult to get feedback**

A worrying trend in the research is that many new principals have asserted that once appointed they have been left alone to cope with the pressures of the new job. Vandenberghe’s (2003) study of Belgian school principals describes the principal as one who alone is confronted with demands and expectations linked to different and sometimes conflicting aspects of the daily operation of a school. Added to this the principal has to face the often conflicting demands of external constituencies including government and state agencies, local groups and parents (p. 4).

Research published in the US shows that some principals reported that once appointed little further interest was taken in them unless trouble occurred. Some of the principals interviewed even went as far as to say that they felt abandoned by their employers (Draper and McMichael, 2000) and that they suffered from a total lack of feedback from those who appointed them (Earley and Weindling (2004).

Research evidence which I will cite from my own study shows how some principals can find it hard to get honest feedback from within the school. A study of new school principals in the UK for example told of the new principal feeling that they were walking and working in the shadow of their predecessor (Weindling and Dimmock 2006). The researchers in this study speak of the ‘New Head in the Hot Seat’ and observed the tendency for the teachers in a school to endow their successors with almost saintly qualities on their retirement regardless of their frailties.

**2.5.4 Culture eats strategy for breakfast**

Linked to all of the above is the concern about the extent to which the new principal ‘fits’ or can work within the established culture of the school. The phrase ‘Culture eats Strategy for Breakfast’ referred to earlier is particularly relevant for new school principals. It has been shown that it is not sufficient for a school principal to know how to do their job. As one study puts it knowing how things are done without understanding how things are **done here** is not sufficient (Crow and Mathews 1998). Research has shown that it is important for a principal to quickly move from being a "stranger" to becoming an "insider,” School principals who can learn quickly how to work within and where necessary transform the culture of a school have a greater chance of impacting positively on the achievements of their students. Marzano’s study of 21 categories of leadership shows the leadership competency with the highest correlation to academic achievement in students was situational awareness, the ability to understand the context of a school and to use its culture to promote academic success and achievement. (Marzano et al 2005).

**2.5.5 The paradox of principalship**

UK research this time looking at the factors that deter teachers from applying for principalship showed that some decide to remain as teachers so that they can stay in the classroom and *still have a life* (Rutherford, 2005, p. 290). In some cases principals have noted that family life has been found to suffer from the demands of the position (Howley et al., 2005). This particular professional isolation is one that effects the principal promoted from within their own school as well as those who have come in from outside (Fielder Atton 2005, Draper and McMichael, 2000; Rooney, 2000).

Many school leaders clearly have a passion for the job and ‘want to make a difference’ (Gold et al. 2002). Vandenberg’s study of new principals in Belgium referred to earlier also found that the opportunity to develop a career, having a chance to implement a personal vision and to create opportunities for school improvement were the main reasons cited by those surveyed for choosing school principalship as a career (Vandenberg, 2003).

**This points to the paradox at the heart of the job of school principal. Research in New Zealand has looked at the issue of stress and wellbeing among the cohort of school principals and has pointed to the personal toll the job takes on the principals themselves. In one study** 90% of the principals reported working 50 hours or more per each week. 40% of those surveyed reported high or extremely high stress levels. Interestingly this study showed school principals to be healthier than the general population even though only one third claimed to have the time to get any regular exercise. In spite of this the majority of principals claimed to be getting satisfaction from their work. When confronted with the statement your job gives you great satisfaction, thirty-six per cent strongly agreed and forty nine per cent agreed with it. Only four per cent disagreed **(Hodgen and Wylie, 2005).**

This paradox is a notable feature of my own study. Although there is no doubt that the pressures, workloads and demands of the job are significant school principals still report very high levels of satisfaction.

**Conclusion**

Because of the lack of a research base in Ireland I have drawn on international research literature to establish the broad theoretical base for this study. The international research evidence I have referred to consistently emphasizes the key role played by school principals in the delivery of quality outcomes in schools and shows how school principals have an indirect positive influence pupil learning because of the direct influence they exert on school organization, culture and climate. A key conclusion from the literature which has informed the direction of this research is that school principals can have their greatest impact on a school when they focus all of their work on school organisation, culture and climate to address student learning.

This chapter has defined four pillars which constitute the theoretical framework of this study. Leadership is a social function. Although the role is multifaceted and complex the core business of school leadership is the leadership of learning. School principals can be most effective as leaders of learning when they practice distributive leadership in their schools. Although certainly experiencing high levels of stress and even anxiety in this demanding role school principals report high levels of job satisfaction and value the experience of their peers and other school heads who support them as role models, coaches and mentors.

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| **Fig. 5 Four pillars of school leadership** |

In the next chapter I explore the Irish context in more detail. Research on school leadership in Ireland is sparse by international comparisons. Although there has been a rapid increase in interest in issue of school leaders at the time of writing the available body of research into the leadership of post primary principals in Ireland remains limited. In the chapter that follows I will acknowledge the work done to support new principals by the National Association of Principals and Deputies (NAPD), the Trustees Bodies and the Management Bodies of post primary schools. I will also explore in some detail the contribution made by Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) since its foundation in 2006. I will show how what research does exist points to the conclusion that our experience of school leadership mirrors that in the literature referred to earlier in this chapter.

**3. The Context of the Irish post primary school principal**

**3.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter I defined four pillars which constitute the theoretical framework of this study. Leadership is a social function. Although it has many different aspects the core business of school leadership is the leadership of learning and the quality of the educational experience of their students (Hargreaves and Fink 2006). School principals can be most effective as leaders of learning when they practice distributive leadership methods (Leithwood et al 2006). School principals report high levels of job satisfaction and value the experience of their peers and other school heads who support them as role models, coaches and mentors. The conclusion drawn from the preceding chapter is that we must pay careful attention to how we attract, train and develop a cohort of professional school teachers and school leaders (Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber 2010) in order to deliver improved quality of educational outcomes in our schools

In this chapter I will focus on the Irish context. I begin with a brief discussion of the historical and legislative framework for the management of Irish post primary schools showing how the role of the school principal has changed as new models of trusteeship and management of schools have evolved. I will treat of the work of Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) and describe the induction, support and training provided for existing and aspiring school principals.

I will show how the last decade has seen rapid change in the landscape of school leadership. The economic depression across all European economies has had a profound impact on the funds available for the delivery of public services in Ireland. In recent years the context of Irish schools has been dominated by cut backs in a system that was already poorly funded. At the same time there has been an increase in the scrutiny of the role of the school principal within a developing culture of accountability and evaluation generally in the public service (McNamara O’Hara 2012, McNamara, O Hara, Boyle, and Sullivan 2009, McNamara and O’Hara, 2006). The recent drive for curriculum reform within *Literacy and Numeracy Learning for Life* (DES 2011) and the proposals for changes to the Junior Cycle curriculum (NCCA 2011) have increased the pressure on school principals to deliver in their primary role as a leader of learning.

Against the backdrop of these curricular developments the fact that there has been a significant turnover within the cohort of Irish post primary principals in recent years means that it is now more important than ever that school leadership be better researched, understood and conceptualized (OECD 2008).

In this chapter I show how the task of better understanding and conceptualizing the role of the school principal is made more difficult by a lack of research data. I refer to the changing legislative context of school leadership and the specific demands made by new curricular initiatives. I show how although starting from a very low base, the study of school leadership is now regarded as a well-established and autonomous discipline in Irish education (O’Toole 2009). In this regard I explore three valuable texts recently published in Ireland, *Leading and Managing Schools (*O’Sullivan and West-Burnham 2011), *School Leadership Matters* (LDS 2009) and Eilis Humphreys’ Doctoral study *Distributed Leadership and its impact on Teaching and Learning* (Humphries 2010).

This chapter completes a broad theoretical and contextual discussion of the issues that have shaped my study. The research data collated in the course of this study will show the extent of turnover among school principals in Ireland over the last six years. The figures confirm the anecdotal evidence that a generation of school leaders formally retired from post primary schools during the period from 2006-2011. The conclusion of the chapter provides the reader with a precise research question to be answered in the remaining sections of the study. *How can we best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for leadership in terms of curriculum and the leadership of learning?*

**3.1 The management of Post Primary schools**

The Education Act of 1998 represents a significant milestone in the evolution of the system when the State for the first time defined a statutory framework for the management and governance of schools (Govt. of Ireland 1998). Under the terms of the Education Act the Minister for Education and Skills is required to monitor and assess the quality and effectiveness of the education provided by all recognized schools (Part I Section 7). Under the Public Service Management Act, 1997, the Secretary General manages the Department of Education and Skills on behalf of the Minister. He is responsible for the implementation and monitoring of policy and the delivery of outputs across the spectrum of education from pre-school to fourth level. The Education Act provides the legislative framework for the devolution of power and responsibility for the management of both Primary and Post Primary schools from the Minister and the Department of Education and Skills through partnership with Patrons (Part II, Section 8) who in turn are responsible for the appointment of Boards of Management for schools (Part IV). The Boards in turn devolve their power to the school principal. The school principal is responsible for the day to day running of the school and is specifically tasked with the responsibility to provide leadership to teachers, students and all who work in the school (Part IV Section 23).

In 2005 the Joint Managerial Board (JMB) which represents the Boards of Management of over 400 voluntary secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland sought to give expression to how the role of the post primary principal has become more complex with a list of legislative acts passed since 1989 which regulate the day to day work of a school Principal.

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| **Table 3.1**  **Acts of parliament that impact on the workload of the Principal**  1. Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 1989  2. Industrial Relations Act 1990  3. Children Act 1991, 2001  4. Terms of Employment (Information) Act 1993, 1997  5. Employment Act (Protection of Young Persons) 1996  6. Organization of Working Time Act 1997  7. Employment Equality Act 1998, 2004  8. Education Act 1998  9. Education Welfare Act 2000  10. Equal Status Act 2000  11. Protection of Employees (Part-time Work) Act 2001  12. Teaching Council Act 2001  13. Ombudsman for Children Act 2002  14. Unfair Dismissals Act, 1977, 1993  15. Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004  16. Child Care Act, 1991 *Source: JMB Survey: 2005.* |

In addition to these acts of parliament the work of school principals is governed by regulatory directives from the Department of Education and Skills in the form of department circulars. A cursory look at the newly revamped DES website shows that there are no fewer than 590 circulars described as Active. In the five years from 2007 and 2011 more than 450 were issued by the Dept. of Education and Skills.

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| **Table 3.2**. **Circulars from the Department of Education and Skills**  YEAR Number of circulars issued   |  |  | | --- | --- | | 2007 | 111 | | 2008 | 115 | | 2009 | 70 | | 2010 | 77 | | 2011 | 77 |   Source /*www.education.ie/servlet/blobservlet/des\_circular\_listing.htm* |

Although some of these circulars focus on administrative functions outside the realm of responsibility of mainstream post primary principals (such as Adult Education) the majority have had a direct impact on their work and most have added to the pressure on school principal. In 1998 for example circular letter 04/98 revised the structures for in-school or middle management of post primary schools (DES 1998) only to be revised again by circular 07/03 (DES 2003) and again in 2011 by circular 53/11.

**3.1.1 An Historical Perspective**

Prof John Coolahan’s seminal *History of Irish Education* describes the genesis of the Irish education system as ‘unusual, complex and interesting’ (Coolahan 1981 page 141). The history of the patronage and management of Irish post primary schools is a history of the interaction of a variety of post-colonial, religious and political issues. Perhaps in a reaction to the fact that the schools were once used as an *instrumentum regni* by the colonial occupier (Coolahan 1981 p. 140) the Catholic Church, through various indigenous and internationally based religious organizations ultimately became the main provider and manager of post primary education in Ireland during the 19th and 20th centuries. In almost all cases the principals of these congregational schools were selected and appointed by the Superiors of the orders. This led to a core anomaly which largely still prevails within the system which ‘…gave unparalleled ownership, access and local control to the Church while the burden of the financial and central administration was carried out by the State’ (Fahy 1992 in Gleeson 2010 page 25.). In addition to the religious dimension, the other political, social and cultural complexities that remain within the structures of Irish Post Primary schools are especially well summarized by Gleeson (2004, 2010).

Prior to the Education Act the National Education Convention, had been established following the publication of the consultative document *Education for a Changing World* (NEC 1992). The then minister for education Niamh Bhreathneach heralded the convention as a change to the traditional approach to policy making in Irish education which had been characterized by bilateral negotiations between the Department of Education and major interest groups (Gov. of Ire 1994). The multilateral discussions within the convention explored a wide range of issues with representatives of various stakeholders and interest groups. When addressing the issue of school management it was the view of the Convention that the role of the school principal was first and foremost as a leader of learning and that the instructional leader was the ‘most neglected aspect of the principal’s work in the school’ (Coolahan 1994 p. 43).

Three years after the Convention Prof John Coolahan noted that there was a strong relationship between positive school leadership and institutional effectiveness, and further added that the challenges posed by the transition from the classroom to the Principal’s office are considerable for newly-appointed principals (Coolahan 1994). In a foretaste of things to come Coolahan’s list of the core responsibilities of school principals clearly emphasizes the notion of the school principal as an instructional leader who is responsible for…‘…creating a supportive school climate, with particular emphasis on the curriculum and teaching and directed towards maximizing academic learning, having clear goals and high expectations for staff and students, establishing good systems for monitoring student performance, promoting on-going staff development and in-service, and encouraging strong parental involvement and identification with, and support for the goals of the school’ (Coolahan, 1994 page 42).

**3.1.2 A changing culture in the management of post primary schools**

Latest statistics for the post primary system show that 26,185 teachers now serve the needs of 356,107 pupils (statistics from the DES website and relate to 2010-11 school year). In total there are 729 recognized post-primary schools in Ireland with patronage arrangements which categorize them into one of three sectors or school types; Voluntary Secondary Schools, Vocational Schools (including Community Colleges) and Community or Comprehensive Schools. The three sectors or school types are served by three management bodies. 383 Voluntary Secondary Schools operate under the guidance of the Joint Managerial Board (JMB) and represent 54% of the total. 33%. of post primary schools or 254 are Vocational Schools or Community Colleges and are managed by local VECs under the auspices of the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA). The smallest of the three sectors accounts for only 13% of the total or 92 Community and Comprehensive schools who are served by the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS).

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| **Table 3. 3 Post primary schools in the Republic of Ireland**   |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | JMB | VEC | ACCS | Total | | 383 | 254 | 92 | 729 |   *Source DES website* |

The religious orders which dominated the management of post primary schools in the last century continue to manage their schools from beyond the grave (McGrath 2007) through new trust bodies. These new trust bodies carry the founding vision of the school and strive to maintain the characteristic spirit or ethos of a school. They exercise the role of Patron/Trustee as enshrined in the Education Act, holding ‘in trust’ the school property and the school’s educational mission. As trustees they also appoint the Board of Management. Almost all of their schools now have so called ‘lay’ principals. Figures obtained from these trust bodies show just how much things have changed in the demography of school leadership and management.

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| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **TRUST BODY** | **CEIST** | **Le Cheile** | **ERST** | **PBST** | **Loreto** | **Jesuits** | | Number of post primary schools | 110 | 54 | 56 | 7 | 21 | 5 | | Serving religious principals | 4 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |   **Table 3.4 Schools under Catholic Religious** |

The new trust body *CEIST* manages 110 post primary schools which were formally under the trusteeship of the Daughters of Charity, the Presentation Sisters, and the Sisters of the Christian Retreat, the Sisters of Mercy and the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. Only four of these schools have principals who are ordained members of these orders. Two principals in the 54 *Le Cheile* schools formally run by the Dominican Sisters, the De La Salle brothers and the Holy Faith Sisters are members of those orders. Over the last number of years the *Edmund Rice Schools Trust has* overseen the transfer of 97 schools from the Christian Brothers. Only 25 of these school remains in existence and none have a Christian Brother as principal. Only one of the five schools under the trusteeship of the *Jesuit* Province has a Jesuit priest as principal. All of the 21 *Loreto* schools have ‘lay principals’.

In addition to the work of the management bodies the Trust bodies provide training and support for new and experienced principals.

**3.1.3 Training and supporting post primary school principals**

The term leadership is used in Irish education discourse to denote the work by the principal in collaboration with others notably the deputy principal, post holders and the Board of Management. In post primary schools in Ireland school principals and deputies are recruited from within the teaching profession and there is no other pre requisite qualification (DES CL 04/98). Many countries are beginning to explore ways of regulating the position of school principal and are asking the question of how best to mandate a common formal certification of school leaders (Bush, 2011).

Later in this chapter I will show how elements contained within the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (*DES 2011) suggest a shift in policy within the Department of Education and Skills and a move in the direction of mandatory training and qualification requirements for post primary principals. There is currently no qualification required of school principals outside of the minimum teaching qualification needed for registration by the Teaching Council and minimum five years of experience.

The three management bodies (IVEA, JMB, ACCS) offer induction programmes to the new principals in their respective sectors on appointment. Typically these programmes are offered in the month of June and/or August prior to taking up the position and at different times during the first year. One of the newly appointed principals I interviewed described his ACCS induction meetings as ‘…an opportunity for the new principals to meet fellow travellers on the difficult journey’. As well as providing this opportunity to meet fellow travellers these programmes provide essential briefings on financial management and legal issues to new principals. They also brief the principals on the workings of the management bodies themselves and explain the support structures that they offer to schools and Boards of Management.

Although the induction offered by the management bodies is attended by all new principals there are no formally mandated training courses for school principals or deputies. All supports provided to principals are offered on a voluntary basis. Two other valuable systems of support for school principals are provided by NAPD and LDS.

