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From aspiration to reality: a qualitative exploration of novice primary principalship in the Republic of Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the transition into principalship in Irish primary schools, focusing on how novice leaders navigate the role during their first five years in post. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with fifteen principals, the analysis is framed by occupational socialisation, which conceptualises leadership development as a dynamic and contextually situated process. The study examines how anticipatory images of leadership, professional preparation, organisational contexts and shifts in personal identity intersect in shaping principals' experiences. Findings show that anticipatory expectations, often grounded in ideals of instructional leadership, collided with organisational realities dominated by accountability and administrative workload. Professional preparation, while valued, was frequently perceived as insufficiently connected to the practical and relational demands of the role. Organisational and personal socialisation were marked by isolation, identity rupture and the strain of individualised responsibility, revealing the contradictions between policy discourse on distributed leadership and its limited enactment in practice. The paper advances understanding of novice principalship by illustrating how socialisation is experienced as iterative, relational and contested, rather than linear. In doing so, it contributes to international scholarship on school leadership by situating the Irish experience within wider debates about the complexity and sustainability of leadership.

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Introduction

'I used to leave work at 4 pm Now I'm answering emails at night, working Sundays just to keep up'. This candid reflection from a newly appointed Irish principal captures a paradox that lies at the heart of contemporary school leadership. International research consistently highlights the principal as pivotal to shaping teaching, learning and organisational culture (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2019). Yes, across many systems, including Ireland, high attrition and declining applications for school leadership positions highlight the fragility of

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the role and the deterrents posed by workload and accountability (Burke, Kinnarney, and Salokangas 2022). These pressures are most acutely felt by those at the beginning of their leadership journey, where the demands of principalship are encountered without the buffers of experience or established support networks (DeMatthews et al. 2021). For novice principals, rather than a gradual induction into leadership, it often entails what Browne-Ferrigno (2003) terms a role-identity transformation: a sudden redefinition of self from teacher or deputy to the individual bearing ultimate responsibility for a school.

Although leadership preparation programmes have expanded globally, evidence suggests that many fail to provide sufficient grounding in the administrative, legal and organisational dimensions of principalship (Bush 2018, 2020, 2022; Crow and Weindling 2010; Heffernan and Selwyn 2023). Moreover, recent scholarship has flagged that what makes principalship particularly precarious is not only workload and accountability, but also the emotional intensity of the role. International evidence collated in a scoping review by McKay, MacDonald, and Longmuir (2022) highlights that principals' daily work is saturated with affective demands, from regulating emotions to managing relationships with teachers, students and communities. These demands have significant consequences for leaders' physical and mental health, with international evidence showing heightened stress, burnout and risks to well-being, particularly for early-career principals. While research and policy responses frequently call for resilience or self-care, these approaches place responsibility on individuals rather than recognising systemic contributors such as workload intensification, policy pressures and resource constraints. These findings resonate with McHugh's (2023) research on the well-being of primary school leaders in Ireland. Within this research, novice primary school principals in Ireland report very high levels of burnout, stress and autonomy frustration, often more acute than among their more experienced peers.

This paper aims to address these leadership challenges by foregrounding the voices of 15 novice primary school principal teachers in the Republic of Ireland. It explores their motivations for pursuing leadership and how they navigate the multifaceted demands of the role during their early years as principals. The transition from teacher to school leader constitutes a significant occupational shift, one that requires individuals to adapt to new and often competing responsibilities (Bush 2018). To interrogate this process, this paper draws on the theoretical framework of occupational socialisation (Spillane and Lee 2014), which conceives leadership development as a dynamic, contextually situated process. The paper illustrates how the anticipatory, professional, organisational and personal dimensions of this framework intersect in shaping how these novice principals interpret and enact their roles. The findings are structured around these four dimensions, tracing their interaction across participants' accounts. The discussion examines what these dynamics reveal about the preparation, support and constraints that shape novice principalship. In doing so, the paper contributes to wider debates on how leadership preparation, policy and practice might more closely reflect the lived realities of those assuming principalship in an era of intensifying complexity.

Literature review: national and international perspectives on novice principals

Research on novice school leadership converges on the idea that the early years of principalship represent a formative yet precarious phase, where identity, authority and

professional relationships are tested in unfamiliar organisational settings (Osterman and Sullivan 1996; Spillane and Lee 2014). The literature has typically clustered around preparation and induction, the processes of socialisation into the role and the novice leader's contribution to school improvement (Kılınç and Gümüş 2020). Across this body of scholarship, three broad themes emerge: (1) the adequacy of preparation and induction, (2) the relational and political challenges of legitimacy and (3) the difficulty of enacting instructional and distributed leadership within contexts of managerial demand. The following review organises these strands, drawing on both international and Irish perspectives.

The socialisation literature has long emphasised that how principals are inducted into the role, both formally through programmes and informally through lived experiences, profoundly shapes their sense of preparedness and their professional trajectories (Cottrell and James 2016; Crow 2006). In many contexts, however, preparation remains fragmented, inconsistent, or overly reliant on on-the-job learning. Relational and political challenges compound these structural difficulties. New principals must navigate pre-existing staff dynamics, cultural norms and leadership legacies that may limit their ability to implement change (Spillane and Lee 2014). For those appointed internally, the transition is particularly complex, as longstanding peer relationships are reconfigured by their new authority (Crow 2006; Kelly and Saunders 2010). External appointees face different but equally significant obstacles, often being perceived as outsiders to a staff culture with deep-rooted traditions and expectations (Walker and Qian 2006). In both cases, principals must assert legitimacy while fostering trust, striking a balance between continuity and the imperative to innovate. These dynamics illustrate the political and cultural dimensions of leadership, aspects that have gained prominence in the international literature but remain unevenly addressed in leadership preparation (Crow and Weindling 2010; Montecinos et al. 2022). Within the Irish context, empirical studies of principals' career pathways have provided valuable insights into the lived realities of leadership preparation and transition. Sugrue's (2015) life-history research demonstrated how principals' entry into and navigation through the role is shaped as much by structural constraints as by personal dispositions. He documented how middle-leadership structures had historically served as stepping stones, but how their erosion during the moratorium period (from 2009) left many schools hollowed out, compounding isolation at the top. Ummanel, McNamara, and Stynes (2016), adopting a portraiture approach, similarly found no composite pathway into the role, but rather a diversity of routes marked by uneven preparation and limited mobility. Murphy's (2023) recent study of novice principals exposes the dualities principals navigate: between formal and informal preparation and policy expectations and lived contexts. These studies, though methodologically distinct, converge on a shared critique: leadership preparation and transition in Ireland cannot rest on individual capability alone but require systemic structures that cultivate leadership capacity more deliberately, distributively and sustainably.

