

The impact of policy on leadership practice in the Irish Educational context; Implications for research.

Keywords: Policy development, policy enactment, leadership, middle leadership, professional learning.

Introduction

The impact of policy on leadership practice cannot be understood without linking it to the wider socio-political context (Bell & Stevenson, 2015). Therefore historical, political and economic factors influencing educational policy development will be considered at the outset of this paper. Following this an exploration of the current educational policy landscape in the Republic of Ireland will be explored before considering its impact on educational leadership practice in primary and post primary schools. Following analysis of the above, implications for future research will be considered which may be of interest to policy makers and those involved in leadership practice at all levels of the educational system as they continue to focus on policy analysis and enactment. For the purpose of this paper leadership practice will be conceived in the broadest sense to include a practice that is formal and informal, individual and collaborative and positional and non-positional.

Socio- Political Context

Historically there has been a lack of legislation governing policy and practice in Irish schools until the emergence of The Education Act (Ireland, 1988). However, the teaching profession has traditionally been highly regarded and trusted in terms of teaching, learning and leadership with Ireland often being referred to as ‘the land of scholars and saints’. Noteworthy, an

examination of the complex tapestry that is the Irish educational system led the OECD (2008, 340) to describe it as *'fragmented, small – scale and voluntarily managed'* – a system very different to that in most OECD countries, a system with potential challenges for leadership practice. Additionally, around 2008 Ireland was in a deepening economic recession which resulted in pay cuts for all staff, loss of leadership and management posts in schools largely due to incentivised early retirements, and a moratorium on new posts for many senior, middle leadership and management roles. Overall there was a 7% reduction in the education budget from 2009-2012, once again impacting on leadership practice in schools.

Nevertheless, education was seen as the way out of the recession, with a focus on improving educational standards to compete in a globalised knowledge economy, an economy characterised by a growing interdependence among the world's economies through increased mobility for workers and shared information through digital technology. Education in this context is perceived as an economic resource. Policy text in Ireland evidenced a focus on education as economic output with literacy and numeracy skills seen as “essential for the rebuilding of our economic prosperity” (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2011, p. 15). This narrowing of focus in education policy from viewing education as a public good to one where education was seen as an export industry plausibly led to a changed relationship between teachers and the state (Codd, 2005), again impacting on leadership practice in schools where principals were expected to ensure enactment of these new policies.

A plethora of education policies followed and while there is “*no single reading of policy texts*” (Taylor, 1997: 26) the changing policy landscape was generally seen by teachers and leaders as policy borrowing from other countries who had moved towards an increasing emphasis on accountability, productivity, and performativity in a bid to achieve economic prosperity. The

level of trust moved from “a perception of integrity” (Bottery, 2006: 20) to one based on performativity which tends to exist in a climate of distrust (Sachs, 2006). One example of performativity was the introduction of mandatory, non-contact extra hours for teachers (33 hours outside of school time), as part of the ‘Croke Park Agreement’ (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2010), and subsequent Haddington Road Agreement (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2013); names given to public sector negotiations that emphasise increased performance management. Principals came under increasing pressure to negotiate with staff the allocation of these additional hours and many at middle leadership felt that “ there were discernible tensions as some of the principals...feared that the tenets of the Croke Park Agreement ...would adversely affect volunteerism and the spirit of collegiality in schools” (O’Donovan, p257). Another example of performativity includes measuring performance against international benchmarks like PISA resulting in the Incidental Inspection Findings Report (DES Inspectorate, 2010) outlining concerns regarding literacy and numeracy attainment following a drop in the 2009 PISA results. Also, a significant gap in literacy levels between disadvantaged schools and the national average was highlighted (Kennedy, 2013). This performativity coupled with Ireland’s economic bailout and a move towards strategic leadership by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) created a ‘perfect storm’ (Hislop, 2011, Conway and Murphy, 2013) resulting in increased accountability within the teaching profession and in particular those in leadership roles. There followed an increased emphasis on the use of international benchmarks to compare and monitor performance (e.g. PISA, TIMMS, PIRLS), along with reporting standardised test results for students to the DES at primary and post-primary level. Despite the fact that the DES has resisted the publication of ‘League Tables’ based on numbers of students in second level schools who gain entry to Third Level, the presentation of such tables each year by national newspapers, places increased pressure on school leaders to retain a balanced provision for all students and in particular to ensure that

students with special needs are provided with the resources to allow them maximise their potential, none of which is reflected in such tables

