

# **The Challenges of Distributing Leadership in Irish Post-Primary Schools**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the challenges and opportunities in relation to developing distributed leadership practice in Irish post-primary schools. It considers school leadership within the context of contemporary distributed leadership theory. Associated concepts such as distributed cognition and activity theory are used to frame the study. The study is situated in a space which acknowledges the current complex reality in our schools, where school leadership is characterised by increased workload and an ever-expanding role-definition. Drawing on the empirical findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with principals, deputy principals, post of responsibility holders and teachers in three case-study schools, the study probes: (1) how school leaders (re)construct a form of leadership suited to the needs of the current reality, by exploring their leadership and management styles; (2) how the internal conditions are created in which distributed leadership can function; (3) the challenges posed by distributed leadership and how they might be overcome. The findings clarify that school leadership is a construct beyond the scope of the principal alone. While there is widespread support for a distributed model of leadership, the concept does not explicitly form part of the discourse in the case-study schools. This poses challenges for school leaders and policy-makers to put mechanisms in place to re-culture schools, to develop teacher-leadership capacity and to reflect on the future direction of leadership in Irish post-primary schools.


**Keywords:** Leadership, Distributed leadership, Distributed cognition, Activity theory, Case study, Policy, Irish post-primary schools, Discourse.

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## **Introduction**

In the educational climate of recent decades, there are increased demands for greater accountability, along with standards and outcomes-based reform measures. Into the mix must be added the new challenges for school leaders, resulting from a changing social environment across many countries, due to rapid technological innovations, mobility, globalization and attendant changes in legislation (Moller, 2009). The Irish post-primary system is no exception to this trend. In this frame, school leadership is high on policy

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agendas and there is a focus on the relationship between leadership, school improvement and sustaining change (Harris, 2005).

There is worrying evidence, however, that school leaders (principals) feel more pressurized than did their peers a number of generations ago, with the phenomenon of increased workload, coupled with the manner in which the role has expanded and intensified, as well as its inherent stresses, leaving principals feeling disempowered (Evans, 1996, Bottery, 2004). This point is clearly evidenced in the Irish post-primary system where the current administrative workload, accountability measures, legislative requirements, budgetary cutbacks, with the erosion of the middle management structure, limit the capacity and detract from the primary role of the principal as the strong visionary leader of learning in his/her school.

While this current situation in school leadership presents challenges, it also provides opportunities to reflect on new modes of organizational and work re-design and lateral capacity building. Because the process of change reflects not only adaptation to external forces, but also an investment of energy in what people do in their mutual relations (Wenger, 1998), it allows us to consider innovative ways of looking at the practice of leadership in our schools and on how lateral capacity might be developed, as schools seek to re-configure and re-structure school leadership roles.

In engaging with this current educational leadership conversation, the pertinent questions requiring reflection and closer scrutiny in the Irish context include: (i) what forms of school leadership are required to mediate the influences of the broader discourses of external forces and policies?; (ii) in the current constantly evolving and fluid educational landscape, how are the leader and follower roles and identities constructed?; (iii) if the core work of a school is teaching and learning and leadership is framed as the *how* of education, what are the issues pertaining to and capacity building of teachers?.

In responding to these questions, the construct of distributed leadership is utilized as the lens through which to analyze leadership practice in Irish post-primary schools. In essence, leadership from the distributed perspective is premised on capacity-building in the school organization, with the engagement of many people being at the core of distributed leadership in action (Harris and Muijs, 2005). Schools in the Irish education system, along with the teachers in them have not had a tradition of engaging in collaborative planning and evaluation. Historically, the model for school leadership was based on a hierarchical system of governance, focused on authority, power and knowledge being vested in the principal at the apex of the organization, especially in religious run voluntary secondary schools, which had a very weak middle management system. The culture was counter-collaborative with the 'lay teacher' (non-religious) being denied agency.