**3.1.4 The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals**

The establishment of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals(NAPD) in May 1997 was intended to unify the six disparate organisations that were representing principals and deputies at the time. NAPD has a regional structure with over 1,000 paid up members. The work of NAPD is coordinated by a national executive of elected representatives across all educational sectors and geographical regions. NAPD seeks to provide a voice for school leaders as one of the education partners and organizes regional and national meetings which typically incorporate elements of discussion of current issues for school leaders as well as training components. The *Executive Report* of NAPD is a bi-monthly publication which is increasingly being used as a forum for researchers and others to disseminate material for consideration by school principals and deputies.

The association’s annual conferences are very well attended with regular crowds in excess of 700 coming to take part in workshops and discussion groups. The conference is normally addressed by the Minister for Education and has input from researchers and other national and international leaders in education. *Le Cheile* is an annual journal which gathers together the research papers, presentations and general proceedings at the national conference.

NAPD does not commission or publish research. Through its national executive, regional meetings and conferences NAPD seeks to ensure that principals and deputy-principals are consulted on all relevant matters. In the *Executive Report*, and its annual journal *Le Cheile* NAPD seeks to gather and represent the views of Principals and Deputy Principals to all interested groups and relevant bodies.

The National Association of Principals and Deputies also provides support to new principals across the sectors through its national executive, a network of regional meetings as well as local and national conferences and symposia.

**3.1.5 Leadership Development for Schools**

Leadership policy in Ireland has evolved as part of the overall changes and on-going reflection in the education system (LDS 2007). As a result of this reflection which had started in earnest from the time of the National Education Convention (NEC 1994) and the publication of the Education Act (Gov. of Ire 1998) it became clear that the State needed develop formal structures to support school leaders. The main policy responses to the need to train and support school principals from within the Department of Education itself have centred on the work of Leadership Development for Schools (LDS).

The LDS website cites the work of Louise Stoll in defining the core vision of the organisation emerging out of a recognition of the fact that; ‘ …*t*he pace of change in education is gathering pace and schools are set to become a key focus in the change agenda. In such an environment leadership requires a different face and alternative to existing models.” (Stoll et al: 2003 p 13).

There are now six different LDS programmes which target different along the leadership continuum including; the need to develop leadership capacity in the system by preparing a cohort of new school leaders, the need to provide induction for newly appointed principals and to need support experienced leaders working in different contexts and in different types of schools.

The *Tóraíoch*t program is a post graduate diploma in education leadership (PGDEL) offered in partnership between LDS and NUI Maynooth which aims to support the preparation for future senior leadership and management positions. The first cohort of 600 graduated from the program in the spring of 2009.

*Misneach* is a program of induction for first-time post-primary principals in all three sectors: VEC, Community and Comprehensive, and Voluntary Secondary. The course is designed to prepare and support principals in effectively leading their schools during their first two years in the position. LDS also offers a programme for recently appointed/acting Deputy Principals *Tánaiste.*

The *Forbairt* program represents a broadening of the scope of LDS and supports the *Misneach* program by targeting experienced leaders.  Each year schools are invited to nominate an in-school leadership team to take part in *Forbairt*. The team comprises of the Principal, Deputy Principal and two positional leaders to be selected from among the teaching staff.

LDS also has designed specially focused courses for school leadersworking in disadvantaged areas (DEIS/DAS schools) *Cumasu* and Principals / Deputy Principals of other designated special schools *Cothu.*

LDS has also contributed to the leadership discourse with a number of publications. The *Country Background Report* which informed the OECD’s *Improving School Leadership* (OECD 2008) was compiled by members of LDS (LDS 2007). LDS’ report did not produce any original research data for the OECD. The authors highlight this as an impediment to policy development and emphasise the need for future research to support school leadership (LDS 2007 p4).

**3.2. Research on Irish School Principalship**

In recent years there has been a notable increase in the level of interest in leadership research in Ireland (O’Toole 2009). But for the most part education research in Ireland has ignored the plight of the post primary principal. In the post primary sector significant research has been carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and others on the experiences of students at Junior Cycle (Smyth, Dunne, Darmody and McCoy 2007) and on the effectiveness of a particular school programs like the Transition Year, (Jeffers 2007) or on the teaching of a particular subject like Maths (Lyons, Lynch, Close, Sheerin and Boland (2003). A broader survey of teaching and learning in Ireland was published in 2008 Gilleece, Shiel, Perkin and Proctor, 2009). More recently studies of social and political issues in education (Gleeson 2004), and how they impact on the early school leaving have also received much attention (Byrne and Smyth 2010). The NCCA has drawn on its own research and that of ESRI in the review of the primary school curriculum (NCCA 2005, 2008) and the new framework for the Junior Cycle (NCCA 2011).

What research that existed until recently in the area of school leadership with only a few notable exceptions (LDS 2006, 2007, 2010, O’Sullivan and West Burnham 2010, Humphries 2010, McNamara O’Hara 2012, McNamara, O Hara, Boyle, and Sullivan 2009, McNamara and O’Hara, 2006).) has tended to focus on the work of school principals at primary level (Drea, and O'Brien, 2003, Sugrue 2003, Sugrue and Furlong 2002, Sugrue 2005, Morgan and Sugrue 2005, Travers and McKeown2005.

Ciaran Sugrue’s *Passionate Principalship* for exampleis a valuable compendium of lessons learned by primary principals when they moved from the classroom to the office (Sugrue 2005). Sugrue suggests that the recent increase in research, curriculum change and policy development in Irish education has effectively pummelled teachers and school principals (Sugrue 2005 p.12). He further criticises the fact that the voices of school principals themselves are rarely heard amid the cacophony of other; ‘…more powerful and influential authorities who are ready to prescribe for the ills of society various remedies that become the responsibility of principals to administer as part of the ‘official’ curriculum (Sugrue 2005)

**3.2.1 Research on school evaluation**

The work of the school principal takes place within an increasingly regulated and evaluative context. It has been argued that schools are now entering the ‘age of evaluation’ having been encouraged or even compelled by the pressure of very influential external forces to adopt a culture of evaluation (McNamara and O’Hara 2008 p 3-14). The recent history of the emergence of evaluation in Irish education has been singularly documented by McNamara and O’Hara in Dublin City University. (2004, 2005, 2006, 2008) and shows how Ireland has followed the trends established in virtually every country in the world in that; ‘…the state has systematically sought to improve the quality of education and training, not only as in the past by increased expenditure, but also by attempting to increase output through systems of evaluation and surveillance.’ (McNamara and O’Hara 2008. p 198)

McNamara and O’Hara’s work represents a systematic analysis of how national and international trends have guided the origins, evolution and implementation of these systems of evaluation and surveillance in the Irish school system. Whole-school evaluation (WSE) is the current guise of the process of external evaluation of the work of schools by which the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) attempts to fulfil its obligation ‘…to monitor and assess the quality, economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the education system provided in the state by recognised schools and centres for education, (Education Act 1998, section 7 (2) (b)).

O’Hara and McNamara show how WSE and the newer form of formal evaluation *Management Leadership and Learning* (MLL) is consistent with a trend toward systematic evaluation within the public sector generally, a trend that has been strongly influenced by policy initiatives from external bodies most especially within the EU including the OECD. McNamara and O’Hara point to the fact that an increasing level of expectation of what school principals can and should do and a corresponding increase in the scrutiny of the role of the school principal has emerged within a developing culture of accountability and evaluation generally in the public service (McNamara O’Hara 2012, McNamara and O’Hara, 2006).

This has placed the burden of scrutiny on the work of school leaders, and specifically the Boards of Management and school principals. Cursory reading of the evaluation reports now published on the DES website clearly bears this out with area 1, the quality of school management consistently representing the largest section of the whole school report across the schools inspected. (DES website)

This trend reflects recent experience in the UK as outlined in *The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education*. This report clearly identifies the quality of the leadership and management as a key factor in a school’s success (HMCI 2008, p.30). Indeed education change literature consistently points to school principals as vital agents for creating the conditions in which school reform and improvement can succeed (Hargreaves 2001, p. 175). Given that, as mentioned earlier, the *raison d’être* of the Inspectorate is to monitor and assess the quality, economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the education system (Education Act 1998, section 7 (2)(b)) and that school principals are universally accepted as key agents in the delivery of the aims of the education system within their schools, it follows naturally that the role of principal should be experiencing increasing levels of scrutiny.

In the face of this rapidly changing and intensifying pressure on the post primary principal the paucity of research is disappointing. Outside of Ireland, schools in other countries have developed the capacity to gather and process data and to use this research data as a base for school development planning (McNamara and O’Hara 2008 page 202). Recent research carried out in Ireland shows that Irish teachers and schools are increasingly less sceptical of researchers and increasingly more positive about research-led practice especially within the context of professional development (McNamara & O’Hara, 2008).

The lack of a research base around issues that relate to post primary school leadership was explicitly criticized by the OECD report *Improving School Leadership* (OECD 2008). The lack of research was identified as a limitation to planning which has impacted negatively on the system’s capacity to address leader retention and support issues. (ibid page 50). The country report for this study which was prepared for the OECD by LDS noted that there were increasing concerns in Ireland about the difficulty of attracting potential school leaders to the role of school principal (LDS 2007 p 47). They were more specific about the gap in the research base in Irish education noting that no data was available at that time to indicate the number of school leaders leaving the profession each year. This lack of evidence is a limitation to planning, as it impacts on the system’s capacity to address leader retention and support issues (LDS 2007 p. 50).

As the figures collected in this study show the need to understand school leadership issues has grown exponentially in recent years as more than half of the cohort of serving school principals in 2006 have now retired or moved on. In spite of this rapid turnover there still exists no objective assessment of the value of the induction programs offered by the DES through LDS, or those offered by NAPD, the management bodies or the Trustees. Neither has there been any measurement of the attrition rates within the profession. There is no information available as to the origins of school leaders from different posts or subject areas. Neither has any research been conducted into the extent to which challenges experienced by school leaders vary across the sectors, in different types of schools and locations. This chapter will return to these questions in the conclusion and in preparation for the research design chapter which outlines the research questions addressed and the methodologies employed in the gathering and analysis of data.

In the section that follows I will highlight three exceptions to the general paucity of the response to issues of school leadership in terms of research and policy. I will briefly treat of the most salient issues which emerge within *School Leadership Matters* (LDS 2009) *Leading and Managing Schools (*O’Sullivan, West-Burnham 2011), and Eilis Humphreys Doctoral study *Distributed Leadership and its impact on Teaching and Learning* ( Humphreys 2010).

**3.2.2 School Leadership Matters**

*School Leadership Matters* is an empirical study of school leadership at primary and post primary level in the north and south of Ireland (LDS 2009). The report begins with a survey of the international research base. The survey of literature highlights research which shows that school leadership matters because it impacts not only on the academic achievement of the students but also on student participation rates, their self-esteem and general engagement with school life. (Hargreaves and Fink 2006).

In selecting a focus for their inquiry the researchers take their direction from the four challenges to school leadership identified within the OECD report of 2008 as follows:

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| **Figure 3.1 Challenges for school leadership**   1. Concerns around the profile of existing school leaders 2. The falling number of applications for the position of principal in primary and post primary. 3. The expanding role of the school in society and the resultant pressure on schools and school leadership. 4. Instructional leadership and the focus on teaching and learning.   *Source OECD (2008)* |

The North South Study provides some useful insights as to why some teachers apply for vacant principalship and others do not. The report also expresses concerns about the age profile of some serving principals, notably in the primary sector. One of the surprising findings of the research is that almost half of the principals surveyed had no management training prior to appointment (LDS 2009 page 44). Another interesting anomaly within the study is the fact that more than half of the serving principals report problems with work-life balance while at the same time 91% report a very high level of job satisfaction.

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| **Table 3.5**  **Some of the findings within LDS North South**  **91%** claim to be satisfied or very satisfied with the job  **57%** report a poor work life balance  **45%** had no leadership training prior to appointment  *Source (LDS 2009)* |

In processing their study the researchers make recommendations under three headings; how to make the post of principal more attractive, the need to explore new and innovative models of leadership and strategies in which the system can be more effective in terms of succession planning.

**3.2.3 Making the post more attractive**

The report identifies the need to emphasize the positives of the job of school principal. To make the position more attractive there is also a need for more clarity in terms of expectations and the competencies expected. The precise role and duties need to be defined more clearly and communicated to aspiring leaders. Concerns were expressed about remuneration and especially the differential between principals/deputies and other posts of responsibility as well as some intra school anomalies whereby the deputy of large school may earn as much, if not more, than the principal of a smaller school. The report also suggests that thought be given to how best to incentivize and reward principals who operate in more challenging circumstances.

**3.2.4 New Models of Leadership**

The research points to a number of structural issues that act as impediments to improvement. The current model of principalship is seen as very inflexible and makes a number of recommendations as to models that would be more favourable. The researchers look at how best to support principals at different points of their career from induction to supports needed for established principals. They recommend establishing networks of principals across geographical areas. This it is hoped would promote the notion of principals from the same area supporting each other rather than feeling they are competing with one and other.

More innovative models for pre service training are also suggested such as shadowing of principals in advance of appointment. They recommend that policy makes explore the possibility of introducing co-headship or job sharing for serving principals or even the offer of sabbaticals to school principals at different stages of their careers (p. 94).

**3.2.5 Succession Planning**

The report points to the need for the training of Boards of Management in areas such as succession planning (p. 92). Central to this is training in how to develop effective middle management systems. The report is critical of some existing systems of middle management which focus on tasks. Echoing a strong theme that emerges in Humphries study (Humphries 2010) to be explored later in this chapter the LDS researchers recommend that middle management systems need to embody the lessons of distributed leadership and provide teachers with meaningful leadership opportunities rather than being task focused.

**3.2.6 Initial response to the report**

The National Executive of the Association of Principals and Deputies (NAPD) welcomed the main thrust of the LDS report as an acknowledgement of the fact that effective school leadership is a key driver in teacher effectiveness. In their response NAPD welcomed the commitment to build the capacity of school leadership but cautioned that, ‘…while school principals and deputy principals are anxious to be leaders of learning in the school, their position is constantly eroded and undermined by an administrative workload that never seems to abate and a middle leadership structure that is disappearing’ (NAPD 2011).

The JMB response also sounded a cautionary note highlighting the toll that the position of school principal can take on those in the role. ‘There can be little doubt but that secondary school headship is an extremely challenging position impacting on one’s wellbeing, emotional state, physical health and family life. A high-quality, reality-grounded preparatory program would serve to reaffirm an aspiring principal of their capacity to do the job or even convince others that it is not for them at this time’ (JMB website 2009).

This North South study is certainly a welcome addition to what is a sparsely populated research base but it must be noted that the study is strongly weighted toward the primary sector in terms of the number of those surveyed. Another threat to the value of the study emerges from the fact that it dates back to 2008. There is a sense in which some of the findings of this study have already been overtaken by events notably the embargo on middle management posts of responsibility in place since 2009, the spike in the numbers of principals appointed in 2009, 2010 and 2011, and other recent developments in curriculum including the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and the new proposals from the NCCA around proposals for the new Junior Certificate.

**3.3 Two important studies**

Outside of the texts referred to earlier in this chapter the term leadership has traditionally been rarely used in Department of Education literature. In fact until the introduction of the latest phase of school evaluation termed Management Leadership and Learning (MLL) the term was not used by the Inspectorate in the guides to *Whole-school Evaluation*, (DES 2006) nor in the earlier framework document for WSE, *Looking at* *Our Schools* (DES 2003). As this chapter on the Irish context is showing leadership literature is generally very sparse. Two notable exceptions warrant attention.

**3.3.1 Leading and Managing Schools (O’Sullivan and West-Burnham 2011)**

This study collates insights and experiences from a number of Irish and internationally recognized experts in the field of school leadership and seeks to apply the principles of effective leadership to the broad spectrum of life in Irish schools.

Michael Fullan’s chapter on system-level leadership and change (p.16-23) describes the lessons that can be learned from the experience of school leadership planners in Ontario. Fullan claims that they succeeded in achieving school improvement because they prioritized investment in the development of leadership in the schools and especially on developing those leadership capacities related to instruction.

Ciaran Sugrue’s chapter on ‘Autonomy and Instruction’ (p. 59-74) bemoans the lack of a culture of self-evaluation in Irish post primary schools. Sugrue argues that there is a need for a clearer articulation of the relationship between self –evaluation and external accountability. In this regard Sugrue concurs with the extensive research in the area of school evaluation and inspection which has been published by McNamara and O’Hara in Dublin City University (McNamara and O’Hara 2008, 2006, 2005).

Tom Collin and Rose Dolan’s contribution on school leadership and the curriculum, (pages 75-89) is also particularly relevant in that it focuses on new approaches to the leadership of learning. The authors propose that schools generally and school principals and teachers specifically need to develop the capacity to be authors of their own curriculum and teaching.

**3.3.2****Distributed Leadership, Teaching and Learning (Humphreys 2010)**

Eilis Humphreys’ doctoral thesis *Distributive Leadership and its impact on Teaching and Learning*(Humphreys 2010) explores how the concept of distributed leadership is understood within the context of the overall work of the school principals in Irish post primary schools. The research which involved school principals, deputies and teachers makes particular reference to the impact distributive leadership can have on teaching and learning. It is particularly valuable because it makes a much needed contribution to a small but growing indigenous research base on school leadership. The research findings are in keeping with a number of international studies which have shown how student outcomes improve when principals focus their attention on distributive leadership practices (MacBeath Odouro, and Waterhouse, 2004, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins 2006, Spillane and Diamond, 2007, Silins and Mulford 2002.)

Humphreys takes account of the limitations and frustrations that exist within the system of middle management in Irish post primary schools (Posts of Responsibility) but the thrust of the research conclusions is overwhelmingly positive. The system of middle leadership comes in for implicit criticism in this study with many post holders not perceiving themselves as having any genuine leadership roles or any role in decision making in schools. Humphreys’ research subjects echo the sentiments expressed in the OECD report on school leadership which identified the dispersal of leadership throughout a school as something that not only relieves senior management burdens but something that offers a way for the school generally to capitalise on a wider range of expertise and skills within the teaching staff. In the conclusion of the study Humphreys notes that ‘…collaborative work processes, and structures and systems that contribute to creating a positive learning environment, are some of the key features of distributed leadership identified in this research that have the potential to have a direct or indirect influence on teaching and learning (Humphries 2010 page 139).