Although policy presents principals as the key lever of school improvement (Hallinger 2005; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2019), the process of socialisation, the weight of managerial responsibilities and the fragile legitimacy held with teachers combine to make instructional and pedagogical leadership an aspiration that is difficult to fully realise. One prominent challenge is legitimacy. Jerdborg's (2023) study of Swedish novice principals shows how the credibility to lead pedagogy is not automatically granted by position but must be negotiated within each school context. Principals with prior phase-specific or

subject expertise were able to participate convincingly in teacher dialogue, which bolstered their authority in guiding instruction. Conversely, those lacking such expertise struggled to establish legitimacy in pedagogical matters and were often perceived as distanced from the core work of teaching. Instructional leadership, then, is not a neutral or universally applicable model: for novices, it is deeply situated, shaped by the fit between prior knowledge and the professional community they enter. A second challenge lies in succession and context. O'Doherty and Ovando's (2013) study of novice principals in the US revealed that while new principals articulated broad, student-centred visions of instructional leadership, these ambitions were quickly tempered by local realities. Many inherited plans or reforms from their predecessors, faced resistance from experienced staff, or were engulfed by the volume of managerial demands. Under such pressures, formal supervision of teaching was often deprioritised, with principals instead turning towards building relationships and collaborative structures as a way to influence learning indirectly.

A paucity of research has also highlighted the challenges that novices encounter in attempting to enact distributed leadership (Kılınç and Gümüş 2020). For example, Spillane et al. (2015) show how deep structural tensions shape the enactment of distributed leadership: while the sheer volume and diversity of the principal's work can encourage distribution, the pervasive sense of ultimate responsibility pulls new leaders towards centralised, heroic practices. Their study demonstrates that these tensions are not simply a matter of individual choice or leadership style, but are embedded in the very nature of the role and magnified by school context, particularly in settings where organisational legitimacy is under threat. In such conditions, distributed leadership is not easily enacted but rather emerges as a fragile and contingent practice, constrained as much by accountability logics and institutional positioning as by the novice principal's own sense of leadership identity (Spillane et al. 2015). In their research with novice principals in Sweden, Liljenberg and Andersson (2020) found that when novice principals reported that sharing leadership responsibilities with teacher leaders, it mitigated feelings of isolation, created a greater sense of belonging and helped cultivate more collegial structures. However, many novice principals in this research expressed reluctance to hand over core responsibilities, as they felt ultimately accountable and needed firsthand knowledge to justify their improvement strategies.

One of the central problems repeatedly highlighted in the literature is that when leadership is framed in individualised and heroic terms, new principals are positioned as solitary drivers of school improvement, expected to deliver rapid results while simultaneously establishing their legitimacy (Spillane et al. 2015). This creates precisely the conditions documented across national and international studies: isolation, burnout, fragile authority and a tendency towards short-term fixes rather than long-term organisational growth (DeMatthews et al. 2021; McHugh 2023; Tahir et al. 2017). For nearly two decades, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) have argued that such models are ultimately self-defeating, as they leave schools depleted once the charismatic leader departs or is unable to sustain the pace. Their call for sustainable leadership addresses these challenges directly. They characterise sustainable leadership as improvement that is socially just, deeply rooted in teaching and learning and distributed across the professional community so that knowledge, capacity and relationships are preserved and renewed over time. In the context of novice principals, this framework is especially salient. The early years of

principalship are marked by heightened vulnerability to heroic expectations and a lack of systemic support, leaving novice principals to navigate immense complexity alone without sustainable practices (Bauer, Silver, and Schwartz 2019). In tandem with sustainable leadership, the past decade or so has witnessed a growing interest in the potential of system leadership as a means of embedding sustainability, particularly through schools working in collaboration to build collective capacity (Harris 2020). System leadership provides a counterbalance to the risks of individualised models by ensuring that leadership knowledge and expertise are not confined to a single figure but are shared across networks (Chapman 2019). In doing so, it offers a potential mechanism for mitigating the impact of principal turnover, as collaborative structures and collective capacity beyond the individual school remain in place, even as individual leaders move on (Gorman, Brennan, and King 2025). Yet, despite its promise, system leadership remains an underdeveloped concept in both scholarship and policy, both nationally and internationally (Gorman et al. 2025; Harris, Jones, and Hashim 2021).

The Irish policy context over the past two decades illustrates these above-mentioned tensions (Murphy 2019). Historically, appointments to principalship rested largely on seniority, reputation, or being perceived as a safe pair of hands, with limited emphasis on formal preparation (Sugrue 2015). Recent reforms have sought to address this issue. The *Looking at Our School* frameworks (DoE 2022) explicitly position principals as instructional leaders, while also foregrounding distributed leadership as a hallmark of effective schools. The establishment of the *Centre for School Leadership* (CSL) in 2015 and the introduction of the government-funded *Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership* (PDSL) in 2017 signalled a system-wide commitment to structured leadership preparation and development. These initiatives align Ireland with global trends that emphasise leadership as a lever for improvement (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2019) and reflect the influence of international research on distributed leadership and capacity building (Spillane et al. 2015). Yet research suggests a persistent gap between the rhetoric of these reforms and their enactment in practice. Studies have highlighted that while distributed leadership is promoted as policy, principals remain the ultimate locus of accountability, both legally and professionally (see Barron, Gorman, and Looney 2024; Cunnane, Gorman, and Furlong 2025; Gorman and O'Higgins Norman 2024; Hickey, Flaherty, and McNamara 2024; Lárusdóttir and O'Connor 2017; Moynihan and O'Donovan 2021; Murphy and Brennan 2024). Furthermore, the intensification of compliance and administrative tasks has exacerbated the managerial burden, crowding out opportunities for principals to act as instructional leaders (Hickey, Flaherty, and McNamara 2024; Moynihan 2021; Stynes and McNamara 2018; Sugrue 2015). This dynamic reflects a broader international pattern, in which principals are tasked with simultaneously leading learning and managing increasingly complex bureaucracies (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay 2021). The result is a persistent tension between policy ideals and lived realities.