Accountability was further evidenced by a need to comply with regulations and professional norms devised by the Teaching Council of Ireland (TCI), all resulting in the existing social partnership between the various policy actors (for example the DES, teacher unions, Teaching Council, parents and principal bodies) coming under pressure and teachers feeling disillusioned and disengaged (Stevenson, 2014). Important to note here is that heretofore social partnership was very influential in the Irish context with unions influencing many political decisions related to education and educational leadership. At the same time both curriculum development and educational legislation are very centralised “*with the Department of Education exercising a great deal of direct and indirect control over most aspects of the system*” (Coolahan, 2011, p. 144) arguably putting pressure on leadership practice within and across schools. An awareness of this wider socio-political context is important to facilitate an understanding of the current educational policy landscape and its impact on leadership practice (Taylor, 1997), which will now be explored

Current educational policy landscape

This section of the paper will provide some background information related to the primary and post-primary school system along with an explanation of current policy development practices to provide context to leadership practice in Irish schools. Further context will be provided through exploration of the increasing emphasis on professional learning and curricular reform in schools adding to the new and challenging leadership practices in schools. This will be followed by a discussion of a new focus on leadership and distributed leadership in Irish schools.

Background

Teacher education programmes have been “over-subscribed, attracting a very high calibre of entrant” up until the last two years where there are less numbers applying for post-primary teaching and many primary teachers taking extended career break leading to somewhat of “a ‘crisis’ in teacher education recruitment and retention” (O’Doherty & Harford, 2018, p. 654) thus impacting on leadership practice in schools. There are similar concerns with regard to applications for principalship in particular – something highlighted in a recent review Coolahan et al. (2017) carried out by a group of academics and commissioned by IPPN and NAPD. This report notes that “*Indeed, there is evidence that the post of principal is not now attractive to many high- quality teachers, who see it as an unwelcome distraction from their core educational interests*” (p.184). The authors emphasise the need for a re-imagining the role of the principal and recommend “*remedy is needed in this area and in the characterisation of responsibility posts in schools if the aspired-for quality of educational leadership is to be realised*” (p. 184).

Total responsibility for governance (other than in the Educational Training Board (ETB) sector) is delegated to voluntary Boards of Management with local government playing a relatively minor role. Historically the church, were quite happy to “*concede to the state the responsibility for laying down regulations with regard to curricula, examinations and so on*” (p. 144). The state for its part did not challenge the church’s ownership and control of schools in matters such as teacher appointments and school ethos. This continues to be the situation today in the majority of Irish schools which are privately owned and managed, but state funded. While this affords autonomy to leadership practice it also leads to the unusual situation whereby the employer, (in most cases the voluntary Board of Management) is not the paymaster or regulator of the professional conditions of its employees.

Another significant factor when considering the policy environment in which Irish Education exists is that 57% of Irish primary schools are led by principals with full-time teaching responsibility. There are 3961 schools in total; 3115 primary schools, 135 special schools and 711 second level schools (DES, 2017). There is increasing lobbying from teaching principals in these small schools given the dual nature of their role; teaching and leadership and management, as evidenced in the recent submission by the National Principals Forum (2018) to the Joint Oireachtas Committee of Education and Skills. The reduction in promoted posts of responsibility during the recession has plausibly resulted in many small schools struggling to source teachers willing to undertake the role of principal. This background information along with an understanding of current policy development practices explored in the next section aims to provide context to aid understanding of the impact of policy on leadership practice.

Policy development practices

Traditionally, policy initiatives tended to originate at government level in the DES or through agencies such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment or the Inspectorate. These policy initiatives are then 'rolled out' and supported nationally through the department funded support services. More recently, a three-year (2016-2019) Action Plan for Education (DES, 2016) was launched by the then education Minister, Richard Bruton. This plan formed the blueprint for policy development and is reviewed each year. Action Plans 2018 (DES, 2018) and Action Plan 2019 (DES, 2019) by the new Minister for Education, Minister McHugh, include numerous targets related to performance, arguably reflecting the continued movement towards the global education reform movement (GERM) (Sahlberg, 2007) and the importance of economic capital.