Distributed leadership is most effective when it is linked to teaching and learning. The school principals who were part of this study acknowledged their dual responsibility for leading learning in the school and developing leadership capacity among teachers and acknowledged their need to promote leadership and to develop potential leadership skills and talents among teachers. In the conclusion Humphreys argues for a more focused approach to instructional leadership within the post of responsibility structures and existing subject department structures.

**3.4 The principal as a leader of learning**

In the final section of this chapter I address the cumulative effect of cultural, structural and curricular developments and changes in post primary education that have shaped the world of today’s post primary school principal. I draw attention to how the PISA scores published in 2010 have added a powerful catalyst to this reaction and explore those elements of the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (DES 2011) which are pertinent to school principals.

**3.4.1 PISA 2010**

Although work had begun on the literacy and numeracy strategy well before the publication of the PISA scores in 2010 the coincidence in timing means that it has difficult not to see one in terms of a response to the other. When the 2009 PISA scores were published in Ireland some stakeholders in education notably the Teacher Trade Unions moved quickly to explain the sharp decline in student performance in terms of the changes in society and demographics (ASTI website 2010). Nonetheless the PISA results have come to be universally accepted as an indictment of the performance of the Irish education system as a whole. In spite of the caveats around possible factors which may have adversely affected the scores the fact that we had slipped from 5th to 17th, in our performance in Literacy and from 16th to 26th in Maths caused serious concern (Cosgrove, Shiel Archer and Perkins 2010, IBEC 2011)

Chief among these concerns was the economic one. Early in the so-called boom era of the Celtic Tiger Ireland succeeded in attracting large numbers of multinationals who cited the young, skilled and well educated workforce as a major factor which had influenced their decision. Before being challenged by PISA the enduring myth of the Irish education system was that we were doing well, punching above our weight in terms of educational productivity. Ironically this perception had been fuelled by the PISA scores from 2003 and 2006 and by respected commentators such as Dr. Garrett Fitzgerald who had suggested that in terms of ‘…output in qualitative and quantitative terms related to input of resources – Ireland seems to have been performing about 50% better than the rest of the EU’. (Fitzgerald, 2002, page 130).

Fitzgerald’s assertion that we were out performing our fellow Europeans was debunked by PISA 2009. The results constituted an uncomfortable epiphany that challenged the previously unchallenged consensus of national commentators and of multinational employers which praised the quality of the education system.

**3.4.2 Responding to PISA**

The PISA results have focused our attention on academic achievement and have sharpened the focus and scrutiny on teachers and all school leaders in terms of what is expected of our schools. The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (DES 2011) explicitly uses the PISA tests as a benchmark for targets for 2020.

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| **Table 3.6**  Desired outcomes at post primary level  Increase the percentage of 15-year old students performing at or above Level 4 and Level 5 (the highest levels) in PISA reading literacy and numeracy tests by at least 5 percentage points by 2020  Halve the percentage of 15-year old students performing at or below Level 1 (the lowest level) in PISA reading literacy and numeracy tests by 2020  (Source *Literacy and Numeracy Learning for Life*, DES 2011) |

To meet these desired outcomes the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* makes explicit reference to the role of school principals and proposes two actions to help build the capacity of school leaders to deliver the desired outcomes.

|  |
| --- |
| **Table 3.6 (b)**  Targets for school leadership  Improving principals’ and deputy principals’ understanding of the most effective approaches to improve the teaching of literacy and numeracy and the use of assessment.  Supporting principals and deputy principals in implementing robust school self-evaluation, focusing in particular on improvements in literacy and numeracy.  *Literacy and Numeracy Learning for Life* (DES2011 |

The scope of this paper does not allow for a thorough reflection on the implications for school leaders of the new literacy and numeracy strategy. It is important however to point out that this document contains a lot of material which is pertinent to this study and the changing role of school principals. Specifically it needs to be noted that for the first time the strategy explicitly aligns Department of Education policy with the instructional leadership model for school principals.

‘Principals have a pivotal role in creating a school climate that supports effective teaching and learning…. The leadership of principals is essential if schools are to look critically at their own work, identify how improvements can be made, implement actions that can make a difference for learners, and monitor student outcomes effectively’. (DES 2011, p 39).

The strategy also breaks new ground in terms of its explicit reference to mandatory content in the preparation and training of school principals. As part of the strategy the Department seeks to

‘…ensure that all leadership development programs for aspiring principals include mandatory units on the teaching and assessment of literacy and numeracy and on school self-evaluation’.

and to encourage

‘…the provision and uptake of leadership development programs for aspiring principals by signalling that the successful completion of such courses will be a mandatory requirement for applicants for principalship from a fixed date’.

(DES 2011 page 41)

The details contained within the literacy and numeracy strategy suggest that the Department of Education and Skills is taking the first tentative steps toward regulation of the position of school principal. The strategy contains an explicit commitment to consider

‘…in conjunction with the education partners and other relevant interests, the possibility of making successful completion of an accredited leadership development program a requirement for future principals, either as a pre-requisite for appointment or as a necessary condition of confirmation as principal within a defined period.’

(page 41)

The responses to the publication of the strategy have been largely guarded. The IVEA’s response in contrast is a well thought out and highly commendable piece of work which is worthy of note in this chapter (IVEA 2010). In responding to the strategy IVEA highlights a number of issues that emerged within the research carried out in this study.

IVEA welcomes the commitment to providing leadership development programmes for aspiring school leaders and argues that there is an urgent need to make the role of the school principal attractive. In particular IVEA draws attention to the fact that the role of principal must be made attractive to those with the personal attributes and dispositions suited to effectively leading schools in the 21st century. In welcoming the report the IVEA raise specific concerns notably: the fact that the current in-school management system is not fit-for-purpose; the lack of a consensus around what constitutes school leadership including the notion of distributed leadership, the lack of codified or agreed list of duties, rights and responsibilities of school management, the fact that few if any schools pay attention to succession planning and a concern that many of those suited to principalship may be deterred from applying.

The IVEA response concludes with a cautionary note with a concern expressed that the introduction of mandatory training programmes and the increasing pressures on the role of school principal will combine to deter the right candidates from applying for this crucial role. They also sound the warning that ‘…There is the real possibility that those with ambition but not the necessary attributes to be effective principals will seek and obtain school leadership positions to the detriment of schools and their students (IVEA 2010).

**3.5 The context for the school principal in 2012**

Although there is a general acceptance that the work of the school principal is multifaceted there is no consensus as to a precise definition of its role and responsibilities. In the course of this research I have noted that although there is no formal contract for school principals there is an apparently endless list of duties and responsibilities attached to the position. One interesting definition of the role which emerged in the course of my reading was published in the report of the public sector benchmarking body in 2002. The report described the school principal’s role in broad terms. According to the Benchmarking Body the principal is the one who holds prime responsibility for the successful running of the school and is charged with responsibility to lead a team of staff and to set long-term targets for the school (Department of Finance 2002).

The workload of post primary school principals is certainly increasing. Principals are charged with the responsibility for the leadership of schools in the context of a gathering momentum of change in education and society. In addition to the tasks of curricular and instructional leadership the responsibilities of the post primary school principal have swollen to the extent that the role now demands a staggering array of profes­sional tasks and competencies. The JMB survey of workload (JMB 2005) and the statement form NAPD in response to the LDS study which were referred to earlier expressed concerns that as the workload expands, school principals may not have sufficient time to dedicate to leading teaching and learning because of the amount of time spent on administrative and other non-educational tasks. This is a theme that was echoed in the interviews I conducted later in this study.

The quality of school leadership is a significant determining factor in the efficiency of schools (OECD 2008) and on the quality educational experience of post primary students (Hallinger and Heck 2011, Hargreaves and Fink 2006). The increasing pressure on school leadership, the trend towards more formal evaluation and surveillance of our schools and the vast array of literature available on the topic of leadership provides the reader with a context for this research.

The research design issues are addressed in the next section of this paper. Chapter five then provides a summary of the data gathered as I sought an answer to the question *how can the system best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for leadership in terms of curriculum and the leadership of learning?*

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**4. Conceptual and Practical issues in the Research Design**

**4.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the theoretical, conceptual and practical considerations that shaped the research design. Beginning with a discussion of the personal and professional reflection from which the research concerns emanated, I argue for the relevance of the study. I locate the study within the *constructivist/ interpretivist* research paradigm arguing the case for a *phenomenological* epistemology and *holistic* ontology. The research is *emic* and *iterative* and uses mixed methods in terms of its approach to data gathering and analysis. The chapter also outlines how concerns around threats to the coherence and quality in mixed methods research were addressed to ensure a process that would ultimately be valid and dependable.

The popularity of mixed-methods research has been identified as a key component in the general improvement in the quality of social science research and especially in education research. (Gorard 2004) The fundamental premise in mixed methods research is that all methods have limitations and strengths. The chapter shows how the researcher ensured that methods were mixed according to how they complemented strengths and therefore avoided compounding the weaknesses of each method. (Tashakkori and Teedlie 2003 p.299) The chapter explores this and other validity claims.

The final section of the chapter outlines the ethical standards applied throughout the various stages of the process and in so doing completes the third of three contextual chapters which prepare the reader for the details of the research process which follow.

**4.1.1 The Research Question.**

The starting point for the research process is the research problem or question. As a teacher I know it is hard to get a good answer to a bad question. As a researcher I have come to accept the importance of clarity in the research question as a pre requisite for quality in terms of the core question of research ‘…how can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 290)

The choice of research problem and definition of the research question emerged from three sources. The first influence was my own experience of induction and training as a newly appointed principal in two schools in 2006 and 2008. The second was the coursework in the first two years of the doctoral programme in Dublin City University, notably the interactions with other class members and the pilot study I conducted in the second year of the programme. The third factor which influenced the definition of the research question was the rapidly changing context of the leadership of post primary schools in Ireland since my first appointment in 2006.

The spike in retirements among principals and other middle managers in post primary schools effectively meant that a generation of school leaders retired between 2006 and 2011 to be replaced by a cohort of new principals. Evidence was also emerging to suggest that events in Ireland were reflecting an international trend with difficulties in recruiting quality candidates in sufficient numbers to replace the experienced leaders retiring. (Anderson, Brien, McNamara, O'Hara and Mc.Isaac 2011) An increasing level of expectation of what school principals can and should do, and a corresponding increase in the scrutiny of the role of the school principal, was emerging within a developing culture of accountability and evaluation generally in the public service. (McNamara and O’Hara, 2012; McNamara, O Hara, Boyle, 2008, McNamara and O’Hara, 2006) At the same time the embargo on public sector recruitment was having a major impact on an already problematic middle management system in post primary schools.

This combination of personal and professional reflection as well as other conceptual, contextual and theoretical influences led to the definition of the research question. I approached the study with a certain amount of knowledge of the subject matter and although I am conversant with the broad context and needs of my research subjects, this did not constitute an *a priori* hypothesis for which I sought confirmation. My research question defined and directed the process as one that is exploratory rather than confirmatory. (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998) The purpose of the study is to explore and better understand the world of the post primary principal and to answer the following question:

*How can we best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for leadership and the leadership of learning?*

**4.2 Research Design**

Research design is that conceptual framework which provides a structure for the collection and analysis of data and subsequently indicates which research methods are most appropriate (Walliman, 2006 p.42).

Once a clear research question is defined the challenge for the researcher is to find the most appropriate research design and methods for collecting and analysing the data that can respond effectively to the research problem. (Rocco, Bliss, Gallagher, & Perez-Prado 2003) The key question for the researcher is which approaches and methods will produce the most rigorous and coherent research so that the research process will produce high quality and reliable results. The purpose of the research determines the design (Cohen, Mannion and Morisson 2000 p. 73).

**4.2.1 Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions**

Creswell suggests three elements to underpin this conceptual framework: philosophical assumptions, strategies of inquiry and detailed procedures of data collection and analysis, called research methods. (Creswell 2005) The starting point therefore must be the philosophical or, more precisely, the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the researcher. The nature of my research question meant that my study would be essentially interpretative/constructivist and phenomenological. I set out to develop a better understanding of the world of the school principal (the phenomenon) and to explore what insights can be gathered from how those who inhabit that world make sense of it (interpretation).

The roots of interpretivism as a research paradigm lie in phenomenology and epistemologies that emphasise the subjective nature of knowledge. The interpretivist or constructivist paradigm grew out Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and is informed by studies of interpretive understanding or hermeneutics conducted by other German philosophers like Martin Heidegger (Mertens, 2005, p.12).

Ontology is the branch of philosophy that addresses the questions, what is the essence of reality? Is there a single reality? Is there a Truth that underpins all being? In the area of social research, Bryman makes a clear distinction between two opposing ontological positions; objectivism and constructivism. Brynman argues that:

‘…objectivism is an ontological position that implies that social phenomena confront us as external facts that are beyond our reach of influence…’

Whereas,

‘…constructivism asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by their social actors. There is no one reality but a constant flow of revision’. (Bryman 2001, p16)

The objectivist holds that reality is fixed and objectively knowable. Reality is single, tangible, and can be fragmented. My research rejects this objectivist stance. Arguing from a constructivist perspective, I hold that the realities of the school principal are dynamic, multiple and although governed by certain regulatory factors, they are at least in part socially constructed. A fundamental assumption of my study is that the school principals that I surveyed and interviewed both act on their environments and in turn are acted upon by their environment. This inter-action shapes their context and inevitably colours their understanding of their experiences within this context. The study therefore is holistic recognising that the phenomenon under study is complex and is greater than the sum of its constituent parts. (Patton 2002 p. 40) The goal of my research is to focus on the participants views of the research problem. Within the interviews and the delphi process the questions are broad and general; that is because my research question is exploratory rather than confirmatory in nature.

**4.2.2 The research perspective**

**The terms *Emic*** and ***Etic*** were first used by Kenneth Pike (1967) in the field of linguistics to refer to two contrasting approaches to research and specifically to two contrasting approaches to data gathering which imply different epistemological positions. An *Emic* approach is one which prioritises the perspective of the subject being observed. It is a description of reality that records this perspective within the culture or the world being observed. An *Etic* account on the other hand provides an objective description of reality as observed solely from the perspective of the ‘neutral’ observer (Rubin and Babbie 2009 p. 227).

In order to develop a greater understanding of my research problem I first needed to gather data to quantify and describe the broader context of my research subjects. Although the research did contain quantitative elements, the study is consistently interpretivist in its ontology and emerges essentially from a phenomenological epistemology. The interpretivist ontology holds that the researcher does not stand apart from the reality of the research world. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) The research perspective is *Emic*. It begins with a quantitative description but ultimately seeks an understanding of the contingencies and contexts of the world of my research subjects. The views of the ‘outsiders’ in the Delphi panel were also used to add legitimacy and validity but did not change the essentially *Emic* research perspective

Because I am a working school principal as well as being an observer, I have been embedded in the world of my research. Within the interviews therefore I could never claim to be a passive and objective observer. As Mertens puts it: ‘the researcher himself is the research instrument’. (Mertens 2005 p. 247) During the interviews I was involved in the meaning making and the construction of data. Later in the analysis stage I interpreted the data from my own perspective.

**4.3 Gathering Data**

One of the key findings of my pilot study was that there was a need for more accurate data to be gathered in advance of any study of school leadership. In the first phase of the research process the emphasis was on extracting, collating, cross referencing and processing data.

**4.3.1 Quantitative Data gathering**

In the first phase of my research I was able to draw on three sources, the available data bases of the management bodies, by NAPD and by LDS. The information from these three sources was not complete and appeared to overlap at times. It needed to be collated and cross checked. This process which began in 2009 was concluded in September 2011.

When I encountered these first obstacles I arranged for a question to be asked directly of the Minister for Education on my behalf by the then opposition spokesman on Education now Minister for Education and Skills Deputy Ruairi Quinn. (Appendix 1) The response provided accurate and very useful information which added to the data base available.

The third source of this quantitative data was a national survey of serving school principals. (Appendices 2 and 3) To introduce the survey I wrote an article that was published in the NAPD executive report. (Cuddihy 2011) The article discussed some international research into the issues faced by newly appointed principals. The survey was included as an attachment in the NAPD Executive report in November 2010 and was circulated to all post primary schools in Ireland. The article and the fact that the survey was carried into the schools through the NAPD executive report ensured that the response rate was high with 307 or 46% of serving principals responding. Initial analysis showed that the response rate as fairly consistent across all three sectors with 42% from Voluntary Secondary schools, 41% from VEC schools and 48% from within the Community and Comprehensive Sector. A detailed analysis of the results of this survey is presented in the next chapter.

**4.3.2 Using Qualitative Interviews**

Steiner Kvale described the research interview as a construction site of knowledge. (Kvale 1997) The fundamental premise that underpins the use of interviews in research is that the true opinions, experience and understandings of others can be accessed and made explicit through the conduct of an interview. The second assumption made when choosing interviews as a research tool is that these experiences and perspectives are of value and can contribute to an area of inquiry.