To summarise, the literature reveals persistent tensions: preparation that is often theoretical rather than practical, legitimacy that is fragile and relationally negotiated, instructional and distributed leadership that are normatively promoted but structurally constrained, and sustainability that remains more rhetorical than real. These tensions set the backdrop for examining how novice principals in Ireland navigate their early years of leadership

Theoretical framework: occupational socialisation

To explore how novice principals in Ireland make sense of their evolving leadership roles, this study draws on the theory of occupational socialisation. Foundational work by Brim and Wheeler (1966), Merton (1968), and Van Maanen and Schein (1979) laid the groundwork for understanding how individuals are inducted into professional roles through formal preparation, informal learning and interaction with organisational cultures. Within the field of educational leadership, this framework has been developed to emphasise the complex interplay between role expectations, professional identity and organisational context in the socialisation of school leaders (Browne-Ferrigno 2003; Cottrell and James 2016; Crow 2006; Greenfield 1985). Previous research by Murphy (2023) in the Irish context has also explored novice principalship in Ireland through an occupational socialisation lens, showing how anticipatory expectations shaped by the apprenticeship of observation collide with post-appointment realities, prompting a recalibration of role identity. Within this research, Murphy identifies dualities, specifically policy versus pathway, systemworld versus lifeworld, formal versus informal learning, that render socialisation iterative and system-situated rather than linear, embedding individual trajectories within Ireland's reforming policy environment. Building on Murphy's research (2023), this paper is also particularly informed by Spillane and Anderson's (2014) conceptualisation of occupational socialisation. Socialisation is not conceived here as a linear or finite process, but as an iterative, situated and contextual form of sense-making, informed by prior experiences and ongoing negotiations with organisational demands, interpersonal dynamics and policy contexts (Spillane and Anderson 2014; Spillane and Lee 2014).

The literature outlines four interrelated dimensions of occupational socialisation: anticipatory, professional, organisational and personal (Brody, Vissa, and Weathers 2010; Crow 2006; Moorosi and Grant 2018). Anticipatory socialisation occurs prior to entry into leadership and is shaped by informal learning experiences, particularly the 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie 2009), where prospective principals develop implicit beliefs about leadership by observing former school leaders (Crow 2006; Ribbins 2009). These early understandings, however, often fail to align with the realities of the role, leading to potential identity disruption during the initial transition period (Moorosi and Grant 2018). Professional socialisation encompasses formal preparation for leadership, typically through postgraduate programmes or induction processes. While intended to equip aspiring leaders with the knowledge and skills required for the role, research suggests that such programmes are often overly theoretical and insufficiently grounded in the practical realities of school management, policy enactment and adaptive problem-solving (Bush 2016). Organisational socialisation refers to the process of adapting to the specific cultural, relational and structural conditions of a school context. This phase is deeply shaped by institutional norms, legacy practices and governance arrangements, all of which influence how new principals establish credibility and navigate authority (Bengtson 2014; Bengtson, Zapeeda, and Parylo 2013; Weindling and Dimmock 2006). Finally, personal socialisation captures the evolving and introspective dimensions of leadership development, encompassing shifts in confidence, professional legitimacy and identity as principals make sense of their role over time (Cottrell and James 2016; Crow 2006).

While the above four dimensions are analytically distinguished, they should be understood as interrelated and mutually influencing. It is their interaction, rather than any single element, that produces occupational socialisation in practice (Cottrell and James 2016). At the same time, these four dimensions are given explicit attention throughout the design and conduct of the research, specifically in informing the development of interview questions. The findings, which are structured around the four dimensions, foreground their overlap and interaction. In the discussion, the framework enables a deeper examination of how novice principals' leadership identities and practices are formed through these intersecting processes, and how misalignments between expectations, preparation, organisational conditions and personal experience help to explain persistent challenges in early principalship. Occupational socialisation, therefore, functions across the paper not simply as a background theory, but as an organising and interpretive lens that shapes the analysis and supports the development of the paper's wider arguments.

Methodology

This paper explores the experiences of 15 novice primary school principals in the Republic of Ireland, each with five years or less experience in the role. As outlined above, the transition from classroom teacher to principal represents a profound occupational shift. In light of this, a qualitative research design was adopted to generate rich, contextualised insights into novice principals, exploring why they pursued this leadership role, and how they navigate the multifaceted demands of the role during their early years of principalship (Creswell 2022). Most participants worked in Catholic denominational schools, reflecting national figures that show 88.5% of primary schools are under Catholic patronage. Only two (Laura and Niamh) were based in Educate Together National Schools (ETNS), which are multid denominational in ethos. It was also important to include teaching principals in the study as they make up 54% of primary principal roles in Ireland (Irish Primary Principals' Network 2022). To reflect variation (Creswell 2022), the sample included participants with and without prior leadership experience or postgraduate qualifications. In Ireland, AP1 (Assistant Principal) and AP2 posts are formal middle leadership roles, with AP1 carrying greater responsibility. Together with the principal and deputy principal, they typically form the in-school leadership team (ISLT) (Table 1).

Given the geographic spread of participants and the professional commitments of participants, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom in 2023/2024. Virtual interviews provided a flexible and practical means of data collection, enabling participants to engage from familiar settings while minimising disruption to their schedules. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, following a semi-structured format that ensured consistency across interviews while allowing for in-depth exploration of emergent themes (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Interview questions were designed to align with the theoretical framework of socialisation (Spillane and Lee 2014). For example, questions were asked to elicit reflection on: anticipatory influences such as images of leadership formed prior to appointment; professional preparation through postgraduate study, formal training, or mentoring; organisational factors including workload, accountability and school and leadership structures; and personal qualities and factors, such as resilience, identity, and feelings towards the position.

Table 1. Participant profile.

Name	Years in the principal role	School Size - Number of pupils	Recruited internally or externally	Prior leadership experience	Postgraduate Qualification
Aine	5	112	Externally	No	No
Brian	5	118	Externally	No	PG Dip. in Leadership
Ciara	3	264	Internally	AP1	No
Ciaran	4	412	Externally	AP1	M.Ed. Leadership
Clodagh	3	304	Internally	DP	M.Ed. (not Leadership)
Colin	3	138	Externally	No	M.Ed (not Leadership)
Elaine	3	256	Internally	AP1	PG Dip. in Leadership
Fiona	4	234	Externally	AP2 (acting)	PG Dip in Inclusive and Special Ed.
Karen	2	93	Externally	AP2	No
Laura	2	289	Internally	AP1	P.G. Dip in Leadership. M.Ed. Doctorate. (not leadership)
Liam	4	367	Internally	DP	M.Ed. Leadership
Niamh	5	324	Internally	AP2	PG Dip. in Leadership
Roisin	5	199	Externally	No	M.Ed. (not Leadership)
Seamus	3	370	Internally	No	No
Sinead	4	245	Externally	No	PG Dip. in Leadership

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and then transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were returned to participants for member checking, ensuring the accuracy of their responses' representation. None of the participants requested modifications to their transcripts. The interview data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clarke 2021). The analysis followed a six-phase process. Table 2 provides an overview of this theme development. Throughout the process, the authors worked reflexively, continually interrogating our interpretations and assumptions in line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the authors' university (DCUREC/2020/258), and all procedures adhered to the institutional ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were assured throughout the research process.