However, there is also a particular focus on “*strengthening leadership and promoting professionalisation*” (DES, 2017a, p. 37) and “*collaborative leadership*” (DES, 2019, p. 32) along with promoting innovative and excellent practice in schools. Funding is available to schools to form clusters to collaborate and work together on projects related to teaching and learning. Minister Bruton when launching the Digital Schools Excellence Fund (SEF) (2017) stated that: “*Truly transformative change does not come from the centre but from the ground up, schools and teachers working together and sharing good practice*”. The emphasis on a bottom-up approach to policy development is a fundamental part of the 2017 three-year action plan. However, the resourcing of this bottom up approach in terms of equipping leadership at school level to actively lead initiatives will require significant investment as the involvement of school leaders in leadership activities beyond their own school has not been a common feature of Irish education. Noteworthy is the recent call for evaluation of the SEF by the DES (DES, 2019). This evaluation may provide clarity around impact on leadership practice and necessary professional learning supports going forward.

Professional learning and curricular reform

Historically there has not been a great emphasis on ongoing professional learning in teaching in Ireland. Granted many teachers engage voluntarily in professional learning but it is not a requirement for career advancement and the absence of any mandatory qualification for appointment to senior school leadership is an example of this lack of prioritisation of ongoing learning in the profession. Teachers and leaders tend to embark on new practices based on the opinions or experiences of colleagues (Mathews, 2010), as they appear to be deemed more feasible, accessible, practical and trustworthy than independently exploring research-based practices (Landrum et al., 2002; Carter and Wheldall, 2008). The increasing emphasis on

professional learning and curricular reform adds to the pressure of leading teaching and learning of a school community whilst teaching full time. This was reflected in the recent reluctance to comply with a new initiative (Droichead, Irish word meaning bridge) which would see principals evaluate and advise NQTs in their first year of teaching. This is conceivably a great cause for concern given that much evidence points to an effective leader as “a type of leader who paid considerable attention to the teaching and learning aspects of schools” (Gumus, Bellibas, Esen & Gumus, 2018, p. 29).

However, Morgan and Sugrue (2005) argued that “*Consideration should be given to a partnership with a college/university not only to avail of appropriate expertise but also with a view to accreditation of programmes*” (p.8). In 2016, the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), which was set up in September 2015, tendered for a post graduate programme for aspiring school leaders and a consortium of three universities (University College Limerick, National University of Ireland Galway and University College Dublin currently deliver and accredit the Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership (PGDL). Practitioners (school leaders) are involved in the delivery of this programme. This cooperative initiative recognises the complementary roles of academic expertise and practitioner experience in the delivery of professional learning for aspiring school leaders and will conceivably impact on leadership practice in schools going forward.

Other policies in recent years impacting on leadership practice include those from the TCI that have placed additional emphasis on the education and development of teachers beyond their initial teacher education. The development of a national framework (TCI, 2016) for teachers’ learning called Cosán (Irish word for pathway) acknowledges and promotes teachers’ learning and that “all teachers are leaders” (p. 4), leaders of their own learning and potentially that of

their colleagues through ‘Droichead’, along with being leaders of their own classrooms. This arguably has implications for those in leadership roles to facilitate and encourage all teachers to practise leadership of learning, not always an easy task in a culture “where isolated practice still predominates” (O’Sullivan, 2011, p.112).

Affecting post primary teachers in their engagement with professional learning is the overriding influence of the terminal examination at second level as a measure of success or failure. The one-dimensional type of learning being promoted in second level schools was commented on by the Chief Inspector Dr Harold Hislop when he posed the question “*Shouldn’t we ask whether the emphasis in our practice is tilted towards a learning dominated by exam success or towards the development of deeper learning*”? (2015, p.7). He went on to highlight the importance of “*a wide range of teaching strategies, including those that promote problem solving as well as creative and critical thinking*” (p.12). This tension arguably reflects the accountability and performativity agenda described earlier and places increasing pressure on leadership practice in terms of policy enactment related to increased results to enhance the knowledge economy or a broader focus of education as a public good.