In the current complex era, this poses challenges for school leaders to enact post-hierarchical options and to develop their school organizations as participatory communities, whereby leadership is collaborative in nature. In this article, the stance is taken that the challenge of interweaving and mediating the historical narratives with new policy paradigms, shapes the construction of leadership in Irish post-primary schools. It must be borne in mind, however, that change always involves both continuity and discontinuity. The challenge for school leadership is to mediate the tensions between continuities and discontinuities. The argument will be made that these two contrasting scripts can be integrated and "these new relationships can awaken new interests and translate into a re-negotiation of the enterprise" (Wenger, 1998, p.97), as schools re-structure and re-define themselves.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature and process of leadership practice in Irish post-primary schools and to probe the challenges in distributing leadership. I first briefly review the literature on distributed leadership and extract a set of tools which inform the study. I then discuss findings from my qualitative case-study research on three post-primary schools. The empirical work that currently exists in Ireland, concerning distributed leadership and on how leadership mediates adaptive challenges, is limited. This study, though small-scale offers a powerful empirical lens to illuminate leadership practice in Irish post-primary schools in Ireland.

### *Theoretical background*

While current discourses on school improvement downplay the traditional notion of the single, strong leader, schools are being drawn in a direction where there is a shifting emphasis in education from individual to collective responsibility (Fullan, 2001, de Lima, 2008). Distributed leadership is one prominent conceptualization of leadership prevalent in the current discourse about leadership practice in schools. There is general agreement among all researchers and analysts that achieving results with others is the essence of leadership and the role of transformational leadership is to help others to find and achieve new goals, individually and collectively (Hallinger and Heck, 2003). Most authors also seem to agree with the conceptualization that distributed leadership is not the same as dividing responsibilities and tasks among individuals who perform certain defined organizational roles, but instead, it comprises dynamic interactions between multiple leaders and followers (Timperley, 2009). A distributed perspective recognizes that there are multiple leaders, with the focus being upon the interactions, rather than the actions of those in formal and informal roles, as it is primarily concerned with how leadership influences organizational and instructional improvements (Spillane et al, 2004, Spillane, 2006, Harris and Spillane, 2008).

The research for this article has been informed by the seminal work of two contemporary theorists, James Spillane (2004, 2005, 2006) and Peter Gronn (2000, 2002, 2008, 2009), whose comprehensive body of work adopts a socio-cultural perspective. I have chosen these two seminal theorists for two primary reasons: (i) in theoretical terms the most contemporary and robust analysis of distributed leadership is located within their work (Harris and Muijs, 2005), (ii) because distributed leadership does not have a broad empirical base, they both utilize the concept as a diagnostic and analytical tool for thinking about leadership and not as a prescription for how it should be practiced.

Spillane (2005, 2006) draws heavily from distributed cognition, which proposes that human knowledge and cognition are not confined to an individual, but are distributed in the interactive web of actors, artefacts and situation, relying on certain cultural tools and ways of being that are valued in particular contexts.

Spillane et al (2004), drawing on rich empirical data from a four-year longitudinal mixed-methods study in Chicago, which remains the largest contemporary study of distributed leadership practice, suggest that a distributed perspective involves two aspects: the *leader-plus* and the *practice* aspects.

The *leader-plus* aspect implies a social distribution of leadership, involving *multiple* leaders. Spillane et al (2004) contend that understanding how various leaders in a school work together to enact leadership tasks is a key aspect of the social distribution of leadership practices. They further suggest that this social distribution is much more than an additive model, thus acknowledging a division of labour in the enactment of tasks. Rather, it involves understanding how practice is *stretched* over the work of various school leaders. In this conceptualization, leadership practice is primarily about interactions between the many rather than the few, it is not simply about roles and positions, but

rather a reciprocal *interdependency* is created between individuals' actions (Spillane, 2005). In this frame, thus, the *practice* is the central concern: leadership practice is generated in the interactions of *leaders, followers* and their *situation*; the *situation* defines leadership practice and is itself defined through leadership practice.

The *situational* distribution of leadership is pertinent and merits further elaboration. In keeping with Distributed Cognition, Spillane et al (2004) argue that situation is not external to leadership activity, but serves to influence leadership activity from within the activity, being stretched over the many facets of the school situation, including tools, language and organizational structure. In their definition, structure refers, not only to organizational structures, but also to broader social structures and the way they influence human agency and the interactions between leaders and followers, in enacting school leadership.