Findings

This section presents the lived experiences of 15 novice primary principals as they navigated the transition into school leadership. The theoretical framework guiding this study is built on four dimensions of occupational socialisation: professional, organisational, anticipatory and personal (Crow 2006; Parkay, Currie, and Rhodes 1992; Van Maanen and Schein 1979). The findings that follow are presented using this framework, demonstrating how each dimension and its points of overlap shaped principals' lived experiences as they negotiated the complexities of transitioning into the role of principalship.

Anticipatory socialisation: imagining leadership before the leap

Anticipatory socialisation refers to the informal expectations, assumptions and role conceptions that individuals develop prior to formally entering a position (Crow 2006; Van Maanen and Schein 1979). For many participants, anticipations were narrated through the lens of pedagogy and learning, reflecting how Irish policy discourse and international

Table 2. Codes, categories and themes.

Code	Consolidated Category	Thematic Focus	Socialisation Dimension	Anchor Quote
Encouragement from staff	Social & professional influence	Why apply / legitimacy-by-invitation	Anticipatory	'My colleagues encouraged me to apply; they didn't want an outsider to change everything'.
Desire to maintain school ethos	School stability & responsibility	Identity/values as driver to apply	Anticipatory	'I have spent my whole career in this school; I didn't want someone new disrupting everything'.
Financial necessity	Financial pressures	Economic push into leadership	Anticipatory (with personal/structural overlay)	'Financially, staying in the classroom wasn't sustainable for my family, so I had to move up'.
Lack of middle leadership roles	Barriers to progression	Constrained routes into leadership	Anticipatory / Organisational	'I would have taken a middle leadership role ... but it just wasn't an option'.
Career stagnation	Barriers to progression	'Principalship or nowhere'	Anticipatory /Organisational	'There was nowhere to go except principalship'.
High leadership turnover	School stability & responsibility	Stepping in to steady the ship	Anticipatory /Organisational	'We had three principals in five years; I felt I had to take this on to bring stability'.
Limited leadership preparation	Leadership readiness & PL	Preparation-practice disconnect	Professional	'No training could have prepared me for this. You step in and just have to figure it out'.
Constant firefighting in role	Reactive vs strategic work	Managerial drag on leadership	Organisational	'You spend the whole day putting out fires ... There's no space to plan ahead'.
Policy compliance burden	Administrative overload	Compliance eclipses pedagogy	Organisational	'I spend more time filling out forms than leading the school. The paperwork is relentless'.
Frustration with bureaucracy	Systemic constraints	Bureaucracy as headwind	Organisational	'We have so many policies and circulars that take up our time'.
Limited time for instructional leadership	Conflict: leadership vs management	Crowded-out pedagogy	Organisational	'I thought I'd be leading teaching and learning, but I barely get to step into classrooms'.
Management overshadowing leadership	Conflict: leadership vs management	'Running a business' identity	Organisational	'I feel like I'm just running a business'.
Principals retaining decision-making	Delegation vs retained authority	Singular accountability	Organisational (accountability) / Personal (risk)	'At the end of the day, my name is on the door'.
Delegation to AP1s, not broader staff	Delegation patterns	Narrow, task-based delegation	Organisational	'I give tasks to my AP1 and AP2s, but in the end, it all comes back to me'.
Emotional burden of decision-making	Emotional/psychological impact	Weight of ultimate responsibility	Personal (felt at org interface)	'Every decision feels massive because you're carrying the weight of the whole school'.
Professional isolation	Isolation & legitimacy	Loneliness as core experience	Personal /Organisational	'I didn't realise how lonely this job would be'.
Work-life balance struggles	Work-life strain	Endurance & spillover	Personal	'I used to leave work at 4 pm ... working Sundays just to keep up'.
Desire for structural reform in leadership	Systemic challenges	Reimagining principalship	Organisational/ System	'The system needs to change. We need to rethink leadership, or we will lose good people'.

research have consistently positioned the principal as a leader of teaching and learning. Brian explained:

All the courses I did before becoming a principal were about teaching and learning. I thought my time would be spent in classrooms, supporting staff, and helping teachers to grow. That's the role I thought I was preparing for,

Róisín echoed. 'I love teaching and learning; it's what I did my MEd in. That's what motivated me to apply; to lead practice in my school'.

Several principals described how their anticipations had been reinforced by policy and professional rhetoric. Sinead noted:

Everything I'd been told about the role, whether on my leadership course, was about leading learning. The way it was sold was that you'd be driving, teaching, and learning in the school. That was the picture in my head.

Laura described leadership as part of her vocation from the outset:

Being a principal was always what I wanted. Even when I first qualified, I looked ahead and thought, someday I'll be leading a school. I wanted to be the person shaping the direction of the school, not just following it.

Laura's decision to apply was similarly grounded in values:

Having done an EdD in inclusive education. I wanted to create a more inclusive school, where staff felt supported and every child was seen. You can do so much as a teacher, but you can't reshape the culture. For me, principalship felt like the only way to live out that vision.

For others, anticipatory socialisation came from direct observation of previous principals. Liam, who had been a deputy principal, recalled: 'I'd been sitting beside my principal for years. I saw her make big decisions, lead staff, and represent the school. That's the picture I carried with me when I applied'. Ciaran similarly explained: 'I'd watched my old principal deal with parents and inspectors, and I thought, okay, that's the job. I felt I had a fairly good idea from being around it'. Yet anticipatory socialisation was not always strong or carefully developed. Some participants admitted they had only a vague sense of what principalship might entail, or that they had never really imagined themselves as leaders until the opportunity arose. Áine discussed her vision for the role of teaching principal: 'I thought it would be like teaching with extras, but you could carve time to deal with the extras, but the reality is another world'. Brian captured the inadequacy of his anticipations: 'I always kind of wanted to be a principal, felt it was a natural step. People said it would be busy. Busy doesn't describe it. Until you're the one carrying the can, you can't understand'.