The emphasis on the terminal exam was arguably filtering down to primary schools with evidence of students being “prepared” for entry to second level. Concern about a one-dimensional teaching methodology approach that did not recognise the many learning styles of students, has led to curricular reform at junior cycle level (JCT, 2014) with a corresponding examination of leaving certificate content and assessment currently underway. The reform of the Junior Cycle curriculum and assessment began on a phased in approach September 2014, and features revised subjects and short courses, a focus on literacy, numeracy and key skills, and new approaches to teaching, assessment and reporting. Schools have more freedom to design junior cycle programmes that meet the learning needs of all students with a new

certificate known as The Junior Cycle Student Award (JCSA) awarded after three years of study. This revision has had a difficult birth requiring teacher collaboration and discussion about what is good quality learning. It has challenged teachers to consider their own professional learning needs and has to some degree opened the doors of classrooms. . . School leaders are also challenged to enact their role as a “príomh oide” (Irish term for principal teacher), prioritising their role as both lead learners themselves and as key agents in leading the learning of both staff and students (King, 2011). This is evidenced in the relatively recent emphasis on instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), which connects leadership and learning (Bush & Glover, 2014) by placing the leadership and management of learning as a core activity in schools. This challenges leadership practice to look at leadership of curriculum and instruction in a variety of new ways including engaging students meaningfully and making them active participants in their learning (Flynn, 2014), thus highlighting the need for policy to focus on leadership.

A focus on leadership

The establishment of the CSL in 2015 was a recognition of the vital role of school leaders in mediating and enacting policy initiatives and impacting on the quality of teacher and student learning in schools. The fact that the centre is a cooperative enterprise combining the two professional associations (The Irish Primary Principals Association (IPPN) and The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)) is a significant development and a recognition of the centrality of leadership to school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2004).

CSL has an overarching role in promoting and quality assuring professional learning for school leaders at all levels. The concept of leadership that underpins the development of a model of

professional learning currently being researched by CSL, is one that is transformational and instructional in nature. The findings of Day and Sammons (2016) argue that “successful principals draw differentially on elements of both instructional and transformational leadership”(p. 253) to affect improvement to learning outcomes for students, and this is at the heart of what CSL sees as effective school leadership. Over the past three years CSL has launched a formal Mentoring and Coaching support service for school leaders as well as commissioning a new post graduate diploma for aspiring school leaders in cooperation with three third level institutions. The impact of this on practice is reflected in an independent evaluation report (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2017) on the work of CSL:

The establishment of CSL in 2015 gave formal recognition not only to school leadership, its role and importance, but also to the need to examine, review, revise and reform how leadership and leaders are supported throughout their Career” (p. 92).

In recognition of the importance of professional learning the Centre is currently drafting a professional learning continuum for school leadership, describing the levels at which leadership exists in schools from teacher leadership, through middle leadership, aspiring senior leaders, established leaders and system leaders. Essential components of a model of professional learning have also been identified and build upon the model of learning articulated by the Teaching Council in Cosán.

In 2016 the Irish Inspectorate developed a Quality Framework for Schools (DES, 2016) which provides a set of standards for two dimensions of the work of schools -teaching and learning and leadership and management. This framework is used by the inspectorate to guide external inspection of schools, but it is also intended to support a wide range of activities in the system

such as professional reflection by both teachers and leaders, informing professional development programmes and activities, recruitment and accountability. Both the formation of CSL and the publication of a set of standards that describe what good leadership looks like in Irish primary and post primary schools, has given a new impetus to leadership development policy and has provided additional workload and pressures on leadership practice in schools. This increasing burden on the school principal has arguably led to the concept of distributed leadership within schools.

Distributed leadership in Irish schools

In Irish education, the concept of distributed leadership is relatively new. The increasing myriad of tasks and responsibilities have left little time for principals to lead, mediate and contextualise policy initiatives for their specific school. Two recent circulars on leadership and management in primary and post-primary schools (DES, 2017; DES, 2018) recognised the necessity to distribute leadership beyond that of the principal and that

Leadership in a school context, creates a vision for development leading to improvements in outcomes for learners, and is based on shared values and robust evaluation of evidence of current practice and outcomes. In this way, leadership is distributed throughout the school as a key support for student learning (p. 4).

These circulars emphasise the delegation to distributive leadership and mirrors the development of a concept of a school principal delegating specific bounded tasks to more participatory and collaborative approaches to leadership across the school. However, the benefits of distributed and collaborative leadership can be overemphasized and oversimplified

(Hickey, 2017; Youngs 2017). Central to its development is an engagement with its meaning and the micro-politics related to same (Youngs, 2017). While school leadership roles may “demand that responsibility and leadership be shared across the school community” (Hickey, 2017, p. 29) it is important that the concept of distributed leadership is not one which involves distributing responsibility (Youngs, 2017) but instead focuses on shared leadership as envisaged by Diamond and Spillane (2016).