Kvale defines qualitative research interviews as ‘attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations’ (Kvale and Brinkman 2009 p. 1). In my research interviews I wanted access the world of the principals. The interviews were exploratory and conversational in tone but they were purposefully designed and formally structured. In this way they differ from mere dialogue or conversation because they have specific intention and purpose. The interviewer was seeking to delve in to the world of the interviewee and in doing so uncover both fact and meaning. I wanted to get the story behind each participant’s experiences in pursuit of in-depth information around the topic. This meant gently guiding the conversation in the course of the interview. (Rubin and Rubin 2005)

Czarniawska (2004) describes interviews as ‘narrative construction sites’ since the answers to questions asked by an interviewer are often spontaneously weaved into the life story or experiences of the interviewee. (Corvellec in Gustavsson 2007 p. 190) This constituted a serious threat to the validity of my study. Silverman alerts us to the danger of the contrived interview and is highly critical of the ‘staged interview’ where knowledge or truth may be dispensed with at times for the sake of entertainment (Silverman 2005). To address this and other validity threats I took a number of important steps in the design phase of the interviews

I managed the rapport carefully during the interviews and used open and informal introductory questioning early to establish a genuine rapport and engagement. I took time over the choice and order of the interview questions to focus on giving the interviewee the chance to tell their story.

In the first round of interviews I relied on handwritten notes and later transcribed the interviews in full. After a number of attempts and through trial and error during the Pilot Study I learned how best to record interviews in an unobtrusive manner using a voice recording application on my mobile phone. The interviews in this study therefore were recorded digitally with the sound recording emailed and saved after each interview. This enabled me to have accurate data to conduct a detailed and coherent thematic analysis.

**4.3.3 The Delphi method**

The final stage of my data gathering involved applying the Delphi technique. This research technique is an iterative process which has been widely used in health and social sciences. The name can be traced back to the *Delphic oracle* and the value of consulting with experts in a particular field to predict the likely outcome of a particular policy decision or to seek convergence of understanding of a complex issue. (Hsu & Sandford 2007) There is no one clearly defined Delphi methodology but there is a consensus in the literature around its definition as a form of surveying of experts in two or more rounds. The value of the technique for researchers is that it enables the researcher to pool the insights of a group without actually having to assemble them (De Villiers, de Villiers and Kent 2005).

The Delphi process sees the results of a previous round of questioning being fed back to the participants with the experts being asked to respond to questions under the influence of the opinions of the wider pool of experts (Okoli and Pawolowski 2004). In theory the iterative process can continue with continual feedback until a consensus is arrived at on an issues or series of questions. My use of the technique was guided by the notion that pooled insights of experts who are ‘outsiders’ because they are not serving as principals can bring a certain level of objectivity to the research process. Their contributions can enhance the predominantly subjective understandings elicited from those in the role and involved two stages or delphic rounds. I used two delphic rounds because my concern was not to achieve a consensus to but to add richness and depth to the understandings being gained from the other aspects of the research gathering.

Within the research literature three considerations are regarded as central to the success of the delphi process: the careful choice of the experts, preservation of anonymity throughout the process and careful control of the feedback. (Hasson, Keeney and McKenna 2000) In choosing my expert panel I identified key professionals who work directly with school principals in a variety of roles. By choosing members different perspectives I ensured rich and quality data. I assured anonymity within the process and did not allow any of the contributions to any one of the respondents in the feedback stage.

**4.4 Ensuring quality when using mixed methods**

The choices made in the early stages of the design process meant that I would be combining elements of different research paradigms. Rather than being bound by a slavish adherence to the constraints of a mixed paradigm or mixed model approach, I used a pragmatic approach to the choice of research methods. I employed multiple methods in an attempt to add quality and rigour to my research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Taking this approach inevitably leads to multiple threats to quality. Although it may not be possible to eradicate every threat to the quality of research there is ample advice available to researchers as to how best to address issues such as research ethics, coherence, validity trustworthiness and reliability (Miles and Hubermann 1994, Cohen Mannion Morrison 2000, Mertens 2005).

**4.4.1 Validity and Triangulation**

By addressing these issues across the various stages of a research process the researcher has a better claim to quality in his research. In a mixed methods approach it is even more important for the researcher to thoroughly explore the quality issues of the study as a whole (Johnson, and Onwuegbuzie 2004).

In quantitative research the term validity is used as a measure of the extent to which the research actually measures what it has set out to measure and how truthful are the research results. In Guba and Lincoln’s seminal work on non-positivist research design, the authors defined the following concepts as important criteria for determining the validity and reliability of a piece of research: the truth value or credibility of the research, the applicability or transferability of its findings, its neutrality and consistency. (Lincoln and Guba 1985.p.290)

At its simplest level the use of different methods in the collection and analysis of data provides an element of triangulation. Triangulation broadens the perspective and adds rigour to a study ‘…by combining methods. This can mean using several kinds of methods or data, including using both quantitative and qualitative approaches’. (Patton 2001, p.241). Triangulation can deliver a greater level of reliability and increase the trustworthiness of the conclusions and recommendations of the research. But the value of mixing methods in research is not limited to triangulation.

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2006) argue for a combined nomenclature to overcome some of the language differences that exist across the different research approaches. They define validity in mixed methods research in terms of integration and legitimation. I addressed the issues of integration and legitimation under three headings.

**4.4.2 Multiple perspectives, Insiders-Outsiders**

This refers to the accuracy of the researcher’s representation of a multiplicity of views within the study. The first two phases of the research process generated objective data. In phase three the data gathered was subjective and interpreted by the researcher. The *emic* analysis of the researcher, an insider, was later enriched and enhanced by the *etic* perspective of the outsiders in the delphic panel. Although certainly experts in the area of school leadership none of those on the panel are serving school principals. The addition of this stage of the research process added rigour to the study as a whole.

**4.4.3 Weakness Minimization**

This term refers to the extent to which the researcher succeeds in designing a research methodology in which weaknesses of each of the methods are compensated by the strengths of others. The quantitative data and statistics from the first two phases of the research provided me with a certain type of information but would not have been sufficient alone to answer my research question. This required the more qualitative approach of the research interview. The interviews would have been insufficient in themselves unless I had been able to interview much larger numbers of the serving principals. The parliamentary question and the national survey addressed this weakness and enabled me to consider the contributions of a wider cohort of principals. The four phases of the research complimented each other and enriched the process.

**4.4.4 Sequential research**

To claim validity/legitimation in mixed methods research Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2006) argue that the researcher needs to show that the results of the various stages of the process have not unduly influenced results of others. A key question is could similar results have been yielded by a reversal of the phases of the design? For me this led to question if the answers to the survey could have had any influence on the data gathered at any other stage such as the interviews or the delphic panel? I assured that that was no cross pollination by not publishing the results of my survey in advance of the interviews. The Delphi technique requires the answers to be fed back to the participants in round two but there is no reason to suggest that these responses were in anyway influenced by other findings within this research

**4.5 Data Analysis in Mixed Methods research**

Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003) have defined seven strategies of data analysis in mixed methods research. *Data reduction* involves simplifying the results by thematic analysis or the use of descriptive statistics. *Data display* involves the use of graphs, diagrams or lists to describe results pictorially. The next stage, which Onmuegbuzi and Teedle insist is optional, involves the *transformation of data* i.e. the qualitising of quantitative data and/or the quantitising of qualitative data. This enables the researcher to blend the data into a more unified unit of analysis. This is then followed by *data correlation* when the researcher places the data gathered side by side and explores the correlations. This enables the researcher to move to the final phases of *data consolidation*, *data comparison* and *data integration* in which the various sources of data are combined compared and consolidated to provide singular and coherent set of results (Onwuegbuzi and Leech 2006, p 490-2).

**4.5.1 Analyzing Quantitative Data**

In the course of this research I gathered three sets of quantitative data: statistical evidence compiled from the Department of Education and Skills annual statistics as well as the data bases held by the Management Bodies, LDS and NAPD, information obtained from the Minister of Education via my parliamentary questions and the results of a national survey of school principals. In the first case I carried out a statistical analysis of the various data bases. Cross checking and comparing these data sets enabled me to arrive at a unified and reliable data set on which to base my further investigations.

Key to the success of this study was the choice of questions asked in the survey and the parliamentary question. These questions were carefully chosen to provide detailed and rich data that could be easily summarised, manipulated, analysed and compared with other data within the study. For example the question which asked ‘What is the number of those principals appointed since 2006 who were previously deputy principals?’ produced a measure of a central tendency. Question 5 in the survey asked what post the principal held immediately prior to appointment. The answers provided a similar measure of tendency and a set of results that could easily be compared.

Other questions asked in the survey produced nominal variables (gender, sector) and interval variables (years of experience/age). The distribution of these variables across the sample was a key concern in the analysis and provided the researcher with detailed descriptive statistics.

**4.5.2 Qualitative Analysis**

In the research interviews the words spoken by my interview subjects were the sole medium of data and analysis (Miles and Hubermann 1994 p.51). Although I took field notes during the interview these notes were used merely as a backup. Miles and Hubermann caution the researcher that raw field notes can be sketchy and unintelligible to the reader, and that notes taken during interviews may also lose a lot of the meaning and quality of the communication. They further warn that notes written up afterwards run the risk of distancing from the truth of what was actually said (ibid p 50-51). Having learned lessons from the interviews conducted within the pilot study I put a lot of thought into the choice of my recording device for the interviews.

I taped the interviews digitally using an android voice recording app (.v.2.0.6  
Android 2.2). As well as producing high quality recordings the app was especially useful as it enabled me to send the recorded data as an attached digital file by email. The app also contained other important practical elements including a digital timer recording and the ability to search the files by title and date. Because the app was stored on my phone I was able to listen to the interviews conveniently.

To help with the analysis I transcribed the interviews. Once transcribed the first significant step in the analysis of qualitative interviews is the process of coding. Following Bogdan and Biklin (1998), I employed three stages in the coding process: ordering, initial coding and focused coding. The transcripts were first ordered chronologically. The texts were then re-read carefully before making an initial coding according to the patterns that were established in the first reading of the transcripts. Data was then be labelled thematically. In practice I found that the codes were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Certain pieces of text within the interviews were assigned several codes.

In the final stage of the analysis of the interviews I used a more focused re-reading and coding of the material highlighting and extracting the repeating ideas and larger themes that connected the interviews.

The themes that had emerged from within the interviews were then used to formulate the questions for the delphic Panel. I applied the Delphic Technique using two rounds with the answers from the first round of questions being collated and thematically grouped. I then recirculated a summary of the emerging themes from the Delphic round one to the participants. This was done anonymously without attributing the answers to any member of the panel. This process enabled me to distil a consensus in the responses to core questions.

**4.5.3 Ethics**

All choices made in the design of the research need to address ethical considerations. This extends from the very nature and definition of the purpose of the project to the context in which the research is to take place, the methods chosen, the choice of participants and the way in which research findings are to be used. (Cohen Mannion and Morrison 2000) The three ethical principles nonmaleficience, beneficience and autonomy were core considerations in my research design. In practice these principles dictated that I guarantee that no harm could come to the participants because of their participation. The principle of informed consent was carefully applied throughout. To avoid any allegation of deception the nature and purpose of the project was clearly defined and communicated to all involved. This helped to ensure that the participants and the researcher were of one mind when it came to the stated purpose of the research (Creswell 2006 p. 64).

The use of research questionnaires, surveys and interviews present an inevitable intrusion into the life of the respondents, be it in terms of time required to complete the questionnaire, the level of threat or sensitivity of the questions, or the possible invasion of privacy. (Cohen Mannion Morrison 2000 p. 245) My survey was conducted with the cooperation of the national executive of NAPD through the Executive Report. An accompanying article in the executive report invited the response. I conducted my research interviews on the fringes of conferences and meetings of school principals to avoid intrusion into the working day of my participants.

Throughout the process I maintained the anonymity of my participants. Although my interview subjects inevitably wove their personal narratives into their responses the data I gathered was for the most part of a more professional rather than personal nature. I adhered strictly to the need for anonymity and was careful not to record the names or any other identifying references in the transcripts of the interviews.

Prior to final submission I presented each of the participants with a full draft of the final paper and reminded them of their right to withdraw from the process.

In addition to the principle of informed consent best practice in ethical research recommended that I consider what good might emerge as a result of the study for the research subjects and for the wider research community (Terreblanche Durkheim and Painter 2006 p 66). I entered into agreements with all who contributed to the research and committed to make the findings of my research freely available to the trustee bodies, the management bodies, LDS and NAPD. During the course of my four year study on the Doctoral programme I also contributed articles to the NAPD *Executive report* (Cuddihy 2010,2011), the annual research review *Le Cheile* and have addressed the annual research conferences jointly run by Clare and Limerick Education centres (LEC 2011).

In October 2011 I took up a position on the national executive of NAPD and continue to contribute to this forum each month. I have received universally positive feedback from those who have been involved in the study including a significant level of correspondence from serving principals in response to an article I wrote on the challenges of newly appointed principals.

**Conclusion**

The goal of all social research is to better understand the complexity of human experience. The context and the role of the school principal like all aspects of education is multi-facetted and complex and needs to be studied from a variety of perspectives in order to be fully understood. It follows that the educational researcher has to develop and utilise a large toolkit of methods and designs (Creswell 2006). Because I was using a mixed methods approach it was important that all aspects of the research process were coherent, well-structured and carefully designed. This chapter has shown that I adopted a cautious approach to the design of this study.

This chapter located the research within the *Interpretivist/Constructivist* paradigm and showed how the research was designed to be *Emic* in terms of its perspective and *Iterative* rather than linear in terms of its process. The *mixed methods* approach taken to data gathering involved the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. While arguing the case for these choices the chapter has briefly considered some of the advantages and challenges faced by the researcher taking this approaches to research.

**5 Four Phases of Research**

**5.1 Introduction**

Having discussed the theoretical, conceptual and practical considerations that shaped the research design in chapter three, chapter four provides the reader with a map of the research and outlines in more detail how a combination of quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis techniques were employed to answer the research question; *How can we best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for the leadership of learning ?*

In this chapter I consider the experiences of the pilot study which directed me towards this research question. I present the four distinct but related phases of this iterative process and outline my use of used mixed methods of data gathering and analysis. I outline these research phases chronologically and show how the continuous analysis of the data at different phases allowed me to integrate my findings from each phase to build on and shape the direction of the study.

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| The research began by focussing on developing an understanding of the context in which school principals operate. This required the collection and collation of data so as to define and propose responses to the needs of school principals.  **Phases of the research process**   |  | | --- | |  | |

In the pilot study I sought to develop my own understanding of the context and the needs of post primary school principals. The findings of the pilot study demonstrated the need for more quantitative analysis. This chapter shows how in the first two phases of the study I addressed this need for better data and focussed on gathering, comparing and collating. I discuss how the research techniques used in phases three and four allowed me to delve deeper into the issues raised in the initial interviews in the pilot study. I used a series of qualitative interviews and a refined Delphi technique to seek a definition as to how best the system can respond to the needs of school principals.The chronology of the data gathering and analysis shows a gradual refinement and distillation of the answers to the research question leading to a number of conclusions that are defined in the final section of this chapter. These conclusions are discussed in more detail in the fifth and final chapter of this study and form the basis of detailed recommendations future policy in the area of school leadership.

**5.1.1 The Pilot Study**

In the pilot study I noted the findings of the OECD project *Improving School Leadership: Policy and Practice* (OECD 2008) which was critical of the lack of research available in Ireland in the area of school leadership. Anecdotal evidence suggested that there was significant change and turnover among school principals occurring in Ireland but there was no research base to confirm this. There were no answers readily available to explain why principals were retiring in such large numbers although it was clear from the country background report *Improving School Leadership* (LDS 2007)that Ireland was beginning to mirror the experience of other countries in the OECD with reduced numbers of applicants for vacated principals’ positions in both the primary and post primary sectors. (IPPN 2006, JMB 2005).

Although the numbers of new appointments was increasing rapidly there was no formal measure of the quality or effectiveness of existing induction or support programmes for what was a significantly increased cohort. Neither was there any research available to describe the attrition rates that were being experienced within the profession. In a later piece of research the age profile of school leaders was identified as a concern for the system (LDS 2010). When I began my pilot there was no research in these areas to inform succession planning.

Because of the lack of a research base in Ireland I drew on international research literature to establish the broad theoretical base for my pilot study. The international research evidence consistently emphasized the key role played by school principals in the delivery of quality outcomes in schools (Fullan, 2008; Leithwood et al, 2004). The literature highlighted how school principals have an indirect positive influence pupil learning because of the direct influence they exert on school organization, culture and climate (Leithwood et al, 2004; Silins and Mulford, 2002). Within what is a vast and expanding literature on school leadership there was extensive empirical evidence to prove that school principals have their greatest impact on a school when they align all of their work on school organisation, culture and climate to address student learning (Spillane, Hallet and Diamond 2003, LaPointe, Meyerson and Darling Hammond 2006, Mourshed, Chijioike and Barber 2010).

The literature review provided the theoretical framework for the pilot study which would seek a better understanding of the context of serving school principals. In particular I wanted to learn how a group of newly appointed school principals were experiencing the demands of the role of principal and the explicit requirement for the leadership of learning.

**5.1.2 A first round of interviews**

The second section of the pilot study presented a sample of the experiences of a number of recently appointed post primary principals captured through qualitative interviews. Interviews are ‘narrative construction sites’ (Czarniawska 2004). The questions I chose were deliberately open and designed to make it easy for the interviewee to tell their story.

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| **Fig 5.1**  **Sample interview questions from the pilot study**   1. What position did you hold prior to appointment? 2. How well did this prepare you for the demands of the role of principal? 3. What have you learned since you were appointed? 4. What would you say are the most challenging aspects of the job of Principal? |

In the course of the interviews I found that the answers to questions I asked were spontaneously weaved into the life stories and day to day experiences of the principals I interviewed (Corvellec in Gustavsson 2007 p. 190). The stories that were told confirmed how the pressure on the job of the post primary principal was increasing. There were multiple references to how cut backs and other measures announced in Budget 2009 as well as the perceived increased scrutiny and accountability coming from the evolving systems of school evaluation were adding to the pressure. All the principals I interviewed made reference to the changing political and economic context and how it has impacted on their job. One referred to 2009 as …*not a great time to start as a Principal*! Another suggested that the atmosphere in his staffroom and the morale of teachers generally was gradually being eroded. Concerns were raised also about how the embargo on public sector appointments was impacting on the middle management structure (Posts of Responsibility POR). This issue would surface more forcefully in the later round of interviews.