Spillane et al (2004) draw on the work of Etienne Wenger (1998) to illuminate how situation is constructed as the socio-cultural context or "reifications of practices" that exemplify school leadership activity. Wenger's theory suggests that people's identities are constructed in relation to their participation in "communities of practice", and ways of knowing can be derived from participation in these communities. From this perspective, "communities of practice" are constitutive of shared histories of learning and evolve through the processes of participation and reification, interacting and intertwining over time. This perspective is of value in enabling understanding of leadership activity and practice, as a school community is comprised of many forms of participation and school leadership is mediated by "communities of practice", in which "meanings are negotiated in practice" (Wenger, 1998, p.85). Considering these conceptual issues, a key challenge in adopting a distributed leadership framework and, influencing the current research is to identify and analyze aspects of the situation that constitute leadership activity in schools.

Similarly, Peter Gronn (2000, 2002, 2008, 2009) argues for a distributed perspective on leadership based on a numerical view, whereby leadership is dispersed among some, many or possibly all members of the organization. This multiple sense, numerical view of leadership allows for all organizational members to be leaders at some stage. This additive understanding does not privilege the work of certain individuals, nor is there a presumption about which individuals' behaviours carry more weight with colleagues (Gronn, 2000). Rather, this type of leadership is characterized by synergistic relationships and assumes that the aggregated sum of leaders' work adds up to more than the individual parts.

The theoretical basis of Gronn's conceptualization of distributed leadership is underpinned by cultural-historical Activity Theory. In Activity Theory, there is an emphasis on the division of labour, creating different positions for the participants. The activity system has multiple layers, with work being mediated by tools and performed in conditions of collective activity and "conjoint Agency". Gronn's (2000, 2002) perspective suggests that leadership has an emergent property. This dynamic, additive holistic concept posits that leadership is more appropriately understood as fluid, rather than a fixed phenomenon. This conceptualization has enormous potential to move forward our understanding of leadership by foregrounding organizational work, more and more as the focus of analysis and discussion is an ongoing trajectory of organizational evolution (Gronn, 2000).

An additional advantage of this participative emergent approach is that it opens up a wide range of development options and possibilities, as individuals can learn from each other in a meaningful and mutually supportive way (Harris and Muijs, 2005). In this way, practice is ultimately produced by organizational members, through the negotiation of

meaning, as the continuity of such emergent structures derives, not from stability, but from adaptability (Wenger, 1998).

Together with this technical side of the division of labour, there is also a social side, which is based on the values, interests and ethos of the groups. This perspective is closely allied to the activity theoretical principle of historicity, which posits that activity systems take shape and may only be understood against their own history. Engestrom (1998) proposes that history needs to be studied at local level and also at the level of theoretical ideas and tools that have shaped the activity. Thus, work in a school needs to be analyzed against the history of its local organization and also against the more global history of the concepts, procedures and tools employed and accumulated in the local activity. This perspective is of value in studying and analyzing the *how* and *what* of leadership practice in our schools and in mediating contradictions and innovating change. The socio-cultural context of the school is fundamental to any discussion on school leadership and the distribution of leadership in schools.

In light of the theoretical research base and to move forward our understanding of the phenomenon of leadership in Irish post-primary schools, the distributed leadership conceptualization is considered a promising approach to analysis. The application of the distributed leadership framework will enable an elucidation on the *how* and *what* questions of school leadership and will serve to open up both the "blank spots" (Heck and Hallinger, 1999) in our understanding of the challenges of distributing leadership in Irish post-primary schools.

### **Methodology**

This study has adopted a phenomenological approach and seeks an understanding of the life-world (*lebenswelt*) of the participants, and how they make sense of that life-world (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The key phenomenologically-inspired elements of this research are: (i) to generate, through interviews, a clarity of the life-world situations of the participants in the case-study schools and to gain a deeper understanding of how leadership is experienced from the inside, and (ii) to analyze, interpret and understand the meanings pertaining to key themes in the subjects' life-worlds, as they relate to leadership, as well as the factors and processes that give rise to and shape them. In this way, it is intended to arrive at the essence of the meaning of the leadership experience.

Purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) was used to select 3 case-study schools, to enable a deeper understanding of the *how* and *why* of leadership practice. In selecting cases, account was taken of the different socio-cultural backgrounds and contexts: one from the voluntary secondary sector, one from the community and comprehensive sector and one from the vocational educational sector; I interviewed teachers at all levels in the school. The three case-study schools have a broad geographical spread, with variations based on school size, history and socio-cultural context; one is an urban all girls' voluntary secondary school, one is an urban all boys' voluntary secondary school and the third is a rural co-educational community college.