An attempt to move towards such shared leadership can potentially be seen with the recent changes at middle leadership levels. Historically, when posts at middle leadership /management level were introduced they were not conceived of leadership and management posts but posts of responsibility which provided the means to recompense staff taking on additional duties outside the classroom. A move from seniority as a key criterion for appointments to middle leadership positions to leadership capabilities as the basis of appointment is a significant policy development and hopefully will impact on practice going forward. This paper will now explore how the above policy initiatives are impacting on educational leadership in Irish schools.

Impact of policy on educational leadership

The impact on leadership will be discussed under the following themes: the drive towards quality; the importance of professional learning; supporting leaders in their role; middle leadership in a new era and; a bottom up approach to system improvement.

The drive towards quality

The publication of Looking at our Schools Quality Framework (LAOS) (DES, 2016) is already having a significant impact on leadership in schools. Principals are conscious that the framework is the template that underpins their school self-evaluation process and the external

evaluation by inspectors. By providing a set of standards which describe ‘effective practice’ and ‘highly effective practice’ the framework helps school leaders at all levels to identify areas that need development in their school. The fact that the framework “*defines school leadership in terms of its impact on learning*” (p. 7) is significant in moving the focus of school leaders from tasks of a managerial and/or administrative nature towards activities that have a direct impact on the quality of learning in the school. Furthermore, the framework aims to support those who provide professional learning for teachers and school leaders by focusing on high quality professional learning programmes relevant to teachers and leaders’ needs thus emphasizing the connection between professional learning and improved practice.

This potentially limits the concept of professional learning to ‘courses’ and ‘programmes’ which may or may not have a transformative impact in schools (Kennedy, 2014) Arguably supporting school-based professional learning in the form of collaborative inquiry models which allow for job-embedded professional learning to focus on what matters most in individual school contexts (Poekert, 2012; King, 2014, 2016) needs to be considered in the context of self-evaluation which appears to be part of “a dual system of internal/external quality assurance” being used in most OECD countries (Brown, McNamara, O’Hara & O’Brien, 2016, p. 9). The impact that the policy drive towards school self -evaluation is having on the practice of school leadership is probably still a little early to measure as engagement with this initiative is still evolving. Central to the success of same is the school’s capacity to engage with the process in a meaningful way and the level of trust between the inspectorate and schools (Brown et al., 2016), thus having implications for professional learning.

Professional learning

There is an increasing recognition of the need for ongoing professional learning for leadership (DES, 2018) and a re-focus on the role of school leadership in leading teaching and learning. While there are no mandatory leadership qualifications yet the policy context for same has been set since 2011 (DES, 2011). However, this has never been progressed or enacted and is missing in subsequent policy documents. There are however an increasing number of supports in place through CSL (coaching and mentoring), the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the universities. While the Teaching Council have highlighted the importance of professional development and learning and are engaging with the profession in terms of a framework for potential mandatory teacher learning for maintaining registration, a number of issues have been raised. This is arguably an important juncture in understanding effective professional development and learning models in the Irish context. Currently in the RoI primary teachers typically engage with professional development courses in the summer in return for up to five extra personal vacation days. The uptake on these courses is very high with most availing of the extra vacation days. However, there is little evidence of the impact of same on teachers' subsequent practice on returning to school the next academic year. Unfortunately, professional development and learning are often considered synonymous with such summer courses, Croke Park hours in schools and "in-service" that is 'done' to teachers (O'Sullivan, 2011).

Currently the system is very vested in the basic transmission model of professional development and usually in line with the latest national priority. Trying to move towards professional development and learning being conceptualised as part of being a professional and encouraging teachers to take ownership of same in line with their needs in their context is somewhat challenging. The role of leadership in developing and sustaining teachers' professional learning (King, 2011) is also problematic in the system with many principals not

seeing themselves as leaders of learning, especially teaching principals who tend to see themselves as teachers first. Principals reluctance to exercise leadership of learning was very evident in 2016 with the INTO calling on all schools not to participate in or cooperate with Droichead or any form of probation/induction as part of the TCI registration process. External evaluation of all NQTs was being proposed instead, once again evincing the power of social partnership. However, this position changed in 2017 (TCI, 2017) with a phased introduction of the Droichead process following a clarification that

the main objective of the Droichead process is to support the professional learning of the NQTs during the induction phase... a joint declaration is made by the teacher and experienced colleagues, following collective reflection, that through their engagement in Droichead, they have participated in a quality teaching and learning process (p. 3).