Others admitted that leadership had not been part of their self-identity at all. Colin described: 'I was a classroom teacher one day and a principal the next. I had no idea what I was walking into. None'. Seamus reflected: 'I hadn't really aspired to it. I saw myself as a teacher, not a principal. When the chance came up, I went for it, but I suppose it was a bit impulsive, but I am happy I did'. Shane echoed:

I never set out to be a principal. It wasn't part of a plan. The job came up in the school, and I went for it. But I'd never really thought of myself in that way before, maybe because I was still/am kind of young.

Clodagh explained: ‘I was encouraged to apply ... It wasn’t that I’d mapped out principalship. It was more that I said yes when asked. Having been the deputy, I was happy there, but I felt happy also to step up’.

For some, anticipatory socialisation into principalship was not a matter of ambition but rather the product of systemic constraint. Participants repeatedly pointed to the moratorium on posts of responsibility during the economic crisis, which effectively collapsed the middle tier of leadership in Irish schools for a decade. Fiona recalled:

I would have happily taken on a middle leadership role, but that wasn’t an option. It was principal or nothing. The AP posts were frozen, and for years, they just weren’t there. So, the choice wasn’t between different leadership roles; it was just being a principal.

Sinéad echoed: ‘It was the only option to move up. There was nowhere else to go’. Colin described the sense of pressure this created:

I thought of waiting. But the longer I waited, the more I felt backed into a corner. If I didn’t take the chance then, I felt I might not get another opportunity. It wasn’t about wanting it, it was about fearing that if I did not take a principalship role, I would regret it.

A further strand in the narratives was financial. In the context of rising living costs and particularly the Dublin housing market, the enhanced salary of principalship loomed large. Niamh described the calculus clearly: ‘On a teacher’s salary in Dublin, I couldn’t get a mortgage. I couldn’t even think about buying a house. Principalship was the only way to move forward financially. That was part of the decision, definitely’. Brian was equally direct: ‘If teaching paid enough to live comfortably, I’d still be in the classroom. That’s the truth. I didn’t apply because I had a burning ambition to be a principal. I applied because I couldn’t afford not to’. Elaine reflected on the ambivalence this created:

Yes, the pay is higher. But so are the demands. There are weeks when I ask myself if the extra few hundred euro is worth the stress, the sleepless nights, the constant pressure. Some days the answer feels like no.

These accounts complicate the neat picture of professional socialisation as cumulative identity development, showing instead how economic structures shape leadership trajectories.

Finally, obligation and loyalty to schools also played a powerful role in professional socialisation. Liam recalled the pressure of succession:

People in the staffroom said to me, ‘You have to step up. We can’t risk an outsider coming in and changing everything. That was the message. It didn’t feel like a career decision; it felt like an obligation to the school.

Clodagh, who had spent her entire career in the same school, explained:

This school is part of me. I’ve given my whole career to it. The thought of someone else coming in and tearing up what we’d built. I couldn’t live with that. So I applied. Not because I wanted the job, but because I couldn’t let someone else take it.

Séamus described a similar dynamic: ‘I hadn’t intended to apply. But when I thought of someone coming in from outside and undoing years of work, I realised I couldn’t let that happen. So I stepped forward’.

Professional socialisation

If anticipatory socialisation shaped the imagined pictures of what principalship might be, professional socialisation determined the pathways by which individuals actually entered the role.

Professional socialisation refers to the leadership learning, deliberate or inadvertent, by which principals acquire the knowledge and skills required to lead schools. In most education systems, there is no systematic preparation programme and principals often 'learn on the job', drawing on their earlier professional experience (Bush 2018, 3).

For several participants, the route into leadership resembled the textbook definition of professional socialisation: ambition nourished over time, supported by formative opportunities and postgraduate study. In terms of postgraduate studies, opinions differed around how much this prepared them for the realities of the role. Ciarán felt his 'Master's in education leadership' gave him 'the theoretical grounding and the confidence. The course made me see leadership differently, not just management, but about culture, about professional learning ... I think having studied leadership, I was able to access supports that would help me'. Niamh also felt that her 'postgrad in leadership was definitely a great help, as we knew about policies in leadership and how to use policy effectively. As policy is part of our job, I think this gave me a great grounding'. Laura, who had a range of post-graduate qualifications, including a doctorate (but not in educational leadership), flagged:

I believe no principal should be appointed without having completed a Master's degree at least. The postgraduate diploma in leadership is good; I completed it, but it is not enough. I earned my EdD in inclusive education, which gave me the confidence to lead and convince others. For instance, we're conducting a PLC [professional learning community] to support children with EAL [English as an Additional Language], and my research enables me to bridge theory and practice, which the staff responds to very well.

Others spoke less enthusiastically about how their postgraduate experience supported them for the role:

The [postgraduate diploma in educational leadership] course is removed from the realities of the job. I think there is a denial, perhaps that is harsh, but there is a failure on the part of those giving the course to really talk about the administration and paperwork. I feel it should be more focussed on 'well instructional leadership is great, and here is how to do it as a real Irish primary school principal, who wears multiple hats'. (Brian)

Liam, who had a Master of Education in Leadership, felt a disconnect:

It is not a criticism of the course – it is excellent – and I wholeheartedly agree with the theorists and researchers we were introduced to. What is said about distributed leadership, it is all spot on. But the problem is, it is the job of the principal here because the Department (of Education) do not care about this. If I miss a deadline on a form for like a grant, they are not going to care why.

When asked directly whether previous roles had helped them navigate the responsibilities of principalship, the response was also mixed. Laura, an AP1, reflected: 'I was in a lot of meetings with my previous principal, particularly around special education. I

had my piece of the jigsaw, but that was one piece'. Liam, a former deputy principal, shared a similar view:

A lot of the big decisions still went through the principal. I was part of the discussions, but the final call wasn't mine. When you're the principal, everything falls on your shoulders. As a deputy, I could always defer to my principal.

Clodagh, however, was an exception: While not framed by her as distributed leadership, her experience had been more expansive: 'There is not much difference in what I do now and what I did as the Deputy', she explained, attributing this to stepping up regularly when the principal was on leave.