The research in the schools took place during autumn 2010 and spring 2011. Semi-structured interviews, which form the kernel of the empirical component, were in-depth and in each school, the principal, deputy principal, a number of assistant principals, special duties teachers, non-post of responsibility holders and newly appointed teachers were interviewed. The data base also includes seven secondary interviews, one with the chairman of the board of management of one of the case-study schools, and 6 focus group interviews, one with each of the parents' councils and one with each of the student councils of each of the case-study schools.

All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed manually. All data analysis was done manually, employing a combination of inductive and thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), as a means of encoding the information and extracting themes and patterns from the data.

## **Findings**

By focusing on the *lebenswelt* and everyday lives of the principals and teachers in the case-study schools, by using three of the emergent sub-headings from the data, the purpose of this article is to probe and analyse the implications and challenges of these characteristics for the distribution of leadership in the schools. The themes which will be discussed in this article are

- (i) Constructions of leadership,
- (ii) Managerial leadership and
- (iii) Instructional leadership.

### *Constructions of leadership*

The initial question probed respondents' understanding of leadership and where they locate themselves conceptually. At the outset there was a general consensus that the role is becoming more complex and challenging, as they endeavour to navigate and mediate the increasingly fluid and blurred roles between the concepts of leadership, management and administration. Viewed from the perspective of school leaders themselves, the role of principal is positioned between and seeks to balance externally policy initiatives, on the one hand, with creating and maintaining school goals, identity and ethos on the other hand.

*Moral purpose.* Notwithstanding the evolving educational landscape, with its external imperatives resulting in principals spending more time on administration and management tasks, the respondents extract the visionary and moral leadership component as being essential to their leadership practice:

*The single phrase I use most often is moral purpose (P1)*

*For me the leadership role is the bit that inspires people, moves them forward (P2)*

*Emotional construct.* I then explored how principals and deputy principals establish their identities as emotional beings and argue that these protagonists need to have an emotional connectedness with their school communities (teachers, students, parents, boards of management), enacted through relationship building, in order to achieve the school's goals. Participation in a "community of practice", refers not alone to the process of taking part, but to the relations and social experience of living in the world, involving one's whole person (Wenger, 1998). Thus, because leading and managing are not static activities, the emotional construct of educational leadership needs to be fore-grounded, in any analysis on the implementation of distributed leadership in schools.

The frame outlined above prompted a discussion with principals and deputy principals on relational methods of mutual engagement. One respondent indicated that:

*I've moved my time to the affirmative part of the school, so I would spend the vast majority of time visiting classes, to praise teachers or say how superb things are going (P3).*

The incumbent points out that, in order to realize the role model aspect of his position, he has reduced his role in organizational work and in the disciplinary process. This role has now been distributed to Year Heads, as part of the middle management structure of the school. The principal explains that he now spends a lot of his time on the corridor, meeting staff, conversing with them, giving them reassurance and direction. The interviewee acknowledges that this strategic enactment of positive emotional leadership is possible, because the school is relatively new and posts of responsibility have not been lost due to staff retirements. Another principal offers a divergent view on how he enacts relationship building:

*If he doesn't contribute to the system, he will drain the system. Leadership is really about preventing energy drainage out of the system and the release of as much into the system as one can. I guess it ultimately boils down to conveying a sense of support, encouragement and validation (P2).*

The principal in the above vignette refers to the issue of the “redirection of some energy” and sees leadership in that context, as dissuading the staff member, without injuring him, and thereby allowing him a perceived agency by coming up with an alternative or remodeling of what the staff member had in mind. The channeling of this energy flow within the school organization is characterized by the emotional inter-subjectivities, in the professional relationships of the members of that school organization. The emotional intensity, on the part of the principal and deputy principal, of constructing the school’s “emotional map” (Moller, 2005), is not only focused on fostering good relations internally by validation and affirmation, but is also part of a process of knowing, and indeed regulating, the emotional subjectivities of all the agents in the school.

*Trust.* As an extension of this discussion, a traditional ethos of *care* and *nurture*, underpinned by values of respect, inclusion, openness and approachability has framed educational leadership in Ireland. The empirical evidence from the current case-study research indicates that leadership, as practiced in Irish post-primary schools, is embedded in an ethos of care. Within this ethos and a key factor in securing teacher leadership is trust and it serves to give teachers a sense of autonomy (Harris and Muijs, 2005).