A clear theme that emerged was that the first year was a particularly challenging time for the principal. One principal spoke of being *a lamb led to the slaughter.*  Another referred to being *dropped in at the deep end with little or no training and very little experience of management to draw on.* The expectations around the first board meetings and staff meetings were identified as particularly challenging. One principal spoke of being *at a loss* when preparing for the first meeting. Another who had already served as teacher nominee on the Board referred to the Board of Management as …*where it all happens* and pointed to his previous experience on the Board as something which had given him much needed confidence.

All of those I interviewed in this initial study agreed that the *Misneach* program and other induction provided by the management bodies were useful and supportive. When pushed to identify the aspect of these programs that were most helpful all agreed that the time spent networking with other principals and the conversations on the fringes of the meetings were the most valuable.

The personal experiences and narratives that were woven into the interviews resounded strongly with my own experience. The period since my first appointment as a school principal in 2006 has been one of change within the landscape of post primary school leadership. Reflection on the research during the pilot study helped to clarify the direction of my future study and confirmed that the issues around the recruitment, induction and in-career training and support of post primary school principals demanded further investigation.

The OECD report *Improving School Leadership: Policy and Practice* (OECD 2008) had highlighted the lack of available data to direct and inform planning. I noted the argument put forward by Hargreaves that the lack of succession planning in schools can result from oversight, neglect or the pressures of crisis management (Hargreaves 2005 p. 163). In consultation with my supervisor I emerged from the pilot determined that my doctoral study would not focus on discerning where the blame for the lack of succession planning should lie. Neither did I want it to deteriorate into the composition of a list of resources that need to be put in place to support school principals. For this reason my research question was defined in such a way so as to address the need for better quantitative and qualitative data for future planning and policy development in the area of post primary school leadership.

*How can we best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for the leadership of learning?*

The next section of this chapter outlines the four phases of my research. In the previous chapter I addressed the issues that surround the use of mixed methods in research. With a clearly defined research question at the centre I assured coherence and maintained focus throughout an iterative process.

**Figure 5.2**

**The research question at the centre of a mixed methods and iterative process**

**5.2 Research Phase 1**

In this first phase of the research I gathered and compared quantitative data from two main sources; parliamentary questions and figures from data bases held by the post primary management bodies, and the two bodies which work most closely with post primary principals, LDS and NAPD. After my pilot study was complete I had begun to share my concerns in conversation with my class mates in DCU, my lecturers and with other colleagues and principals I met at various conferences and meetings of principals. One of the issues that emerged during these conversations was the difficulty that many experience in getting reliable data from the Department of Education and Skills.

**5.2.1 Gathering and collating statistical data**

In search of this reliable data I engaged the then Labour Party spokesman on Education and Skills Deputy Ruairi Quinn to ask a parliamentary question on my behalf. On Wednesday May 5th, 2010 he asked the then Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Skills if she could provide figures for the following; the number of post primary principals appointed in the years since 2005, the number of teachers appointed each year by school type that is, vocational school, voluntary secondary school and community schools, and the number of those appointed principals who were previously deputy principals. The written answers to these requests proved very revealing (Appendix 1). It was notable that no data was available from the Vocational sector. This was surprising given that VEC schools account for more than 1/3 of all post primary schools.

**Table 5.1 Data from the responses to *Dail* Question**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **YEAR** | Number of Principals Appointed | Community +  Comprehensives | Voluntary  Secondary | The number who were Deputies Principals prior to appointment |
| **2005** | 46 | 6 | 40 | 17 (37%) |
| **2006** | 36 | 7 | 29 | 16 (44%) |
| **2007** | 37 | 7 | 30 | 14 (38%) |
| **2008** | 52 | 11 | 41 | 23 (44%) |
| **2009** | 69 | 20 | 49 | 33 (48%) |

Although incomplete these responses confirmed a number of important points for my study. The trend towards an increase in the number of appointments to the position of principal was well established during this five year period. A second important point that came from these figures was that the majority of those appointed as principals arrived to the position without the experience of having been a deputy principal. This issue would resurface in the national survey and in later parts of this study.

**5.2.2 Other sources of Data**

In addition to the fact that there was no data made available from the VECs there were obvious discrepancies between the figures held in the Department of Education and Skills and those held by the Management Bodies, LDS and NAPD all of whom provide assistance and induction for newly appointed principals. After initial comparisons these discrepancies were easily explained as an almost inevitable consequence of the lack of a centralised held data base of appointments. This lack of a centralised and reliable data base gave rise to less than satisfactory practices with some involved in the collation of figures for various bodies admitting that they used the advertisements in the national press as the source of their data.

Other practical issues also impaired the reliability of the available data. For example the lists of retirements each year did not always correspond with the list of appointments. As I delved into the data I further noted how some of the appointments had been double counted or appeared in two separate years. Some principals who retired while on secondment were replaced by Acting Principals whose appointments may also have been counted twice. Other variations existed because of the fact that some principals were appointed in mid-year. Still further anomalies within the figures were the result of other variances that occur because of amalgamations and/or school closures.Notwithstanding these challenges I continued to accumulate information from the various data bases held by the management bodies and by LDS and cross checked them against the DES data and that held by NAPD. At the end of numerous revisions I arrived at the following summary of appointments since 2005:

**Table 5.2 A collation of data from data bases held by LDS and NAPD**

Three key points that emerged from this first phase of quantitative data gathering directed the next phase of my research.

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| **Table 5.3**  **Conclusions from phase one of quantitative data gathering**   1. There is a lack of data and research available on post primary school principals in Ireland. 2. There has been a significant turnover in school leadership in recent years with a significant spike in new appointments in a three year period from 2008-2010. In total there were 266 appointed with more than 1/3 of all post primary schools appointing a new principal in these years. 3. DES figures for the Community and Comprehensive and Voluntary Secondary Sectors suggested that only 43 % of the principals appointed each year who had previously served as deputy principals. |

These conclusions directed me to conduct a further round of quantitative data gathering in order to make progress on my research question. To understand more of the needs of school principals I needed to gather more descriptive statistics. My study required more information about the profile of serving post primary principals and how they differ in terms of age, gender and experience prior to appointment. I chose to use the survey method so that I could reach a large cohort of serving principals.

**5.3 Research Phase 2 A National Survey**

Using the survey offered me a convenient way to access responses from this large cohort of principals and allowed me to reinforce the study with an element of triangulation. Because I had no direct contact with all but a very small number of the principals I surveyed I was also able to claim reduced bias in the phases of the research process.

The survey was in two parts (Appendix 2). The first set of questions sought statistical data on a range of nominal and interval variables. The second set of questions used a licert scaling method to measure the respondent’s opinions on a number of subjects. In the survey therefore I was gathering descriptive statistics and some limited qualitative data. The main purpose of the survey was to gather more quantitative data so that I could compare it with what I had gathered from the earlier phases of the research. I also wanted to drill into the statistics and to add more detail to the picture that had started to emerge from the pilot study. I chose questions to produce nominal variables (gender, sector) and interval variables (years of experience / age). The distribution of these variables across the sample was a key concern in the analysis and provided me with some detailed descriptive statistics.

**5.3.1 A summary of findings**

**Table 5.4**

There is no centrally held data base with which to compare this sample. The respondents to my survey broke down approximately 60-40, male to female.

**Table 5.5**

The age profile of those who responded raised a number of important issues for my study. Although more than half were in their 50s, more than a third (35%) of those who responded were in their forties or younger. This is a significantly high number and reflects the concerns raised by the OECD who found that in most OECD countries, the principal workforce is ageing and a large proportion will retire in the next five to ten years (OECD 2008).

**Table 5.6**

The results of this question were consistent with the data collated in earlier phase of this study. It provides further evidence of the very large number of post primary principals who were appointed in the last five years.

**Table 5.7**

40 % of the principals who responded had been deputy principals prior to appointment. Within the 60 % of principals who were appointed without having been deputies this question showed how a significant number (39%) had come to the position of principal without holding any senior middle management position. In the notes attached to many of the surveys I noted that some of those appointed had held other positions such as Programme Coordinator before being appointed. Others had held key positions such as Guidance Counsellor prior to becoming principal. It would also appear that a small number of those surveyed may also have been principals in other schools before taking up their current position. Principals in smaller schools naturally progress to take up positions in larger schools. These issues although not central to the focus of this study do require further research.

**Table 5.8**

56 % of the respondents had been promoted from within their own school, 44% appointed from outside.

Although the scope of this study did not allow for further drilling into this data there are a number of issues that emerged from the survey that could prove valuable for further research Among the issues I will discuss and recommend in the final chapter is the need for more precise descriptive statistics to inform succession planning. A similar national survey of serving deputy principals will be recommended.

**5.3.2 The second part of the survey**

In the second part of the survey I asked the respondents to rank their agreement with a set of general statements. This part of the survey was designed to provide a measure of attitudes and to gauge levels of satisfaction with issues such as the levels of preparation for the position on appointment, the helpfulness of the courses run by LDS and the general levels of pressure on the role of the principal (Appendix 3).

A number of salient points emerged from the second part of the survey which helped define the next phase of my research.

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| **Table 5.9**  **Key results from the Survey (part two)**  **56%** agreed that they had experienced a lot of anxiety in their first year as Principal.  **64%** said they had found Misneach, the LDS course, very helpful.  **72%** agreed or strongly agreed that they received useful feedback and support from their Boards of Management and /or Trustees.  **75%** of those who responded felt that their previous experience had prepared them well for role for principal.  **83%** agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘too much of my time is spent on paperwork or other non-educational matters’. |

Analysing this data provided me with further direction and helped me to define the questions for the qualitative interviews in phase three. The interviews were designed to enable me to get behind the statistics and to probe the experiences of the principals.

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| **Fig 5.3 A sample of interview questions**   |  | | --- | | What was your experience of the training provided through LDS?  What was useful in these programmes?  What would you like to have seen more of in the training?  What are the challenges you face in your role as a school principal? | |

**5.4 Research Phase 3 A second round of interviews**

“An interview is a directed conversation…..an in-depth exploration of a particular topic with a person who has had the relevant experiences.” (Charmaz, 2006, p.25)

The first two phases of this research were quantitative in nature and had built on the findings of my pilot study. The responses from the *Dail* question and the results of the survey had provided me with a level of clarity around the statistical data that my research required in order to begin to answer my research question.

*How can we best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for the leadership of learning?*

I conducted a series of interviews with serving school principals throughout 2010 and 2011. I wanted to get behind the statistics from the survey and to access the real world of the school principal. In these interviews I spoke with principals from a variety of backgrounds all whom had relevant experiences to share. In total I interviewed 12 principals who came from across the three sectors and who had different levels of experience (Appendix 4).

The interview questions which had emerged from the results of the survey were framed to facilitate a structured conversation and to generate rich data for this study. The quality of the conversations proved to be excellent with my interviewees effortlessly weaving their own personal narratives into the answers to my questions.

I was determined that the interviews would not descend into a study of the frustrations of the job and a list of resources that need to be put in place to improve the lot of the school principal. This required careful management of the interviews. The principals I interviewed were honest in their assessments and certainly did mention the resource issues during the interviews. But the overall thrust of the conversations was positive and constructive. For the sake of clarity and to allow for further reflection and study I quarantined these issues into one list which is contained in the appendices(Appendix 5).

To analyse the data from the interviews I listened back to each interview a number of times before writing out the transcripts. In this way I was able to establish the codes for analysis of the data. From this process four themes recurred strongly.

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| |  | | --- | | **Fig 5.4 Four themes emerging from the interviews**  The induction and training of school principals.  Middle management and the impact of the cut backs.  The question of sustainability.  The paradox at the core of the role of the principal. | |
|  |

**5.4.1 Induction and training**

The feedback in the interviews was consistent with the findings of the survey. Many of the principals I interviewed reported very positive experiences on the *Misneach* programme. They also spoke highly of the support offered by the management bodies and NAPD. Among those appointed some years ago the level of satisfaction was especially high. One principal in her 9th year spoke of how …*the* *training was excellent. There was so much of it then. I understand it has been cut back and that is a problem* (Principal # 1).

There were numerous references made to the value of meeting others and the conversations on the fringes of *Misneach* and other meetings of school principals. This was consistent with the evidence which had emerged within the interviews during the pilot study. Although essentially positive about the content of the training they received from LDS and the management bodies some of the principals questioned the predominance of soft or interpersonal skills within the programs. Some were critical of the relative lack of time devoted to more practical issues of management. One said he found the content of the program *repetitive and poorly focused*. Another was more specific about what was missing.

*Misneach was good. But you know… there was an awful lot of time spent on the management of stress and other stuff like that….I wanted more pragmatic help. A little more work on specifics like how to conduct a staff meeting or how to do a post review (#9).*

Although essentially positive there were frequent reminders of the pressures of the first year for the school principal. This echoed the first year anxieties that had been reported by 56% of those principals who responded to the survey. Many recalled how they felt that they were expected to do most of their learning on the job. Two responses were particularly worthy of note in this regard:

*When I was appointed I was handed the keys and off you go. The nuns who had their own way of doing things left no real structures behind them. We are still catching up on that one (# 8).*

and

*When I started I asked the BOM for a contract and I was told that the Department don’t issue one. I know now that that is because I suppose principals are expected to do everything (#5).*

The interviews also uncovered concerns about whether or not all the learning for school principals can be done on the job.

*I think I hardly left the school once in my first year. I was learning on the job…I didn’t know what S+S was when I started. It was a steep learning curve. My predecessor did the timetabling himself. That meant that he was brilliant and knew all the quirks and pragmatisms that need to be concerned but didn’t have a view on the curriculum. I had to learn all that…and I had no help (#5).*

The interviews produced evidence of the need for new principals to be trained in the operations of school administration such as timetabling and the workings of the systems of supervision and substitution. This need is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of those appointed recently come to the position without any experience at deputy principal level.

In addition to these more practical training needs one principal spoke of the importance of addressing broader issues like vision and leadership within the induction programs.

*Along with the nitty gritty of the day to day human resource management principals need a grounding in organisational development and organisational change and a background in education …there has to be a broader issue of leadership and educational vision. You don’t get that on by learning on the job (#5).*

The principals I interviewed generally seemed to endorse the existing induction and training provided by LDS and the management bodies.

**5.4.2 Issues with Middle Management Posts**

A key dimension of the context of serving principals that was revealed within the interviews was the pressure on the middle management structures in post primary schools. Because of the embargo on public sector posts all of the principals I interviewed had recently taken on some of the duties of a retired post holder who had not been replaced. In some cases the principals reported that they were filling in for all or part of at least two middle management posts, sharing responsibility for Year Head, Examination Secretary or Programme Co-ordinator.

The future of the existing post structure was strongly questioned.

*The current moratorium has meant that the special-duties post has been effectively abandoned as a promotional position, with no replacement. Similarly, the level of appointments to assistant-principal post has been severely curtailed, and these responsibilities have largely fallen on principals and deputy principals (#3).*

References were also made to how the embargo on public sector appointments and other financial cut backs have impacted on the administration of schools and on the non-teaching staff. The fact that there are fewer post holders has added an already growing administrative burden.

*The job was bad enough as it was before this. It seems there is more and more to do for us (#10).*

Throughout the interviews it was made clear that principals struggle to find time and energy to address what are seen as the core responsibilities of school principal, around the leadership of learning. One principal put it quite succinctly.

*With all principals now seemingly expected to do the work of at least one un-replaced post holder it is not surprising that something has to give ( #2).*

Although the principals said they felt it was important to visit classrooms and all said that they tried to observe all new teachers in their first year, only one of the principals I interviewed had found time during the previous year to visit other classes and to observe teachers in action in their school. One spoke of the need to be involved in conversations with teachers about their teaching but bemoaned the fact that*…*

*…the day to day of the school doesn’t lend itself to that...it is constantly eroding of room for vision and creativity (#5).*

Concerns were raised about a perceived lowering of morale in the staffroom and even among the parent body. One principal referred to the responsibility of the school principal to

*Lift them all a bit...you have to remain positive...that’s the leadership…and it’s hard when you’re under more and more pressure yourself (#3).*

In the midst of these challenges one positive theme emerged in a number of the interviews. One principal observed that

*The good thing about this moratorium is that it may provide us with an opportunity to kill off this system and put something in its place that will work…based on management functions with other people (# 8).*

This echoed what others were saying about their frustrations with the existing post structure.

*What we have is not working*. *It’s a pretend middle management system, not a real one… it can’t function. It can’t continue (#5).*

Many spoke of the challenges posed by the existing system. References were made to the challenge of having to work with some teachers in positions of responsibility who seem unwilling to take on leadership roles or who lack the skills to operate in a middle management capacity.

*Many principals I know are looking around wondering what I am going to give this person to do…that’s an awful way to run a system (#8).*

Although critical of the inflexibility of the existing system one principal spoke of having some teachers in positions of responsibility *who are so good that they should have their salaries doubled (#5).*

Another framed the responses to this question more positively asserting how

*….School management should have the ability to acknowledge the extraordinary voluntary work done by teachers by means of a reward and merit system (#8).*

One principal in particular was more prescriptive in a recommending precisely how the existing system of middle management needs to change.

*…appointments (to* posts of responsibility) *should be based on merit rather than seniority and appointees should be openly re-interviewed every three to five years. Performance should be openly assessed and allowances should be graded according to the size of a school and the level of responsibility (#9).*

**5.4.3 Sustainability. How long can one be expected to do the job?**

In addition to the concerns expressed about the future of the current system of middle management other more specific and personal concerns were raised about the sustainability of the current model of principalship. One principal in his early forties appointed in the last five years asked; *can we do this for the rest of our lives? Can I keep doing this* and poignantly admitted. *I’m now looking at a way out...wondering what do I do next? (#7)*

In one interview the conversation moved onto a discussion about how religious orders who at one time were the main providers of post primary education had addressed the issues of burn out and sustainability among their school leaders.