Those who held AP2s felt less prepared. Elaine noted: 'You were expected to take care of a subject or area, but not really to lead people or deal with the issues that are now on my desk today at 4 pm'. Niamh felt

it only gives you a glimpse in to what a principal deals with ... the ISL (in-school leadership) meetings were good but again it is more reporting and looking at certain policies that need to be addressed, you don't really get preparation for the role [of principal].

Karen felt her experience, though, did support her:

I led literacy, and we had a subject inspection for literacy in my second last year, and at the time, the principal put a lot of pressure on me to lead it – make sure the school was ready. He made me sit in on meetings with the inspectors, too, and it felt important because it made me step up and make sure people were up to date and knew what we were doing in terms of our Literacy plan. We also then established a system where I was in charge of the first and second class teachers, and it did help me as he kept me in the loop, but our principal in that school was unique ... I know many principals could not do it; it was the culture of our school.

For others who neither had postgraduate qualifications nor formal middle/senior leadership experience, there were different viewpoints:

I was a classroom teacher one day and a principal the next. There was no stepping stone. It was straight into the deep end ... I did feel at a loss. If I had sat on an ISL team, it would have helped me get my head around the posts, so I feel it did hold me back, but eventually I caught on. (Colin)

Seamus felt:

Having no post [middle leadership position] did make me feel lost at the beginning. More than that, others in the school knew it, but then no one else applied, but my deputy principal was good in that they went through things with me. In terms of courses, I think the CSL do great work there, so I am not sure if a postgraduate course is needed – it is more about the support you need on the job rather than having it before the job, because all schools to me are different. As I said, I have a great deputy, a school up the road may not and then a principal may need help with delegation and having difficult conversations.

For Sinéad, however, professional socialisation had occurred less through formal posts than through a school culture of distributed leadership: 'I'd led Science, mentored new teachers through Droichead. That gave me confidence. Even without a title, I'd already been leading beyond my classroom, and it helped me in the role as I got training on how to have professional conversations through Droichead and other things like that'.

Organisational socialisation: immersion into bureaucracy, legacy, and relentless responsibility

In classical terms, organisational socialisation is about learning the way things are done in a particular workplace: routines, norms, and hidden rules (Crow 2006). For the participants in this study, it was not a gradual induction but a sudden immersion into responsibility. The first months were described as overwhelming, with many comparing the experience to ‘being thrown in at the deep end’ (Niamh). Liam, despite three years as deputy, explained: ‘I thought I had a sense of it, but when you’re the principal, everything falls on your shoulders. The buck stops with you on every single issue’. Karen captured the relentlessness of this immersion: ‘Every day there was something. A staffing problem, a call from the Department, a parent at the door, a building issue. I’d get home in the evening and think, what did I even achieve today? It was just fire after fire’. Colin described ‘the first months felt constant, relentless, no time to breathe. Even if you talked something over with someone, at the end of the day, you knew the decision sat with you, and you alone’. Róisín reflected: ‘I thought I’d be leading learning. Within weeks, I was drowning in policies, like GDPR, child protection, health and safety’. Elaine shared a similar frustration: ‘There is so much administration and bloody paperwork and staffing and substitution issues. There is always a new issue at your door’.

Teaching principals, in particular, felt that they were inhabiting multiple roles simultaneously. Brian captured this vividly: ‘You’re HR, you’re the building manager, you’re the leader, and you’re the class teacher. All rolled into one. It’s like four full-time jobs squeezed into one body’. Áine echoed this feeling of overload: ‘I was teaching all day, then managing the school at night. There’s no off-switch’. Elaine described the dissonance between the role’s demands and her preparation: ‘I did leadership courses, I studied the theory, but none of that prepares you for being principal and teacher and caretaker and counsellor all at once. That was the reality from day one’. Others noted the impossibility of maintaining balance. Karen explained: ‘I was constantly pulled in different directions – we had to build a new special class and it was just a nightmare trying to deal with everything. My class suffered, because I was being split in two’.

While policies such as *Circular 0070/2018* (DoE 2018) and *Looking at Our School* (DE 2022) emphasise distributed responsibility, participants’ accounts showed how fragile and contested this was in practice. In some schools, deputy and middle leaders were protective of their long-established areas and resisted efforts to broaden their responsibilities. Róisín recalled: ‘There were AP posts in place, but people were very comfortable in them. They knew their patch, and they weren’t keen on me tampering with it’. Clodagh explained: ‘When I tried to broaden responsibilities, I got pushback. People said, ‘That’s not my area’, or they worried I was interfering. It wasn’t open conflict, but there was resistance’. In Colin’s school, the deputy principal openly rejected attempts at redistribution:

I thought giving more leadership would help. But the deputy [principal] pushed back, saying it was too much, that they hadn’t signed up for that. It created a strain, because I was trying to build a team approach, but they wanted to keep things the same.

Other principals admitted they themselves hesitated, holding back until they had read the internal politics of the school. Liam explained:

While I knew the staff, I wanted to see how things worked for me before I started making changes to the leadership team, but looking back now, that meant for the first year, I was doing far more myself than I should have. It wasn't sustainable when I look back.

Others admitted they were cautious about pushing responsibility onto colleagues, not only to avoid upsetting staff but also because they feared the consequences if things were not done properly. Karen explained,

I wanted to give more to the deputy, like total responsibility for overseeing the code of behaviour, but I kept thinking, if it goes wrong, it's still on me. That's what makes you hesitate. You can't hide behind 'oh, the deputy didn't do it', it's your head on the block.

For some, this caution turned into a reluctance to let go even of seemingly minor tasks. Elaine reflected:

I remember thinking, I could hand this piece over, but what if it's not done exactly as it should? In the end, it would bounce back to me anyway, so I may as well just do it. That's not healthy, but it's the reality.

In addition to structural roles, participants described how inherited cultural legacies shaped their early experiences. Elaine described the shadow of her predecessor: 'The last principal had been very top-down. People were wary, defensive. I found myself constantly trying to prove I wasn't the same'. Colin echoed this sense of inheritance: 'The school was just coasting, the previous principal I feel was burnt out and let things go. I was expected to sort it, like updating policies and I suppose changing the overall culture'.

Personal socialisation: the self as the site of intersection

Across the dataset, principals spoke of a fundamental reconstitution of who they were, or perhaps more precisely, of who they were allowed to be, once they assumed the role. Seamus explained this change:

As a teacher, I was one of the staff. I was part of the team, sharing jokes in the staffroom. As principal, I was apart from it. I was the boss. I didn't choose to put that wall there, but it was there from day one.