As one principal suggests:

*The human being always responds to validation, and trust is probably the ultimate validation, because it's a signal that you're capable (P1).*

This view is very much corroborated in the interviews with the other principals. There are divergences, however, in how trust is enacted. Thus, the question needs to be posed regarding how authentic that trust is or if it is merely rhetoric as the assertion that any enactment of a team spirit based on trust is:

*A claim anybody can make, and people are going to make it, whether there is or there isn't (P2)*

Multiple meaning can be ascribed to enactments of trust, based on the subjectivities of the protagonists, from models that are carefully orchestrated by principals, to those that are enabled through discussion and debate, where people are allowed to make mistakes. Building an identity as a school principal consists of negotiating the meaning of one's experience of membership of school communities, and the negotiations are processes where emotions and questions of power play important roles (Moller, 2005, p. 145).

*My philosophy is this, if I give a role or a job to somebody, we [principal and deputy principal] start at the point that people need a lot of help, but our object is within two years, to empower that person to a point where they can do the job, without recourse to us except to check that the way things are moving is within the general ethos of the school (P1).*

*Risk-taking.* There are other ways in which trust can be enacted. Another principal puts forward the view that in a school culture which promotes empowerment and the distribution of leadership, and which supports people during times when that leadership works, and at times when it does not work, risk-taking is a key component. This principal sees her role as one of trusting, supporting and confidence-building and in encouraging teachers to take a risk.

*I would see most members of staff now being willing to risk something, whether it's making a presentation in front of staff or taking on another role. This is one of the things I love, people are willing to take on leadership roles, without having an official title (P2).*

Risk-taking is very much part of this principal's trajectory of leadership practice, as she creates the conditions necessary to take risks in the interests of new learning and identity formation (Sugrue, 2005). The sub-text of the above narratives may be read as instances of the influential spaces occupied by teachers in the decision-making and leadership processes of schools. Key questions arise around who are the power-holders in the schools and who is empowered to act? In the cultures of management in these schools, power and influence are presented as being distributed, negotiable and are exercised both formally and informally.

*Shared practice.* Another overarching conceptualization across the three case-study schools constructs leadership as:

*giving empowerment right down through the organization for all members to be leaders themselves (P1)*

*I think it applies throughout the school at all levels (P2)*

*The only way you can give leadership is by allowing people to practice leadership (P3).*

Consistent with the literature (Ritchie and Woods, 2007), a recurrent theme emanating from the interviews with principals and deputy principals is a recognition that leadership in the twenty first century is a shared phenomenon, with the aim of empowering all members of the school community. In respect of this debate, it is important to note, however, that conversations with members of the Parents' Councils and Student Councils of the three schools constructed leadership as residing primarily in school principals. This calls on school leaders to facilitate debate among all stakeholders to consider "the changing landscape of agency in work organizations" (Engestrom, 2008, p. 207).

*Teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership practices.* The research also sought to analyse the lenses through which teachers position the roles of their principals, along with the factors and processes influencing decision-making procedures in the schools. The following three quotes are illustrative of typical themes emerging from the interviews with teachers. The vignettes include themes and modes of belonging which, (i) construct hierarchy as a constraint, (ii) propose that principals lead from the front and the back, thereby, implying that leadership and agency are becoming increasingly distributed, (iii) fore-ground issues of identity and agency, (iv) recognize that leadership practices are informed by school ethos and characteristic spirit.

*I recently came back to the classroom after fourteen years. It is now much more structured, the organization, the red-tape, the paper work, the legal implications and the whole sense of accountability. I think sometimes a principal has to lead from the front and sometimes they have to lead from the back. It must be very difficult trying to marry that with everybody. I suppose leadership is in the middle of the circle (T1).*



*I think a good leader should share skills. I think it's actually good to share out the skills. You can't be dependent on one person [principal], I think that makes for a happier atmosphere (T2).*

*I see leadership throughout the school. I mean the principal and Deputy Principal are the top when it comes to authority, but there are a lot of other circles and networks going on (T3).*

In the above quotes, there is an explicit recognition of the increasingly complex and challenging role of the school principal and of extrinsic variables in the guise of prescriptive, externally-mandated demands for accountability and legal compliance. Implicitly, what emerges from the narratives is that a principal's identity is constructed by mediating external variables with the internal life-world and history of the school community.