The process is now non-evaluative and arguably an attempt to engage principals and other staff members in leadership roles for professional learning within schools. Droichead Quality Assurance (DQA) panels have been established by the TCI and they visit a random sample of schools to discuss the Droichead process in “a spirit of collegiality and collaboration” (p. 7). While the principal may not be directly involved in the process they do support the process and as such professional learning within their schools. Arguably professional development and learning has to managed and led (Earley and Bubb, 2004, p. 80) or led and supported (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2010) individually and collectively at school level by Boards of Management and/or Trusts. Supporting principals and Boards in leading learning is an area of importance. Similarly encouraging teachers to embrace the autonomy being afforded to them in terms of their professional learning (TCI, 2016) instead of seeing it

as something that is done to them (King, 2014) will potentially result in more transformative models of professional development and learning both within and across schools (Kennedy, 2014). Given the vast amounts of money the DES spend on professional learning and development it is arguably timely to consider the impact of same not only on individual teachers and leaders but on the individual and collective efficacy of teachers and schools to achieve equity and excellence in schools (King, 2014).

Supporting School Leaders in the role

The establishment of CSL presents a unique opportunity for the development of a coherent continuum of professional learning for school leaders. It mirrors practices in other jurisdictions. Regarding the impact of the work of CSL on school leadership, the evaluation report (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2017) commissioned by the DES on the work of CSL notes that the formal one-to-one mentoring programme led and managed by CSL was “*considered highly effective*” (p. 94) by both mentees and the more experienced principals who served as mentors. The significant successes of the mentoring programme (and indeed of the coaching service) was the move away from any focus on targeting school leaders experiencing difficulty to both mentoring and coaching seen as “*a valued form of professional development*” (p. 94). Similarly, the evaluation of the coaching service was very highly rated by participant school leaders “*All features of the support are rated highly, with the confidentiality of the service and the trustworthiness, openness, compatibility preparedness, expertise and quality of support of coaches all very widely commended*” (p. 94). At a more strategic level, the introduction of mentoring and coaching as powerful leadership development tools into Irish education will hopefully be seen in the coming years as highly significant in empowering leaders in schools to maximise both their own performance and that of other leaders in the school community, for example teacher leaders and middle leaders.

Middle Leadership entering a new era

Reference has already been made here to the evolutionary nature of the concept of middle leadership in Irish schools. O'Donovan's (2015) case studies of three post primary schools highlights the evolutionary nature of collaborative practice in second level schools in Ireland. She identifies the isolationist culture that is still prevalent.

Traditionally in Ireland, the teacher has had virtual autonomy in the classroom, operating behind a "closed door" culture...principals express a reticence to counter that culture, in deference to staff sensibilities and micro-politics and to remnants of a culture where the powerful teacher unions vehemently supported the "closed door" system. From a distributed instructional leadership perspective, this presents challenges to principals and school communities to negotiate meaning anew (p. 263).

More recently, the set of professional standards on leadership and management contained within the quality assurance framework, LAOS (DES, 2016) marks a heightened policy focus on leadership and middle leadership and its impact on school improvement. In addition, two circulars on leadership and management in primary and post-primary schools (DES, 2017; DES, 2018) and the development of a continuum of professional learning in leadership (CSL, 2017) signal the further development of this area. The circulars envision a distributive leadership model based on shared responsibilities. However, they also require that post-holders are re-assigned to specific responsibilities in line with the needs of the schools, which is in contrast to Young's (2017) argument for distributed leadership not to be centred on distributed responsibility. Noteworthy in the circular(s) is the role of the BOM/ETB in building leadership capacity within schools. This may help principals in developing skills and a language to engage with middle leaders around the changes envisioned in the transition from posts of responsibility

to leadership along with developing a vision for distributed leadership that would result in the building of leadership teams in their school. This requires changes from the bottom up.