What is striking is not simply that participants felt changed, but that the change was relationally imposed. Niamh captured this subtle but powerful shift: 'I'd say something casually in the staffroom and people would treat it like an instruction. They carried authority I didn't intend'. The personal result was the erosion of continuity between past and present selves. The rupture was felt not only in self-perception but in the loss of collegial ties. Karen described the shock: 'In the first month, I felt completely alone. I'd gone from being surrounded by colleagues, chatting in the staffroom, to sitting in the office or classroom on my own, carrying everything. I wasn't expecting that loneliness'. For Laura, the loss of belonging was bound up with her sense of self as collaborative:

I'd always thought of myself as someone who worked with people, part of the team. But as principal, you can't always be that. You have to make hard calls. That was the hardest thing for me, realising I wasn't part of the staff in the same way anymore.

If identity shift and isolation were the first lessons of personal socialisation, the second was the emotional labour it demanded. Participants spoke repeatedly of the need to

absorb others' anxieties while concealing their own. Aine explained: 'You have to learn to put on a face. Even if you're panicking inside, you can't show it. Staff look to you for calm. Parents look to you for reassurance. So you end up carrying your stress and theirs'. Seamus elaborated: 'You're absorbing everyone's stress – the teacher who's struggling, the parent who's angry, the child who's upset. You have to hold it all. And you can't let it spill. That's the hardest part'. Elaine described the private toll: 'I've cried in the car on the way home more times than I can count. But you walk in the next morning and smile, because that's what's expected'. Brian added, 'There are nights you go home and it feels like the whole school is on your back. It's exhausting, and it's lonely. You can't unload it onto your staff; you can't always unload it at home. You just carry it'.

Despite the weight, participants found ways to survive, often by creating new spaces of belonging beyond their own schools. Niamh reflected: 'I was really struggling until I connected with another principal who'd been at it for ten years. Talking to her helped everything; it made me realise I wasn't failing. That principal saved me'. Karen described how informal principal networks offered relief:

The WhatsApp group of local principals was my lifeline. It was the only place I could be honest about how hard it was. In school, you put on a brave face, but there, you could say what you were really feeling.

These external connections functioned as counter-socialisation, reconstituting principals into (informal) networks of empathy and recognition: 'My principal group is just class, and I feel I owe them so so much – great friends now, I would do anything for them' (Liam). Where the organisational context isolated them, peer networks re-socialised them into solidarity.

Most felt that time and experience also helped them overcome the challenges. Roisin flagged 'the honeymoon period, well, that was the toughest period. But you got to know the school, the staff, and the parents. You got to know how things work, and what to sweat about and what not to sweat about'. Elaine shared this, 'time and experience, but I think that is not a healthy outlook because the first few months you should not be made to feel vulnerable, you should have somebody there at your side'. Brian also felt that 'I am still learning the ropes but it is easier, but the first few years were really stressful and I don't think that should be allowed to continue, because I know people who have packed in the role of principal after three years or so, because they just hated it and could not get on top of things'. Laura described her days 'as ups and downs ... some days I feel I am doing really well, other days, well not so'. Karen remarked: 'I still ask myself is this the right job for me – I do look back on my old school, my lovely literacy post, and wonder why did I give it all up'.

Discussion

Murphy's research (2023) rejects leadership preparation as a pipeline or a credentialing exercise; rather, he identifies a series of dualities, such as formal/informal, individual/systemic, policy/pathway, that are constitutive of how novice principals experience becoming leaders. This study advances this theorisation. The experiences of early-career principals documented in this study highlight that occupational socialisation is a deeply relational and contested negotiation of multiple, and sometimes contradictory,

dimensions, which impacts how they are prepared for and inducted into the role (Cottrell and James 2016). The anticipatory images that principals carried into the role were formed over years of observing their own school leaders or in their own idealised visions of what kind of leader they wanted to be. These anticipations, while powerful in shaping motivation, were revealed to be partial and misleading. Many principals entered the role animated by the ideal of becoming instructional and pedagogical leaders, of shaping teaching and learning, nurturing staff and driving improvement. Yet, once in post, they encountered a reality dominated by bureaucracy and the administration. The motivational core of anticipatory socialisation was thus displaced by an overwhelming set of managerial demands, generating frustration, disorientation, and a sense that their visions had failed to match the lived texture of the role. This disconnect is not unique to Ireland; research across contexts highlights how anticipatory socialisation produces idealised, even romanticised, conceptions of leadership that collapse when confronted with the daily realities of principalship (Spillane and Lee 2014). The problem, however, is not simply one of individual naivety but of systemic reproduction: the ways in which leadership is represented in professional and policy discourse cultivate images of instructional and pedagogical leadership while systematically obscuring the extent of bureaucratic and managerial work that dominates practice (Spillane et al. 2015).

Professional socialisation, while valuable, compounded these contradictions. Post-graduate leadership programmes foregrounded the principal as the leader of learning. Participants valued this framing, and many attributed their decision to seek principalship to the intellectual and moral purpose such discourse provided. Yet when tested against the lived reality of the role, these framings faltered. Instructional leadership, while desirable, even inspirational, proved extraordinarily difficult to enact under the weight of administrative demands. This gap between professional socialisation and practice echoes a longstanding critique in leadership studies: that theoretical models, no matter how coherent, are vulnerable to becoming normative discourses that inspire but do not adequately equip principals to deal with the competing logics of accountability and bureaucracy (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay 2021; Hallinger and Murphy 2013). In this light, the question is not whether instructional leadership remains theoretically sound, but whether it can ever be meaningfully enacted without fundamental changes to the organisational and policy contexts in which principals work.

Organisational socialisation revealed another critical layer of contradiction. Circular 0070/2018 (DoE) has sought to reconfigure leadership in Irish schools by strengthening middle leadership posts and advocating for distributed models of practice. Yet, despite this policy development, principals rarely described their experience as embedded in a distributed leadership culture. Instead, they framed themselves as isolated actors, carrying the burden of accountability alone. Several were reluctant to disrupt existing leadership structures within their schools, wary of upsetting staff relationships or destabilising established practices. Others recognised the potential of distributed leadership but felt constrained by accountability measures and legislative frameworks that hold principals singularly responsible (Gorman and O'Higgins Norman 2024). What emerges here is a tension between policy rhetoric and lived enactment. Distributed leadership is officially sanctioned, even celebrated, yet structurally undermined by the institutional design of the principalship itself. This mirrors the argument of Spillane et al. (2015) that the tension between leadership in the singular and leadership in the plural is not reducible

to the choices of individual principals; it is embedded in systemic contradictions that compel them to assume an isolated, individually accountable stance. In short, organisational socialisation inducts principals into a role that formally promotes collaboration but structurally enforces individualisation. Personal socialisation further complicates this picture. The identity transformation demanded of novice principals was profound, requiring them to shift from collegial staff member or middle leader to the figurehead of the school. This transformation was often experienced as isolating and dislocating.