The comment that the principal has to marry different perspectives and experiences of all members of the school community supports the finding from the interviews with the principals, that in constructing the school's "emotional map", the principal focuses on fostering good relations and regulating the emotional inter-subjectivities of all agents in the school. From this perspective, negotiating school identity and meaning involves both interpretation and action on the part of the school principal, as school leader. In negotiating this meaning, there is a recognition that it is incumbent on the principal to be sensitive and respectful to the diverse needs of the school community and to bring together the multiple perspectives, interests and interpretations that participation entails (Wenger, 1998).

A key point emanating from the above data is that, in the increasingly complex and pressurized school environments of today, the notion of the heroic, solo leader at the apex of the organizational structure no longer prevails. While there is an implicit expectation that school principals create the environments to enable the diffusion and distribution of leadership practice throughout the schools, the tone of the discourses indicates that this is a reciprocal process, with teachers expressing satisfaction and support for their principals in that endeavour.

*Transformational leadership.* Congruent with the findings from the interviews with the principals, from the perspectives of the teacher interviewees, principals' leadership practice has a strong transformational component. Teachers identified the importance of transformational models of leadership practice as being significant in mediating complex situations. The conceptualisations of transformational leadership are as follows:

*I see leadership as both guiding and nurturing. The guidelines for leadership, certainly within this school, I see them coming from the top (T1).*

*I suppose it [leadership of the principal] is a combination of a number of things. I think, the principal, as a true leader has to act in such a way that people see them doing such things and follow in their footsteps (T2).*

*I'm always very careful that the principal is not standing alone in the cold and everybody else down on the other end of the pitch. It's important that the principal knows the staff are behind her. Now that can only happen if the principal behaves in a certain manner too. It's a two-way thing (T3).*

*I think the whole tone of the place is set by the principal (T4.)*

The above quotations indicate that there are diverse views on what constitutes transformational leadership. The various perspectives range from constructing this element of leadership practice of the principal as setting the vision, enabling a mutually

supportive environment, using the tools of communication and collaboration and being visible. This empirical evidence constructs practice in a participative, shared model informed by the core values of the school. While it is acknowledged that the quotations are informed by the respondents' subjectivities, a commonality in all discourses is the positioning of the principal as *the* visionary leader in the school, who leads by example. This symbolic force of the principal's leadership, whereby s/he communicates what s/he stands for provides meaning to the school and gives both teachers and students a sense of order and direction, to which they respond with motivation and commitment (Sergiovanni, 2001).

The construction by Teacher 2 above, of the principal as the "true leader" is an interesting rhetoric as it points towards a practice that privileges the perspective of those who define the organizational procedures and implicitly "hides the knowledgeable of those who apply them" (Wenger, 1998, p. 261). While the argument may be made that the institutional authority is an essential aspect of negotiability, it must also be borne in mind that an organization which functions in an adequately coordinated fashion, without excessive recourse to privileging thrives on "intensive negotiation of meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 261). The challenge for transformational leadership, thus, is to enable the school, as a learning community, to develop new understandings and identities of participation.

#### *Managerial Leadership*

This section of the analysis provides insights into how managerial leadership unfolds in the schools. It also provides an understanding on how the instruments and tools utilised to enable the enactment of leadership and management across the various agents in the school communities – both positional and non-positional (Spillane et al, 2009). It explores the various positional (middle management teams in the guise of post of responsibility holders and subject department coordinators) and informal leaders (who exercise leadership to complete a specific task), whereby teachers exercise leadership and decision-making (i) to enable the school organisation to achieve its goals and (ii) to enable the lateral distribution of leadership and the development of collaborative school cultures. The pervasive practice of volunteerism is also identified as a central dimension of teacher, non-professional, leadership practice.

*Middle management structure.* It was clear from the conversations with the principals and deputy principals that their identities and their lived reality, at this time, are shaped by adaptation to the exigencies of externally mandated accountability regimes. The following quotation is typical of sentiments expressed by principals in all the case-study schools.