A bottom up approach to system improvement

The concept of system leadership in Ireland is somewhat underdeveloped. However, there are a number of avenues through which school leaders at all levels in the system, can have an influence outside of their own school setting. As a starting point in the Irish context the focus for developing system leadership should begin with principals becoming involved in school improvement within and between schools. A focus on this level is justified firstly, because some tangible developments in other jurisdictions of this role (for example SCEL Fellows in Education Scotland, 2018) can provide learning and secondly, because arguably, it is at this level that the professionalization of Irish school leaders can best be developed and thirdly, promoting system leadership between schools is reflecting one of the recent policy initiatives in Ireland -The Schools Excellence Fund (Bruton, 2017). This recent initiative aimed at supporting clusters of schools who are involved in a wide range of activities, all of which are focused on improving learning outcomes for pupils/students supports schools has the potential to develop the sharing of good practice between schools and for the emergence of system leaders.

The combination of policy initiatives such as the Quality Framework for Schools which sets clear definable standards, the embedding of the school self-evaluation process that enables schools to focus on implementing change and improved teaching and learning outcomes and the new middle leadership positions as the model through which this improvement can be achieved is arguably having a significant effect on the practice of leadership in Irish schools.

Finally, the emphasis on clustering schools together to share good practice and to explore new innovative approaches, may in the future be a significant policy initiative. Noteworthy however is the importance of all teachers and principals in developing their skills in collaborative practice so that the benefits of such policy initiatives are reaped. Significant here is that leadership is described as hierarchical and aligned with that of formal 'roles' and positions and not necessarily that as envisioned either by the TCI when they talked about all teachers being involved in leadership or by King and Stevenson (2017) in their democratic and organic model of leadership from below with support from above. Further exploration and development around supporting the development of such non-positional leaders from the bottom up is warranted but would require support from the top as principals learn to 'let go' (King & Stevenson, 2017) and embrace shared leadership models of practice

Conclusions and implications for research

Given that everything that happens on the ground is influenced by what is happening at a higher/wider level (Bottery, 2006) it is important that those practising leadership across the education sector have an awareness and understanding of global and national issues and their impact for educational leadership. Many perceive new policies related to educational leadership as the emergence of a new managerialism and accountability agenda whereas "policies do not normally tell you what to do; they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed" (Ball, 2006, 12). In the Irish context it would be interesting to explore "*the differing effects that documents have in the production of meaning by readers*" (Codd, 1988: 239). Supporting principals to mediate policy

and to co-ordinate a response to same that is relevant for their context requires social action (Ball, 2006).

While there is an increasing emphasis on distributed leadership both in rhetoric and policy documents there is little engagement with what this means on the ground and whether it truly represents shared leadership as envisaged by Diamond and Spillane (2016). This “policy fudge” (Torrance & Murphy, 2017) is arguably adding to the varied understandings and representations at school level. It often merely represents “licensed leadership” where teachers are afforded autonomy and agency if it serves “managerially determined and imposed targets” (King & Stevenson, 2017, 660). Arguably an additional focus on a more organic form of teacher leadership from below with support from above (King & Stevenson, 2017) would enhance a collective responsibility for all students’ learning despite the existence of a prevailing culture where isolated privatism is more valued (O’Sullivan, 2011). Given the increasing emphasis on teacher leadership for enhancing student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004) and to meet the needs of increasingly diverse classrooms an exploration of the concept of teacher leadership and the supporting factors for developing same in schools warrants investigation. Some evidence exists related to developing leadership capacity at ITE level (King, 2017) but this needs to be explored so that schools and leaders are prepared to support newly qualified teachers who are prepared to exercise teacher leadership as part of their professional practice.

For existing principals, research into leading professional learning within their schools could support individual and collaborative professional learning in schools. This could be done in conjunction with HEIs, CSL and other stakeholders to foster a culture of professional learning in schools that is relevant to the individual context of the school. It also might support the

development of a more organic model of teacher leadership (King & Stevenson, 2017) as practice focused on professional learning and not linked to roles or positions but rather practice shared with colleagues (Spillane et al. 2001). Finally, it could support principals in understanding the capacity building aspect of engaging in models of professional development and learning so that practice is transformative (Kennedy, 2014). Similarly, further research into the impact of current funding of professional development ‘courses’ or in-service (for example post-graduate courses in support teaching, Professional Development Support Service for Teachers seminars and sustained support models) on the social, cultural and decisional capital within schools could enhance awareness and decision making at policy level.

Overall the authors argue for supporting management bodies and principals in: understanding national and international policy contexts and; leading professional learning within their schools. A macro level understanding of a distributed leadership perspective in schools is warranted along with a focus on non-positional teacher leadership for enhancing teachers’ and students’ individual and collective learning.

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