The findings of this study invite a sharper interrogation of what it means to speak of sustainable leadership in the Irish primary school context. In policy and scholarly discourse, sustainability in leadership is consistently tied to the capacity of schools to distribute responsibility, build collective capacity and ensure that leadership is not dependent on heroic individuals but embedded in enduring structures (Hargreaves and Fink 2006). Yet the narratives of novice principals in this study reveal a profound disjuncture: the image of the principal as the solitary fulcrum of the school, responsible for everything from exercising administrative and operational oversight, persisted, despite policies that ostensibly challenge it. What is at stake here is not only the well-being of individual principals but the systemic sustainability of leadership. By socialising new principals into roles that are overwhelmingly individualised, the system perpetuates not just individualised and heroic models of leadership, but, critically, fragility, where leadership becomes dependent on personal endurance rather than on institutionalised capacity (Sugrue 2015). This fragility was evident in participants' accounts of disorientation and their experiences of survival. Sustainable leadership cannot be achieved by exhorting principals to be more resilient or by encouraging them to adopt distributed models; it requires a systemic redesign (Spillane et al. 2015). This includes confronting the accountability and policy texts that position the principal as solely responsible, embedding mentoring and succession planning as formal features of school life, and institutionalising shared leadership so that responsibility and capacity can genuinely extend beyond the individual incumbent (Sugrue 2015).

Participants acknowledged that, while the first year or so was marked by disorientation and strain, they eventually adapted to the demands of the role over time. What proved most critical in this process was the engagement in principal networks and support groups. Overwhelmingly, these were described as a key survival strategy. Regional principal clusters and informal peer groups provided both practical guidance and emotional solidarity, offering a collective space to troubleshoot challenges and counteract the isolation of leadership. In this respect, it could be argued that these support networks operated as an embryonic form of system leadership, where principals collectively worked to build shared capacity and resilience across schools (Brennan and Pennycook 2025; Chapman 2019; Harris, Jones, and Hashim 2021). However, while such practices reflect the very essence of system leadership, they remain notably absent from current policy discourse in Ireland, which continues to frame leadership largely through the lens of the individual principal. The reliance on informal networks for survival thus not only highlights the adaptability of novice principals but also exposes a policy blind spot: the failure to recognise and embed collective forms of leadership (beyond the school) as a sustainable feature of the system (Gorman et al. 2025). That said, these supports, while valuable, were not a panacea for the issues encountered. They were peripheral to the daily life of schools and largely informal. They did little to

redistribute responsibility within the organisation, leaving the core experience of leadership in the individual school as one of isolation.

Conclusions, limitations and implications

This paper helps to cut through some of the common myths about becoming a principal. The participants did not step into the role unknowingly; rather, they entered a position that remains ill-defined, with expectations that are often hidden until lived. Viewed through the framework of occupational socialisation, the data show how supportive contexts can amplify anticipatory hopes and professional preparation, yet just as quickly dampen them due to organisational pressures and the weight of accountability (Spillane and Anderson 2014). Recognising these dynamics opens new possibilities for rethinking how leadership preparation and support might be designed around the realities of the role, rather than the myths that surround it. That said, some limitations should be noted. The study is based on a relatively small purposive sample of fifteen principals, which, although diverse in terms of school size and context, may not fully capture the heterogeneity of leadership experiences across Ireland. The reliance on self-reported accounts means that the findings are shaped by participants' reflections at a particular moment in time rather than by longitudinal trajectories of adaptation and change. Future research could extend these insights by following principals over time, combining interviews with observational data and exploring how socialisation processes unfold across different phases of leadership and in varied international contexts.

While recognising the limitations, this paper offers an analytically in-depth grounded account of the current state of school leadership in Ireland, viewed through the experiences of novice principals. Their experiences do more than illuminate the challenges of early leadership; they act as an early signal of a system under strain, revealing how existing arrangements for leadership support, development and accountability are increasingly misaligned with the realities of school leadership. While distributed leadership is widely promoted in policy and professional discourse, novice principals' experiences suggest that it remains difficult to enact in practice within a system that continues to concentrate individualised responsibility and accountability on the principal. This concentration of responsibility is not a novel finding; rather, the contribution of this paper lies in showing how this enduring structural condition is brought into sharp relief during the early years of principalship, offering further insight into why distributed leadership continues to prove difficult to realise in everyday Irish school practice. This concentration of responsibility has wider implications for the sustainability of the principal's role. By positioning the principal as the primary bearer of accountability, it contributes to growing concerns about the long-term viability of the role, reflected in national and international calls to reconfigure school leadership through role division, co-principalship, and shared leadership arrangements (Armstrong and Rayner 2020; Sheehy 2023).

These dynamics also highlight the limits of existing approaches to leadership preparation and induction, and the potential value of more embedded, context – and practice-based forms of professional learning (Gorman, Brennan, and King 2025). Participants' accounts suggest that preparation remains heavily oriented towards normative and theoretical models of leadership, with insufficient attention to the relational, administrative and

situational complexities that characterise the role in practice. In this context, forms of professional learning such as structured shadowing, sustained mentoring and professional learning communities may play a critical role in supporting novice principals' transition, particularly by providing opportunities to learn leadership *in situ* rather than retrospectively making sense of it once accountability has already been assumed (Brauckmann, Pashiardis, and Ärlestig 2020; Brennan and Gorman 2023; Bush 2018; Miscenko, Guenter, and Day 2017).

Without addressing these underlying structural conditions, attempts to rethink leadership, support collaboration, or enhance leadership learning risk remaining rhetorical rather than transformative. The commitment within the Irish *Programme for Government 2025* to convene a national education convention in 2026 and to review school leadership supports creates a timely opportunity to engage more fundamentally with how leadership is supported, sustained and renewed over time. In this context, the analysis presented in this paper offers a grounded contribution to that forthcoming national conversation.

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