*A lot has come back to the principal and deputy principal. It means that by taking on the day-to-day things, an awful lot more, that you have less time to do the planning, and the planning is done outside of school time, because you're caught up with so much of the day-to-day things (P1).*

All interviewees concurred that there is an increasing pressure on the principal and deputy principal to fulfil an increasing number of administrative duties, because schools are required to adhere to accountability regimes. The embargo on promotional posts, as an enactment of state intervention, has adversely impacted on the formal distribution of leadership through the middle management structure. By extension, it also impacts on the primary role of the principal as educational leader, to enable capacity building, in order to create a professional learning community in his/her school.

*If you don't build people's leadership skills at this stage, when we eventually get our posts back, we won't have anybody ready to fill them (P2).*

One way in which principals manage this complex situation is to distribute leadership by negotiation, persuasion and strategic planning. This leadership distribution is both opportunistically and strategically managed by principals, as they focus on school improvement (MacBeath, 2009). What is clearly evident from the interviews is that as principals navigate these new realities and “modes of belonging”, issues of power come to the fore, in terms of how actions, transactions and “patterns of activity” shape distribution of leadership.

The conversations with post of responsibility and non-post of responsibility holders alike, indicate that the post of responsibility structure constitutes the formal, remunerated middle management stratum, supporting the principal in leading and managing the school. There is an explicit recognition of the need to share duties across members of the teaching staff and “to support the principal” in the complex life-world of today’s school organizations. The Year Head system is a key component of the middle management structure, allowing the protagonists to have an effective role in managing student progress.

*Year Heads’ Meetings.* One of the tools and routines utilized in all the schools, to enable the distribution and enactment of leadership across these positional agents, is the convening of Year Heads’ meetings with the principals and deputy principals. Following Spillane et al’s (2004) *task-centred approach*, the following typical quotes centre on the tasks around which school leaders organize practice.

*I’m a Year Head, we’ve meetings twice a week and we meet in the principal’s office. We discuss pastoral and discipline issues relating to the students. As a follow-on from these meetings, if parents need to be consulted, I would get in touch with them. I meet the teachers and find out how things are going [re student discipline]. I visit classes the odd time (T4).*

*It [Year Heads’ meeting with the principal] is a kind of think-tank, where you share ideas, and I think that’s really important. I would follow up on any issues for the next meeting (T6).*

The above data suggest that teacher leadership is being recognized across all school communities and that teacher leadership is being distributed and actively supported in schools. The timetabling of structured meetings between the principal, deputy principal and year heads is indicative of a strong commitment to the central work of the school, student achievement and welfare. There are a number of key points implicit in the data: (i) year heads have decision-making power and autonomy, enacted through the routine of meeting with teachers and parents; (ii) the metaphor of a “think-tank” suggests that expertise is shared and all points of view are considered as part of the process; (iii) the sharing of best practice implies open lines of communication and relationships based on trust and collegiality.

Conversely, however, a situation that is typical across all three case-study schools, the evidence also indicates that there is a hierarchical character to the structuring of team meetings. Due to time constraints, meetings are not convened with Special Duties teachers, who also hold promotional posts of responsibility. If the leadership potential of these posts of responsibility holders is to be pro-actively enhanced and supported, it is important to convene occasional structured meetings with the role incumbents to inspire and motivate confidence in the role. If teacher leadership is to become truly transformative, there needs to be time and opportunity for teachers to focus on aspects specific to their role (Harris, 2005).

While there was general consensus across all three case-study schools that the work and sphere of influence of the post of responsibility holder extends beyond the individual classroom, there was a lack of congruence as to whether their responsibilities constitute a key leadership role within the school organization.

*I wouldn't see myself as being any more powerful than anybody else. I'm getting paid to do it. As for leadership, I suppose we work as a team really (T1).*

*I suppose my view of leadership is probably quite narrow, because I wouldn't be that experienced in it. But from my point of view, I wouldn't like to sit at the back of the bus, I'd like to drive the bus (T2).*

*My post of responsibility would be part of the leadership in the school. If leadership is not distributed around the school, it's impossible for people to develop their own levels of leadership. People in this school are given total leadership and freedom, by the principal, to do the job (T3).*

*I would see leadership as being a part of my middle management role, as part of my post (T4).*

In applying an activity-theoretical perspective as a diagnostic tool to grasp the essence of leadership practice, it is evident from the foregoing data that while teacher leadership is a key factor in the lived reality of today's school organizations, different perspectives are rooted in different communities and historical formations. The above quotes are representative of two competing paradigms, with different conceptualizations on the power differential and authority conferred on the role. On the one hand, the views of the teachers in the first two quotes, equate power with rank, authority and control. In their conceptualizations, leadership is shared by post of responsibility holders, as part of a collaborative team, with the distribution of power and agency being located in the group. The principal is the "real leader" of the school, with the role of the middle management team being constructed in functional and egalitarian terms. Implicit in this constructivist view of distributed leadership is the notion that the team derives its identity and meaning from its shared understandings and culture.