*They* (the orders*) generally moved their principals every five to seven years…..They (the* principal*s) would have switched schools, they would have taken a break… I think they had it right… it’s good for the school…you only have a certain amount of energy to give (#1).*

During the interviews we also talked of the large numbers of new principals coming into the job in their 40s. Many questioned whether it was reasonable to assume that they might be facing 20 years or more of the same job in the same school. One principal when asked what kept him going answered…..*Adrenalin….but that’s not good for you. That can’t continue…Where is this all going...there is a need for an intervention.* Echoing what had been shared about the issues of middle management he continued*……The principal and deputy trying to do their own work and the work of a year head say...that’s not sustainable. (#9)*

The interviews suggest that the pressures on the role of principal certainly seem to be increasing. Although many of the principals shared their frustrations and challenges with me I did not detect any lack of job satisfaction. This points to the fourth theme that emerged in the interviews.

**5.4.4 The Principal Paradox**

Perhaps the most interesting issue that came out of this round of interviews was the paradox at the core of the world of the school principal. The responses of my interviewees certainly reflected the findings of the North South study conducted by LDS in 2010 which had reported that 91% of those surveyed were either satisfied or very satisfied in their position (LDS 2010). Those I interviewed spoke of the role as challenging and even draining on the person but across the interviews there was evidence of similarly high rates of job satisfaction. The principals were obviously under pressure but all were very positive about their work.

Many of the principals explicitly referred to how much they enjoyed and valued the job. In spite of using terms like ‘…*lambs to the slaughter’* to describe the first year my interviewees also spoke of how they have thrived on the challenges they have faced as they have grown in the job… *At one level it has become easier since I started…..There’s a lot more realism around now....a recognition that the job is more complex. (#8).*

This interviewee was particularly positive about her job but she also questioned the way in which the role of the principal is perceived by others.

*How is the job perceived is a concern...the relative lack of deputies becoming principals would worry me…we have to ask ourselves why is that...how are we modelling the job. What is the way we are doing our job saying to others? I have had many say to me …how do you do your job? I wouldn’t do it for love or money. That’s a problem...we need to show them the job is do-able and that it’s a brilliant job. It’s tough. There are very long hours and you need to have great energy for it….but it is a very good job...I am happy to be in it (#8)*

Another spoke of the role of the principal as *hugely rewarding* and highlighted how the position offers a teacher *a way of effecting change within a school.* While acknowledging the challenges this principal affirmed her commitment to the position saying, *.I am pleased to be in it and I have the energy for it (#10).*

The thematic analysis of these interviews helped me to select the questions I would use in the fourth and final phase of this research process. As part of a Delphi Process I assembled a panel of experts and presented them with three questions that had come directly from the thematic analysis of the interviews.

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| **Fig 5.5 Questions for Delphi Round One**  What is the single biggest challenge facing the Post Primary school principal within the system today?  What is your assessment of the current system of middle management in post primary schools?  Can you suggest a new initiative that could support school principals? |

**5.5 Research Phase 4 Delphi**

In chapter three of this study I showed how I chose to adapt the Delphi technique to help bring my research process to a conclusion. I showed how in the research literature three considerations are regarded as central to the success of the Delphi process, the careful choice of the experts, preservation of anonymity throughout the process and careful control of the feedback (Hasson, Keeney, Mckenna 2011).

In choosing my expert panel I identified key professionals who work directly with school principals in a variety of roles. By choosing different perspectives I wanted to enhance the quality of the conclusions of my study. I assured anonymity within the process and did not allow any of the contributions to be identified with any one of the respondents in the feedback stage. I used two Delphic rounds because my concern was not to achieve a consensus to but to add richness and depth to the understandings being gained from the other aspects of the research gathering.

I selected members for my panel of experts from those who were ideally positioned within the system with very close involvement with the work of school principals (APPENDIX 6). The panel included the CEOs and Education delegates of three of the largest Trust Bodies in post primary education, the General Secretaries of two of the three management bodies of Post Primary schools who between them share responsibility for supporting the management of almost two thirds of all post primary schools, the directors of two education centres, the founder of *CURAM* an extensively used independent service which supports school boards and principals, the national coordinator and others from Leadership Development of Schools who deliver induction and in-service training to school leaders in all post primary schools and the director and other members of the executive of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals..

**5.5.1 Delphi Question One**

*What is the single biggest challenge facing the Post Primary school principal within the system today?*

In the first round of the process I brought the participants into the conversation with a very broad question asking ‘what are the key challenges that face school principals today? The responses from the Delphi panel were consistent with the data from the interviews. Many of the themes addressed by the principals I interviewed were repeated precisely in the first round responses of the panel (Appendix 7).

Many members of the panel identified the main challenge for school principals as the challenge to make time and have energy to lead learning when all other demands are increasing. Reference was made to how difficult it is for school principals to promote positive practices like distributive leadership and creative approaches to middle management while working within in a culture that restricts. A number referred to the fact that principals operate at the interface between the Department of Education who prescribe a set of expectations and demands on one hand and the teaching staff who are largely members of Trades Unions that see things differently on the other. He went on to describe the principal as one who is caught in the middle having to cope with increasing responsibilities at a time when there are diminishing resources provided to deliver on them. There was also a question as to whether or not school principals have the authority and autonomy they require to achieve the tasks put before them.

A further point made strongly within the first round of the Delphi process was the pressure on principals to manage relationships and to lead people when morale is low. One respondent put it succinctly referring to the challenge to *uphold professional standards and maintain the commitment to quality at a time of austerity and distrust (even derision) of public servants.*

All of the respondents implicitly or explicitly questioned the sustainability of the current model of school leadership with one observing how for most school principals that he works with the challenge is just to keep going.

**5.5.2 Delphi Question 2**

*What is your assessment of the current system of middle management in post primary schools?*

In a second question I focussed the attention of the panel on the existing middle management structure. Once again the responses were consistent with the points that were articulated within the earlier interviews. The panel noted how the post of responsibility (POR) system which was already questionable is now all but decimated. Respondents spoke of how this POR system initiated in 1998 has not delivered what was intended. They spoke of how POR was expected to lead to something more positive and how it was intended as a stepping stone. The consensus was that the system has now run aground. Many of the panel identified this as the core issue for serving school principals and concluded that it is only when the issue of middle management is resolved that the principal can have any chance of getting into core business, the leadership of learning.

Ultimately the panel pointed to a lack of vision for school leadership and pointed to the need for a new middle management structure for post primary schools to be underpinned by a clearly defined vision. Echoing a theme raised in the earlier interviews members of the panel argued that an effective middle management structure should provide more meaningful leadership experience.

**5.5.3 Delphi Question 3**

*What one initiative would you recommend to support school principals?*

The third question asked the panel to define one initiative that policy makers need to consider in the area of school leadership. This question was designed to begin to draw the process toward a consensus. In this regard the panel recommended that the work of LDS, NAPD and the management bodies in the area of leadership succession, development, training and support needs to be prioritised and reinforced. They recommended more structured mentoring and coaching of school leaders and the creation of structures and practices to allow principals learn from other principals. In practical terms the panel seemed to recommend that attendance at induction and on-going training needs to be mandatory.

But the most resounding consensus echoed the recommendation for a new vision around middle and senior management and the leadership of schools. The panel suggested that this could lead to the introduction of a more flexible and enabling structure. The responses to the questions in round one provided defined the direction for the second round of the Delphi Process.

**5.5.4 Delphi Round two**

In the second round of the Delphi process I provided the members of the panel with a summary of the findings of round one. I preserved the anonymity of the responses when reporting back to the panel at the start of the second round. I jumbled the answers given to me to produce a very general summary to be considered by the panel. In the second round I asked the panel to consider four more focussed questions. The first two questions sought to distil what had been earlier reported about the need to support school principals and on the issue of middle management. In questions three and four I invited the panel to indicate whether or not they supported a proposal for mandatory levels of training and qualification for school principals.

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| **Fig 5.6 Delphi Round Two questions**  In the light of the responses made in the first round could you suggest one initiative that could be introduced to help address the challenges faced by post primary school principals within the system today?  If we were free of limitations and restrictions what could a new system of middle leadership (ISM) look like in post primary schools?  Would you favour the introduction of mandatory training and or prerequisite levels of qualification for school principals prior to appointment?  Would you be in favour of making it compulsory for all principals to attend induction and in-service/on-going training? |

The panel were unanimous in their feeling that attendance of school principals at induction and in-service training should be compulsory. At present it remains voluntary although the numbers attending remain very high. The panel stopped short however of recommending a mandatory level of experience or pre-requisite qualifications beyond that currently required i.e. a teaching qualification / registration and a minimum of five years’ experience. Indeed a number made the point that such a move toward mandatory qualifications could be counterproductive. Although in practice school principals tend to have a masters level qualification it is important that selection panels are not constrained as one contributor put it

*…in circumstances where the qualification, while at Ph.D. level, for example, has little connection with educational leadership/management.*

The other two questions produced quite a strong consensus. In terms of initiatives that are required to support school principals two distinct themes emerged.

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| **Fig 5.7 Themes from Delphi Round 2**  Enhance and extend the supports and training of principals provided through LDS and others.  Re-imagine and restructure the system of middle management in post primary schools. |

The panel were equally unanimous in their appraisal of the existing training and support programmes for school principals. There was strong support for the idea of expanding and extending the remit of LDS and to include training methods such as mentoring, coaching and shadowing.

Another strong message that emerged from within the Delphi Panel was the need to look at the rigidity of the existing contract for school principals. The fact that there is no fixed term on the contract of a principal and that there is no formal system in place for appraisal/evaluation of school principals is seen as regrettable.

The panel argued strongly for the introduction of a new and more flexible and enabling system of middle management which could offer increased autonomy to schools and school boards.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how the research question remained at the centre of all research activity through an iterative process which took place over a period of four years. My pilot study conducted in 2009-10 had concluded that there was a lack of data and research available on the issue of post primary school leadership and suggested further study was required to help understand the challenges facing post primary school principals, a large proportion of who were new to the position.

From the outset this study had to address the need for more reliable quantitative data. I addressed this need through the Dail question and a national survey. My initial data gathering showed that there had been a significant turnover in school leadership in recent years with a spike in new appointments in a three year period from 2008-2010. The statistics from the survey and from the Dail question suggested that only 43 % of the principals appointed each year had previously served as deputy principals. The quantitative data generated in the first two phases of the study shaped the questions to be used in the qualitative interviews and the Delphi Panel. The chapter has also shown how I used the interviews to delve behind the statistics into the world of the school principal. I have shown how the interviews helped me to develop a better understanding of the challenges they face in their role and how best the system can respond.

These interviews in turn led to a more focussed set of questions to be considered by the Delphi panel. The chapter has concluded by showing how the Delphi Process further refined my research findings to suggest three answers as to how the system can best respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals. The findings of the Delphi process suggest that the existing supports and training of principals provided through LDS and others need to be enhanced and extended. The responses of the panel also suggest a need to examine and redefine the role and contract of the Principal to make it more flexible. A specific recommendation to re-imagine and restructure the system of middle management in post primary schools is also made.

The ideas from round two of the Delphi Panel form the basis of the final chapter of this study. Chapter six provides the reader with a brief summary of recommendations and conclusions of the research and seeks to collate the many valuable lessons that have been learned by the researcher in the process. In final summary and conclusion chapter five will make a case for how this study can contribute to the general discourse of leadership in post primary schools with recommendations for future research and suggestions for policy initiatives that can enhance such further study.

1. **Discussion, recommendations and conclusion**

Chapter five told the story of the research chronologically and gave details of how the research evidence was gathered and analysed. This chapter focuses on the answers to the research question with precise recommendations as to *how can we best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for the leadership of learning.*

Whereas the previous chapter collated the research evidence and the insights gained during the gathering and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, this chapter draws conclusions from the study as a whole. In this chapter therefore I recall the themes within the literature review and align them with the research evidence and my own personal reflections.

The first section of the chapter presents an understanding of the current context of post primary principals and their needs in terms that emerged in the different phases of the research. I use evidence from the literature review and other phases of the research process to present a definition of the role of the school principal as a leader of learning and refer to research evidence which makes it clear that principals find it easier to deliver on this this role most effectively when they practice distribute leadership.

This chapter then addresses the responses to the needs of principals that have emerged from this research. I refer to three specific proposals. In the first recommendation I posit ways in which we can improve the existing models of leadership training available to include more mentoring and coaching. I refer to the need for the training of school principals to address specific issues in organisational effectiveness and the leadership of learning.

The second recommendation points to the need for an overhaul of the existing middle management structure in post primary schools in order to facilitate. I show evidence that the embargo which is in place on appointments in the public sector is having a negative impact on the ability of school principals to deliver on their core responsibility as leaders of learning.

In conclusion I recommend the broadening of the Irish research base in school leadership and suggest specific areas that need further study. Finally I discuss some of the limitations of this study and suggest how the issues addressed and revealed in this research could form the basis of further research and study.

**6.1 Understanding the context**

In establishing the theoretical context for my study I referred to literature which defines leadership as an interpersonal and social function (Stefkovich and Begley 2007, Ciulla 2003, Starratt 2005). I discussed how leadership effectiveness has been linked to the emotional intelligence of leaders (Goleman 2002). I showed how school principals are responsible for the quality of the delivery of education outcomes in schools and how they exercise their leadership both directly and indirectly to influence student learning (Leithwood et Al. 2006. The literature review argued that we must pay careful attention to how we attract, train and develop a cohort of professional school leaders if we want our system to deliver improved quality of educational outcomes (Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber 2010).

In the third chapter I explored the historical and legislative framework for the management of Irish Post Primary schools. I quoted one definition of the role of the school principal from the Public Sector Benchmarking Body report of 2002 which described the principal as the one who holds prime responsibility for the successful running of the school, who leads a team of staff and who is responsible for setting long-term strategies for the school (Dept. of Finance 2002). I also showed how the context of post primary principals in Ireland is defined by the Education Act (Gov. of Ire 1998). The Act describes the role of the school principal as a critical one for the success of the system and makes explicit reference to the principal as a leader of learning who is responsible for the creation of a school environment which is supportive of learning and promotes professional development of the teachers (Section 23). In the interviews it was made clear to me that the new rhetoric and curricular initiatives emerging from the Department of Education including *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES 2011) and *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle* by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA 2011) is increasing the emphasis on the understanding of the school principal as the leader of learning in their schools.

Throughout this study I have made reference to the most significant piece of literature on school leadership in Ireland, the OECD report *Improving School Leadership* (OECD 2008) which was informed by the country background report provided by LDS ( LDS 2007). A key feature of this report was the criticism of the lack of research and the poor levels of data on Irish school leadership (LDS 2007 p64). The first conclusion drawn early in this research process is that there is a need for more coordinated and targeted research in the area of school leadership in Ireland. The lack of research is an impediment to good planning. My study therefore began with a focus on quantitative data gathering.

**6.1.1 Implications of the high level of turnover 2006-2011**

In the first stages of my research I gathered and collated data that quantified the turnover in school leadership in recent years. This turnover has been spoken about informally for some time at conferences and meetings of school principals. There was ample anecdotal evidence available which suggested that there was a significant turnover from the middle of the last decade. The Dail question and the collation of data from the management bodies and NAPD enabled me to quantify the turnover. In the first place this study therefore provides research evidence to back up what many have spoken about and believed to be true.

The data presented in this study shows that more than 351 of the 730 post primary schools in Ireland are managed by school principals who were appointed in the last five years. In itself this is a significant number and suggests that almost half a generation of school leaders have retired in a very concentrated period of time. It will be some time before the system will be able to assess how significant this turnover will prove to be. What we do know is that this turnover has occurred at a time of change in society generally and that it has preceded and coincided with a period of significant reform of the school curriculum specifically. The large numbers of appointments has also increased the pressure on the systems in place which deliver support and training for school principals. It is unfortunate that during this time there has been a scaling back of services provided by Leadership Development for Schools.

A second important statistic that came from a further probing of this data showed that only 43 % of the principals who were appointed during this time had previously served as deputy principals. This leadership experience deficit is a defining feature of the context of post primary principalship today. More than half of those newly appointed have come to the position with relatively little management experience. A number of the principals I interviewed in later stages of the research pointed to a leadership experience deficit and said that they had relied heavily on the supports offered by the management bodies, by NAPD and by LDS. It is regrettable that LDS has been forced to scale back on what it offers to school leaders at a time of significant need. This is the second defining trait of the context of post primary school principals. The context is marked by increased pressure for reform in the curriculum at a time of significant turnover. The new principals, many of whom have little leadership experience require significant levels of support to enable them to deliver on the increased demands as leaders of curriculum reform in their schools.

**6.1.2 The conflicting pressures on the role of the principal**

The school principals I interviewed wove their own personal narratives into their responses as they articulated the challenges of the role as they experience it. A strong theme that emerged in the interviews was that principals see themselves as the link between the externally mandated policies and the day to day life and experiences in schools. Evidence from the interviews demonstrated how post primary principals experience significant tension and conflict as they try to operate at this interface.

In the literature review I showed how the tensions in the context of the post primary principal are increasing as the general pressure on schools to deliver improved educational outcomes becomes more intense. The context within which school principals operate is one that is characterised by expanding expectations and increased levels of scrutiny and responsibility (McNamara and O’Hara 2012, McNamara, O Hara, Boyle, and Sullivan 2009, McNamara and O’Hara, 2006). The international literature I cited suggests that in order to deliver on these increased expectations we need well trained and well-motivated teachers who are led by highly effective principals with the support of an effective system of middle management (Bush 2008).

The interviews showed evidence of that principals experience challenges as they try to manage increased responsibilities and sometimes contradictory expectations at a time of diminishing resources. The principals highlighted the critical importance of effective middle management. They identified the diminishing number of posts of responsibility in schools as a particular cause of concern. The problems with middle management constitute the third aspect of the context of serving school principals that requires a systemic response.

In the appendices I collated a list of the many problems that are faced day to day by school principals that emerged in the interviews (Appendix7). In the previous chapter I also referred to one of the members of the Delphi panel who summarised the challenge for the school principal to …*keep going in the face of almost non-stop challenge...principals have to uphold professional standards at all times. They have to maintain the commitment to quality at a time of austerity and distrust (even derision) of public servants’.*

**6.1.3 The Paradox of principalship**

A fourth defining trait of the context of the post primary principal that emerged throughout this study as a whole is that it is paradoxical. There is ample evidence available to show how the workload of post primary principals is increasing (JMB 2005) and that many principals are experiencing significant levels of stress. **83%** of the principals who responded to my survey agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘too much of my time is spent on paperwork or other non-educational matters. **56%** said that they had experienced a lot of anxiety in their first year as Principal. In the interviews the point was made very clearly that the fact that there are fewer post holders available in middle management positions has added an already growing administrative burden.

The survey provided evidence that a large number of serving post primary school principals are in their 40s. Some of the interview subjects expressed their concerns for the long term and spoke of the increasing impact of the emotional and personal demands of the position. The evidence suggests that the pressures on the role of principal are increasing and that many principals are concerned about how long they will be able to remain within the position.

But throughout this study, in the literature review (LDS2011), in the interviews and in the national survey especially, the school principals in my study display high levels of job satisfaction. In chapter three I referred to an empirical assessment of the attractiveness of the role of principal in the North and South of Ireland which was conducted jointly by LDS and RTU. In that research, **91%** of post primary principals surveyed reported being satisfied or very satisfied in their current role. In my interviews there was also evidence of job satisfaction. The role of the principal was described as *hugely rewarding* and others highlighted how they really valued the position because it offers the principal *a way of effecting change within a school.* While acknowledging the challenges the principals generally showed evidence of a strong commitment to the position. Principals certainly face unprecedented levels of challenge and pressure but school principals are also strongly supportive of the induction and in-service training they receive from LDS and others.

**6.1.4 Problems with middle management**

There appear to be high levels of job satisfaction but many principals are frustrated by the dis-connect that sometimes exists between what the system dictates in terms of organisational effectiveness and distributed leadership and the *real politic* of schools. A strong theme to emerge in the literature review was the link between organisational effectiveness and distributed leadership. The school principals in my study report a specific frustration with what they believe to be a dysfunctional middle management structure. There is a concern about the lack of training for school leaders (LDS 2007 p 52). The embargo on posts of responsibility is exacerbating this already difficult issue. The delphi panel identified this as the core issue for school principals. The delphi panel concluded that problems with the structure of middle management for post primary schools need to be resolved so that the principal can achieve success in the leadership of learning.

In the previous chapter I provided the data which specifically names the issues that need to be addressed. The loss of posts at AP and SD level are part of the moratorium which affects all public sector workers. The evidence from the *Dail* question and the responses to the survey revealed evidence that even when at full capacity the POR system was not achieving one of its core aims. The concerns expressed by the OECD about the relatively small pool of candidates for positions of principal suggest among other things that the middle management system has failed to produce a cohort of well trained and experienced middle leaders. The fact that procedures for filling what vacancies did arise in the past actively militated against the wishes of school principals. This is in part explained by a flaw within the structure which required that the middle management duties associated with posts of responsibility had to be inclusive. In practice this meant that all members of staff were theoretically equally competent and equally qualified for all middle management positions. Boards of management were required to fill available middle management vacancies with the most senior suitable candidate. This essentially meant that schools were not free to choose the best person for the job.

The delphi panel identified the structure of middle management as the single most challenging aspect of the context of the school principal. The embargo on posts has prevented schools from making any new appointments for almost two years now. What was already a problematic issue is now being made a lot worse. The panel were unanimous in recommending reform of the structure.

The context within which school principals operate therefore is best understood under four headings. The role of the principal is a challenging one as principals are required to operate at the interface between the sometimes conflicting realities of externally mandated reform and the local context of their own school. The core business of the school principal is the leadership of learning. The school principal in Ireland struggles to deliver on this agenda because of conflicts they manage and the frustrations of operating a dysfunctional middle management system. In spite of this obviously challenging context school principals consistently report high levels of job satisfaction.

**6.2 Responding to the needs of school principals**

This section draws from different phases of the research to clarify how the response to the needs of school principals should to be framed. This study suggests that the best response to these needs is in terms of improvements to existing systems of induction and training offered to school principals, the need to focus these supports around the concepts of organisational effectiveness and distributed leadership and the need to reform middle management in post primary schools.

**6.2.1 Improving and focusing existing models of training**

The interviews with principals and the survey produced evidence of very high levels of satisfaction with LDS and the supports provided to school principals. In the survey and in the interviews there is a consistent endorsement of the value of the support that principals receive from their deputies, their Boards, the Management Bodies and NAPD. Principals also consistently recognise the support of their peers in the structured training programmes run by LDS and the more informal contacts made at conferences and meetings of school principals. The more recently appointed principals I interviewed were emphatic about how they valued interaction with other principals at meetings, seminars and conferences.In the literature review I referred to research which showed that peer coaching and mentoring are popular with newly appointed principals and are regarded as highly effective methods of leadership training(Bush & Glover, 2003 Robertson 2008, Rich and Jackson 2005, Browne-Ferrigno and Muth, 2004).

In the national survey the principals who responded showed satisfaction ratings in excess of 80%. In the interviews the principals spoke highly of their experience on the *Misneach* programme. Those who had taken part in the *Forbairt* programme were especially positive about this program which targets more experienced school principals. The first response to the needs of principals that this study recommends is that the supports offered to school principals by LDS be further strengthened and expanded. The members of the delphi panel were strongly supportive of the idea of making attendance at these induction and in-service courses mandatory. This recommendation is in line with the suggestions in the Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life outlined in more detail in chapter three (DES2011).

In the interviews it is clear that school principals learn a lot by listening to each other. They can also learn a lot from the experiences of principals working in other schools. This study suggests changes that are needed in some of the content of the programmes. As well as changes to content a strong theme to emerge from within the study is the need for more innovative approaches to induction and training. The LDS study *School Leadership Matters* recommends innovative approaches to induction such as shadowing and more formal mentoring programmes for new principals. (LDS 2009)

Throughout the study principals report how contacts with other principals, and with those experienced principals who deliver the in-service and induction, are the most beneficial element of the existing programmes. The case has been made for the extension of the existing mentoring and coaching models. Principals in this study spoke very warmly of how they had benefitted from having a ‘buddy’ to ‘run things by’.

In addition to making attendance mandatory it is also important that the content of all these programmes should be aligned to focus on the leadership of learning. The *Forbairt* programme already places a strong emphasis on the centrality of teaching and learning in the leadership of schools and focuses on the provision of key strategies for leading learning and teaching. The evidence from this study suggests that there is a need for the content of the *Misneach* programme to be adjusted. My research suggests that *Misneach* must address the needs of the newly appointed principals who want to learn more about procedures and the administrative demands of the day to day running of their school. This content is what one interviewee referred to as the ‘nitty-gritty’ of school life and what has been referred to in the literature review of this study as organisational effectiveness.

**6.2.2 Training in organisational effectiveness**

A core theme in this study is the link between organisational effectiveness, distributed leadership and the leadership of learning. In chapter three when defining the context of school principals I referred to John Coolahan’s summary of the core tasks of the school principal as

‘…creating a supportive school climate, with particular emphasis on the curriculum and teaching and directed towards maximizing academic learning, having clear goals and high expectations for staff and students, establishing good systems for monitoring student performance, promoting on-going staff development and in-service, and encouraging strong parental involvement and identification with, and support for the goals of the school (Coolahan, 1994 page 42).

This statement provides a framework for the work of a school principal in terms of the leadership of learning. To effectively lead learning the principal needs to be able to master these tasks, to set goals and high expectations, to establish and monitor good systems of school administration and assessment and to unite parents and others around shared goals. To do this effectively the principal needs to engage a leadership team and work as a leader of other leaders.

As stated earlier, there was strong endorsement of the value of the current systems of training and induction provided by LDS in this study. Some of the principals I interviewed, however, were critical of the relative lack of time devoted to issues of organisational effectiveness. The interviews revealed a number of aspects of day to day school administration and management in which the newly appointed principal needs to be trained. The principals I interviewed spoke of the need for more input in areas such as timetabling, school finances, post reviews and more advice and sharing on how to conduct staff and Board meetings and the most efficient way to operate systems such as the On-Line Claims System (OLCS) for the payment of part time teachers and the Supervision and Substitution scheme (S+S). It is important therefore that the training addresses specific issues like how to conduct staff meetings, or alternative methods and systems for monitoring and assessing student performance and how to promote the professional development and in-service for the teaching staff.

In chapter two I referred to the NCSL commissioned study of the life stories of outstanding head teachers which spoke of how school principals learn from professional relationships with other teachers. The inspiration and role modelling of other principals was clearly highlighted as a very significant factor in their own growth by outstanding school leaders. The report strongly recommends that all aspiring school leaders need access to high quality coaching, mentoring and critical friendships (West Burnham 2009). Principals learn from each other. In the interviews there was also a strong endorsement of the value of peer coaching and mentoring models of training for serving school leaders.

**6.2.3 Distributive leadership / Reforming Middle management**

At all levels of my research there is evidence that the middle management system (POR) is failing school principals. One part of the answer to the question of *how can the system best respond to the needs of serving principals* is quite clear. The embargo on public sector appointments is having a major impact on the working of schools. All of the principals I interviewed had been affected by the moratorium on posts and spoke of the difficulties that are caused when they have to fill in and cover the duties of vacant posts.

As well as the reducing number of posts, the evidence from this study suggests that very nature of the system appears to be problematic. The current model which has seen teachers obtain posts of responsibility first without any job being specified or without a job description or contract or required training beyond a teaching qualification is unsustainable as a model. The *Country Background Report* prepared for the OECD noted an anomaly in the system in which led to the promotion to positions of responsibility on the basis of seniority (LDS 2007 p 35-37). The report also highlighted how the Posts of Responsibility structure in Irish post primary schools is not conducive to the creation of meaningful middle management teams (p. 65).

There was a strong consensus from the delphi panel that there is a need for reform of this middle management structure to support the work of school principals. The monies invested in the current system of middle management could undoubtedly be better and more efficiently invested in a reformed structure. One of the central reasons cited for the success of the Finnish Miracle in chapter two was the level of autonomy afforded at local level for the management of schools; this included management of finances. The Irish system is highly centralised. The members of the delphi panel suggested considering a reformed system where the schools were financed with leadership budgets to be deployed in accordance with local needs. Such a change could offer the opportunity for schools to develop a more positive middle management structure and offer meaningful leadership experience and preparation for more senior management roles.

The survey confirmed what many believed to be true anecdotally, i.e., significantly high numbers of newly appointed principals come to senior management without sufficient leadership training or management experience. The fact that more than half of those recently appointed as principals were not deputy principals and that many held no post of responsibility prior to appointment, points to the fact that it is not providing a stepping stone to senior management.

In chapter three I made reference to the research base that showed declining numbers of applications for vacant principalships in three quarters of the OECD countries (OECD 2008). Figures gathered in a survey by the JMB (JMB 2005) and later evidence collated by LDS showed that this trend has been replicated in Ireland (LDS 2007, 2011).

Because for so many years seniority was enshrined as the criteria for appointment to a middle management position, many serving post holders have never engaged in any form of professional development or leadership training. The popularity of courses such as *Tóraíocht*, and the proliferation of new diploma and Masters Programmes in school leadership now on offer from the Universities, would suggest that this may be changing. All seven Irish universities now provide a Masters level programme in school leadership and management. After only four years of existence the increased numbers of applications for *Tóraíocht* have prompted LDS to expand its provision by using seven regional education centres as venues to deliver their course to a wider cohort in 2012.

A more flexible and empowering middle management structure is required to allow those who are engaging in professional development to find a meaningful outlet for their leadership training. Evidence of an increased appetite for training and leadership suggest that the system should now respond. There are obvious challenges and impediments within the current context that would make such a paradigm shift toward more local autonomy over middle management structures highly problematic.

**6.2.4 The challenges of reform**

All serving school principals, deputy principals, assistant principals and special duties post-holders in our schools have contracts for the terms and conditions as they now stand, including pension rights. All of the principals I spoke to during this study and all of the members of the delphi panel agreed with me when I suggested that the funds currently devoted to the existing structures could be better spent locally by the principals and boards of management of individual schools.

But in the current climate it is unrealistic to believe that any new funds could be made available for such an initiative. With respect to the existing contractual obligations it is equally hard to see how the monies now going to post-holders could be diverted to a new scheme.

In the medium term at least it is most likely that principals and boards will be forced to work within the existing very restricted system. It should be noted that the Croke Park agreement did clarify the rights of school principals to change the responsibilities undertaken by Assistant Principals and Special Duties teachers. Principals also have the established right to review the schedule of responsibilities following consultation with staff and the post holders themselves.

The existing POR structure needs reform. When considered within the context of state finances and what is available for investment in education the system represents very poor value for money. The end of the Croke Park agreement seems to offer an opportunity for policy makers to engage in serious consideration of a new vision for school leadership. It is important in this regard that they recall the advice of the ESRI and others who have shown how the benefits of strategic interventions in education can considerably exceed their costs. Long term gains can be made from carefully targeted investment. (Levin, 2009 in Smyth and McCoy 2011)

**6.4 Recommendations**

In the final section of this study I highlight the need for a more comprehensive Irish research base in the area of school leadership and name a number of specific areas that require further study. In a closing discussion of some of the limitations of this study I make suggestions as to how the issues addressed and the evidence presented in this study could contribute to the on- going discourse on school leadership.

**6.4.1 Further research**

The importance of sound research evidence to inform policy development in education leadership is a strong theme throughout this study. It is made all the more important in the context of continued constraint and the likelihood of further cuts in expenditure on education. I quoted research from the OCED which pointed to the weakness of the level of Irish research on school leadership (OECD 2008). Hargreaves and others have shown how the lack of succession planning is an impediment to future reform (Hargreaves 2005). At its most basic level the system needs access to a complete and comprehensive set of statistics of school leadership to inform future planning?

The scope of this study has allowed for only a very cursory exploration of the cohort of serving school principals. My study did not produce anything like the level of detailed descriptive statistics that the system requires. I would recommend a skills and training audit of the cohort of existing school leaders from principal, deputy, assistant principal and special duties post holders. More information is needed, for example, to assess the level of proficiency in Literacy and Numeracy, Special Education Needs, ICT, Finance, and school development planning and curriculum development. In the context of cut backs and diminishing resources such information could contribute to an understanding of where in-service needs to be targeted.

There is no centralised data base that would show the number of school principals who hold masters level qualifications or any other post graduate qualifications in education leadership. Similarly, nothing is known about the level of training completed by serving deputy principals. A review of the training and qualifications of all senior and middle management post holders in schools would also prove beneficial as a guide to inform what the system requires. Such information could be gathered via the October returns and could be updated on an annual basis.

A formal centralised and especially dedicated school of education leadership research could help gather and process such data. This body could help to guide, promote and facilitate future research. The model for such a structure is already available in the shape of the NCSL in the UK which sponsors and coordinates education leadership study. A centralised college of school leadership in Ireland would serve the system directly by providing detailed information to policy makers to help prioritise whatever limited investment may be available in the future. It could also provide a structure for school principals and other school leaders to engage in research and professional development.

The seven universities, who now offer post graduate training in school leadership need to collaborate on this project for such an initiatve to succeed. The existing structures within LDS and NAPD could also be adapted and expanded to incorporate more of a research dimension and feed into this structure.

**6.4.2 Additional Themes and limitations of this study**

It would be a fair assessment that this study raises at least as many questions as have been answered. Throughout this research I have pointed to issues that were beyond the scope of this study. Although the response rates to the survey were relatively high there is a need for a more comprehensive survey to be carried out in order to reach more reliable conclusions.

I conducted only twelve interviews in support of this study. This means that I cannot claim any significant levels of generalizability or transferability regarding the findings of this study. The fact that the study was conducted over a period of years during which there was significant change in the context was also an impediment to the study. Some interviews, for example, were conducted before the embargo on posts of responsibility really took effect. The principals I interviewed were selected from across the sectors and contained some who were recently appointed and others with five, ten and even fifteen years of experience of senior management. On reflection I can also see the value of narrowing the interview cohort and restricting it to a group of principals in their first year. This would enable a study to track them over the course of the first critical years in the role.

In spite of these limitations it is hoped that this study will make a contribution to a developing body of research. Much of the findings of the research confirm the anecdotal evidence. It is hoped that the study can contribute to a much needed research base which can be used to inform future policy making.

**6.4.3 The value of this research**

I believe that this study has produced two valuable benefits. The first is in terms of my own professional development and learning as a research practitioner. In this section I also propose that this study can make a contribution to the existing discourse on school leadership in a time of change.

In the course of my two years of class work in DCU and the extensive reading of international and Irish research on education I have developed my understanding of the theory and practice of education research. From the initial lectures, class discussions and my first experiences during the pilot study, I have refined my interview techniques both in terms of conducting and recording the interviews and analysis of data. I have also had the opportunity to engage in a variety of qualitative and quantitative research techniques.

I have also developed my knowledge of the conceptual and practical issues of school leadership. In particular the four years of study on the programme provided a structure for an informed on-going reflection on the nature of the challenges of the role of the post primary principal within the system.

The pilot study directed my study to focus on school principals and to the question:

*How can we best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for the leadership of learning?*

In the course of this study I have answered this question drawing on a number of different sources. From the outset this study has revealed the lack of quality data available in this area. Surveying the vast corpus of international literature on school leadership allowed me to draw together some of the main findings of international research and apply these insights within the Irish context. Focussing on the Irish context I have uncovered some information which was not known beyond the level of anecdote. The much talked about turnover in school principals was collated and quantified. This data base is now available to the management bodies and other stakeholders.

In the interviews I amassed a set of qualitative data which enabled the principals’ voices to be heard in this process. The final stage of the delphi panel allowed me to provide a way for some of those who are centrally engaged in supporting the work of school principals to articulate their sense of the core issues that face school leadership. Synthesising the information from diverse strands meant I was able to propose a coherent answer to my research question which recommends responses to the needs of school principals. My research points to the need for a new vision of school leadership in the light of changing paradigm and increased pressures on the role of the school principal.

To respond to the needs of school principals I propose an extension of the existing structures for the induction and training of school principals. The principals value what is provided by LDS, NAPD and others. Attendance at training and in-service for new principals should be mandatory and should include an improved focus on the need for more practical training in school administration. This study also recommends the extension of the existing mentoring and coaching models which already forma part of these programmes.

The strongest need that is argued within this study is for an overhaul of the existing middle management system. Notwithstanding the current restraints that prevent the issue of a new contract at present, it is important that any new developments be guided by the core principles of learning centred, sustainable flexibility.

**6.4.4 Dissemination of findings**

When I recruited the members of my delphi panel, I agreed to provide their organisations with details of my research findings. It is proposed that elements of this study will be published in the NAPD executive report in the winter of 2012. As a member of the national executive of NAPD, I hope to bring the findings of my research top bear on discussions on how the executive can best support the needs of its members. I have also given undertakings to others who work with school leadership in Leadership development for Schools, the JMB and the ACCS.

Already some elements of this study have been presented at research conferences. I have had a number of articles published in the last two years which have drawn heavily on the research. These articles have appeared in the national executive report published by NAPD (Cuddihy 2010, 2011); the journal of the European School Heads Association (ESHA 2010), the report on the Limerick /Clare research conference (LEC 2011) and the Jesuit Quarterly review (Studies 2012).

Once completed I will present the findings of this study at the national conference of Education Studies Association of Ireland

**6.4.5 Concluding remarks**

The study set out to explore the world of the school principal and to answer the question;

*How can we best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for the leadership of learning?*

In this chapter I have concluded this study by outlined detailed answers to this question that have emerged from the research. I have shown how these answers emerged from a synthesis of the themes within the literature review, my personal reflections and the new data generated and analysed using mixed research methods.

School principals work at an extremely pressurised and demanding interface. The context of the school principal is best understood in terms of the leadership of learning in the school. Every day school principals face the challenge of satisfying what are often contrasting demands for curricular reform and improvement made by the state and the Department of Education on one side and the day to day needs of school administration and the organisation of the teaching staff and student body on the other. Echoing the language of leadership and organisational effectiveness school principals achieve success as leaders of learning when they practice distributed leadership. For the school principal in an Irish post primary school, this is made all the more difficult by the fact that the middle management system is not functioning. The embargo on appointment is making what was already a failing system now appear to be crumbling toward extinction. Into this context a whole new generation of school leaders have begun their career in the last five years.

The needs of school principals, therefore, are defined in terms of the need for on-going support and leadership training, most especially in organisational effectiveness. The existing structures need to be reinforced and strengthened to meet the increasing needs expressed by the principals in this survey for more support in the area of leadership of learning and organisational effectiveness. I have shown how school principals value the supports and in-service offered by LDS and the Management bodies. These courses should be mandatory and should include more elements of coaching and mentoring.

There is also clear need for reform of the middle management system in post primary schools. The embargo on public sector appointment which remains in place is effectively killing off what was an already dysfunctional system. It urgently needs to be replaced if school principals are to have chance of successfully delivering on the ambitious curricular reform agenda being championed by the Minister for Education and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

I have argued for the need for more research in the area of school leadership. I have proposed how this could be addressed by the establishment of a centralised college of school leadership along the lines of the NCSL in the UK. Such a structure could harness the benefits of the vast and growing interest that is being shown by teachers and serving school leaders in post graduate study and research. Such a college of leadership could operate within the existing structures of LDS and or NAPD and could help to gather the statistics and research data needed to inform and guide future policy and planning in school leadership.

The chapter has concluded by exploring some of the limitations of the study and has shown how elements of this study will be dispersed. It is the hope of the author that, in spite of its limitations, this study will contribute to the on-going discourse around school leadership.

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**A list of Appendices**

1. A list of abbreviations used
2. The Dail Question and response
3. The national survey part one.
4. The national survey part two.
5. A description of the interview subjects .
6. Resource issues referred to in the interviews
7. The Delphi Panel.
8. Delphi round one summary.
9. Letter of invitation and consent

**APPENDIX ONE**

*Abbreviations used*

ACCS Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools [www.accs.ie](http://www.accs.ie)

DES Department of education and Skills [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)

ESRI Economic and Social Research Institute [www.esri.ie](http://www.esri.ie)

ICT Information Communications Technology

IPPN Irish Primary Principals Network [www.ippn.ie](http://www.ippn.ie)

IVEA Irish Vocational Education Association [www.ivea.ie](http://www.ivea.ie)

JMB Joint Managerial Board [www.jmb.ie](http://www.jmb.ie)

LDS Leadership Development for Schools [www.lds21.ie](http://www.lds21.ie)

NAPD National Association of Principals and deputies [www.napd.ie](http://www.napd.ie)

NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)

NCSL *National College for School Leadership* [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org)

NERC National Education Convention

OECD Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

RAP Research Associate programme

WSE/MLL Whole School Evaluation / Management Leadership and Learning

**APPENDIX TWO**

Dail Questions

Available from http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2010/05/05/00308.asp

***Question number 398.******Deputy Ruairí Quinn***

*[Information on Ruairí Quinn](http://www.oireachtas.ie/members-hist/default.asp?housetype=0&HouseNum=30&MemberID=985)[Zoom on Ruairí Quinn](http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2010/05/05/member985.asp)asked the* ***Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Skills*** *[Information on Mary Coughlan](http://www.oireachtas.ie/members-hist/default.asp?housetype=0&HouseNum=30&MemberID=247)[Zoom on Mary Coughlan](http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2010/05/05/member247.asp)the number of post primary principals appointed in the years 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009; the number of teachers appointed each year by school type that is, vocational school, voluntary secondary school and community schools; the number of those appointed principals who were previously deputy principals; and if she will make a statement on the matter.* ***[17828/10]***

*Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Mary Coughlan):[Information on Mary Coughlan](http://www.oireachtas.ie/members-hist/default.asp?housetype=0&HouseNum=30&MemberID=247) [Zoom on Mary Coughlan](http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2010/05/05/member247.asp)**The following is the information requested by the Deputy.*

|  |
| --- |
|  |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Numbers of Teachers*  ***Year*** | ***Voluntary Secondary*** | ***Community & Comprehensive*** |
| *2005* | *13,412* | *4,128* |
| *2006* | *13,362* | *4,110* |
| *2007* | *13,444* | *4,201* |
| *2008* | *13,499* | *4,247* |
| *2009* | *13,621* | *4,319* |

*Information on the number of teachers appointed each year by school type is not readily available for Secondary and Community/ Comprehensive schools.*

*The number of Whole Time Teacher equivalents for each of the years is:*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Year*** | ***Number of Principal Appointments*** | | ***Number who held a DP Allowance*** | |
|  | ***Secondary*** | ***C&C*** | ***Secondary*** | ***C&C*** |
| *2005* | *40* | *6* | *14* | *3* |
| *2006* | *29* | *7* | *13* | *3* |
| *2007* | *30* | *7* | *13* | *1* |
| *2008* | *41* | *11* | *16* | *7* |
| *2009* | *49* | *20* | *23* | *10* |

***399.******Deputy Ruairí Quinn***

*[Information on Ruairí Quinn](http://www.oireachtas.ie/members-hist/default.asp?housetype=0&HouseNum=30&MemberID=985)[Zoom on Ruairí Quinn](http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2010/05/05/member985.asp)asked the* ***Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Skills*** *[Information on Mary Coughlan](http://www.oireachtas.ie/members-hist/default.asp?housetype=0&HouseNum=30&MemberID=247)[Zoom on Mary Coughlan](http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2010/05/05/member247.asp)the number of principals her Department estimates will be needed in the years 2010 to 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter.* ***[17829/10]***

*Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Mary Coughlan):[Information on Mary Coughlan](http://www.oireachtas.ie/members-hist/default.asp?housetype=0&HouseNum=30&MemberID=247) [Zoom on Mary Coughlan](http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2010/05/05/member247.asp)**There are a number of contributory variables in relation to the demand for new school principals. Foremost of these is the number of retirements among serving principals of which non-compulsory retire[232]ments is the biggest factor. While the number of non-compulsory retirements in respect of the next ten years is not known, the recent retirement trends of principal teachers may be indicative.*

*Retirement figures for principal teachers for the past three years are:*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Year*** | ***Primary*** | ***Post-Primary*** |
| *2007* | *167* | *54* |
| *2008* | *173* | *56* |
| *2009* | *321* | *100* |

*This is based on Department held data with a pro-rata adjustment to include VEC schools.*

*The number of new schools and school closures will also impact on the demand for new principals. The Forward Planning Section of my Department has carried out a study of the country to identify the areas where, due to demographic changes, there may be a requirement for significant additional school provision at both primary and post-primary levels over the coming years. This study has been conducted using data from the Central Statistics Office, the General Register Office and the Department of Social & Family Affairs with reference to recent schools’ enrolment data. The study indicates that the requirement for additional primary provision in years 2010, 2011 and 2012 is likely to be greatest in more than 40 identified locations across the country based on significant changes to the demographics of those areas.*

*Forward Planning Section is in the process of carrying out detailed analysis and reports for each of these locations in order to identify the school accommodation requirements for each area up to and including the school year 2014/2015. When the required reports have been completed for the initial areas Forward Planning Section will continue to work on preparing reports on a priority basis for the remainder of the country. Overall primary and post primary accommodation requirements will be analysed as part of this process.*

**APPENDIX 3**

**SURVEY FROM NAPD Executive report (** PART 1)

*Thank you for taking time to complete this short questionnaire. It should take no more than 5 minutes to complete. All data gathered will be used exclusively for the purpose of this research project. This research aims to assist policy makers and decision makers in the area of school leadership. To do this I aim to compose a snap shot of the cohort of school Principals currently serving in all three sectors. It is hoped that the data could help to inform and improve the quality of recruitment, induction, and on-going support for all of us who work as school Principals.*

***Please circle the appropriate answers***

***Your gender:*** *Male Female*

***Age group***

*60yrs + 50-59yrs 49-40yrs 39-30yrs < 30yrs*

***In which sector is your school ?***

*V.E.C. Vol. Secondary Community/Comprehensive*

***How many years have you been a school Principal?***

*1-5 years 6-10 years 10 +years*

***What post did you hold immediately prior to appointment?***

*Deputy Principal Assistant Principal Special Duties Post Other*

***Were you promoted from within your school or from another school? (Circle one)***

*Promoted from within Employed from another school*

**APPENDIX 4**

SURVEY FROM NAPD PART 2

***Please rank each of the sentences below according to the extent to which they reflect your experience to date. Circle one on each line.***

1. ***I strongly disagree 2. I disagree 3. Not sure 4. I agree 5. I strongly agree***

*My previous experience prepared me well for the job of Principal:*

*1. 2. 3. 4. 5.*

*I experienced a lot of anxiety in my first year as Principal.*

*1. 2. 3. 4. 5.*

*During my first year(s) I was encouraged not to rock the boat in my school*

*1. 2. 3. 4. 5.*

*I have completed an LDS course*

*1. 2. 3. 4. 5.*

*I receive good feedback and support from the BOM and or the Trustees of my school:*

*1. 2. 3. 4. 5.*

*During my first year(s) as a Principal I felt quite isolated.*

*1. 2. 3. 4. 5.*

*Too much of my time is spent on paperwork or other non educational matters*

*1. 2. 3. 4. 5.*

*I was well aware of the nature of the challenges of Principalship when I applied*

*1. 2. 3. 4. 5.*

*I found the LDS courses very helpful*

*1. 2. 3. 4. 5.*

***APPENDIX 5***

A description of the 12 interview subjects .

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Gender* | *Male*  *7* | *Female*  *5* |
| *Sector* | *Community Comprehensive*  ***5*** | *Voluntary Secondary*  ***4*** | *VEC*  ***3*** |
| *Length of Service* | *<4 yrs*  ***7*** | *4-10 yrs*  ***4*** | *>10yrs*  ***1*** |

1. The principal of an all-girls voluntary secondary school of 650 girls appointed in 2004
2. The principal of a Community school of 600 students appointed in 2005
3. The principal of a VEC school appointed in 2007
4. The principal of an all-girls school of 800 student appointed in 2011
5. The principal of a VEC school appointed in 2010
6. The principal of a Comprehensive school of 700 appointed in 2005
7. The principal of a Community school of 300 appointed in 2008
8. The principal of a Community school appointed in 2009
9. The principal of a mixed voluntary secondary school first appointed in 1994
10. The principal of a Comprehensive school of 800 appointed in 2009
11. The principal of a girls voluntary secondary school appointed in 2010
12. The principal of a VEC school of 1,000 appointed in 2009.

***APPENDIX 6***

**A summary of resource issues referred to in the interviews**

The job is changing BUT people aren’t !

The pressure of Inspection / Evaluation makes things more challenging

I took over form a parlour of nuns who left no structure behind them

The sheer complexity of the job

The effect of the embargo on appointments to posts and non-teaching staff

Increased expectation around SEN

After a period of good service LDS has been scaled back. THIS MUST BE REVERSED

Financial pressures

Different constituencies within the staff who want different things

A changing and challenging student cohort.

Increases in the Pupil teacher ratio

Increased parental expectation

Challenges of how to deal with the underperforming teacher

The sheer workload

The principal as plate spinner

The expectation that the principal must be a magician

Pressure to lead curricular change

LCA, LCVP and Trans Yr are now part of the mainstream.

New initiatives; Literacy and numeracy and The new Junior Certificate

Union directives to teachers mean the principal is the middle man for cuts

Too much time is spent doing other people’s work

The challenge to maintain school discipline

Competition from other schools, lack of cooperation

Pressures and frustration within staff and parent body

**APPENDIX 7**

The contributors to the Delphi Panel.

The CEO of *Ceist*

The CEO of *Le Cheile*

The CEO of *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment*

The Jesuit Education delegate

The Gen Sec. of the *JMB*

The Gen Sec of *ACCS*

The director of *Limerick Education Centre*

The Director of *Dublin West Education Centre*

The Director of *CURAM*

The National Coordinator and members of the team who deliver courses through *Leadership Development of Schools* (LDS)

The Director and members of the executive of the *National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals*. (NAPD)

**APPENDIX 8**

DELPHI Round one summary.

***What is the single biggest challenge facing the serving Post Primary school principal within the system today?***

1. *How sustainable is school leadership? Just to keep going is a challenge*
2. *Making time and having energy to lead learning when all other demands are increasing*
3. *Trying to promote positive practice and maintain standards in a culture that restricts.*
4. *Principals seem to have increasing responsibilities with a corresponding lack of authority and resources to deliver on them.*
5. *Managing relationships and leading people when morale is low, challenges are increasing. It is hard to uphold professional standards and maintain the commitment to quality at a time of austerity and distrust ( even derision) of public servants*

***Many Principals express concerns that the present middle management structure is not fit for purpose. Do you agree?***

1. *The system which was already questionable is now all but decimated.*
2. *POR did not deliver what was intended. It was expected to lead to something more positive. Although intended as a stepping stone it has now run aground*
3. *This is THE issue for school Principals. It is only when this issue is resolved that the principal can have any chance of getting into core business, the leadership of learning*
4. *There is a lack of vision. A new structure requires a vision and should provide meaningful leadership experience to those who want it.*

***What one initiative would you like to see policy makers consider in the area of Post Primary school leadership?***

1. *A fundamental re-think of the issue of school leadership. A new vision*
2. *The introduction of flexible, enabling, fixed term contracts at middle and senior management*
3. *More structured mentoring and coaching of school leaders. A formal structure to allow principals learn from other principals*
4. *Attendance at induction and on-going training needs to be mandatory. Perhaps pre-requisite*
5. *Strengthen and support the work of LDS and the management Bodies in the area of leadership succession, development, training and support*

**APPENDIX 9**

Letters of invitation and consent

A Chara

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research as part of my study for a professional Doctorate in Education. The propose of the interview is to help me in composing an answer to my research question *How can the education system best understand and respond to the needs of serving and aspiring school principals in a context of increased demands and explicit requirements for leadership and the leadership of learning.*

The interview will take the form of a structured conversation during which I will invite you to respond to the following open questions.

1. What is your sense of the job of the principal as it is now? Do you enjoy it? Is it getting easier / more difficult?
2. How would you assess the level of induction and ongoing training and support you have received in advance?
3. What are the most significant challenges you face in your role?
4. How could these concerns be best addressed?

With your consent the interviews will be recorded to enable me to represent your views accurately. Although the data from the interviews will form part of my research paper your responses will be presented in my thesis anonymously and neither you nor the name of your school will be identified. The data will be stored in the college for a period of five years and will then be destroyed

Sincere thanks once again for your willingness to help me in what I hope will be a valuable exercise.

**Consent Form**

I have read and understood the conditions of my involvement in these interviews and give my consent to participate and to have the interview recorded for the purposes of this study.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_