Also worthy of note is the fact that one interviewee constructs his role as that of mere functionary, whereby he performs tasks for which he receives remuneration. An explanation for this world-view may lie in the fact that because his school is a voluntary secondary school, legacies of traditional, hierarchical modes of governance, as discussed earlier, pertain. Deep-rooted subjectivities, thus, serve to reproduce "the social structure in which it takes place" (Wenger, 1998, p. 13).

The alternative view is premised on the notion that in the complex activity systems that are today's school organizations, in the distribution of leadership and agency, the power and authority to lead are vested, not alone in the principal at the apex of the organization, but are distributed, to empower teachers working in collaborative working environments. Power is facilitative and enables others to accomplish something that they think is important (Sergiovanni, 2001, p. 152).

The metaphor of the post of responsibility driving the bus is a powerful description of a school organization which supports a flatter and more lateral type of leadership distribution. It is engaged in creating "the structural conditions or spaces where leadership can best operate and flourish" (Harris, 2008, p. 40). This debate makes it clear that conceptualizations of team and power are largely dependent on the character of the school organization and on the particular historical contexts in which they are embedded. Thus, the construction of the objective (leadership practice) does not happen in

“harmonious unity”, with different perspectives continuing to exist in different activity systems (Engestrom, 2008, p. 129).

While there is clear evidence from all three schools of distributed leadership practice, with the agents carrying out their leadership and management responsibilities with diligence, pride and commitment, due to their historical legacies, however, the concept of *distributed leadership* is not an explicit component of the discourse of voluntary secondary schools, which adhere to more traditional conceptualizations of middle management team construction. In light of the foregoing evidence, the point may be made that current changes in school organizations may create historically new features of intentionality and distributed agency (Engestrom, 2008).

In the conversations with non-post of responsibility holders, there was general consensus that posts of responsibility constitute a key leadership role within the school organizations. All teachers cited the Year Head system as being a key component of the middle management structure, in that it has an effective role managing student progress and behaviour. The following quotes, which represent typical responses, provide interesting data on 3 aspects of practice worthy of closer analysis. These aspects are (i) perceptions of the role, (ii) power differentials and (iii) the impact of the moratorium on promotional posts. Issues concerning communication underpin all 3 aspects.

*I do not have a post of responsibility. I didn't ever intend to go that route. I have no interest really in taking a post of responsibility. I just want to teach, I love teaching (T7).*

*There are some posts of responsibility where they would get extra pay for the position. I'm a class tutor and if it [a discipline issue] gets to the stage that it's out of control, the Year Head then comes in and I suppose they make a decision between the Year Head and the Principal (T8).*

*I'm a permanent whole-time teacher with no post of responsibility. If it wasn't for the moratorium, I think I probably would have a post for the work that I do (T9).*

In the first iteration above, the interviewee provides a lens through which she positions the roles of responsibility holders. She expresses the view that she has no interest whatsoever in middle management, but derives her identity as a teacher in the classroom, encouraging and motivating students. Implicit in her narrative is the notion that the holding of a post of responsibility is extraneous to her construct of classroom teacher. The point must be made, however, that the two constructs are not irreconcilable and that “communities of practice become resources for organizing our learning as well as contexts in which to manifest our learning through an identity of participation” (Wenger, 1998, p. 273).

In the second iteration the interviewee's discourse indicates how she, as a Class Teacher (a voluntary role catering to the pastoral needs of a particular class group), positions the relationship between the principal and the year head, as post of responsibility holder, and the power differential between leader and follower. Implicit in this narrative is the view that school leadership has a linear property, with a demarcation between those who have formal leadership authority and those who do not. This has implications for school communities to address and re-define how collegiality is understood and how leadership activity is coordinated and transacted.

A key message in the third interviewee's narrative, as he elucidates on his career trajectory, and congruent with that of post of responsibility holders, is that the moratorium on promotional posts adversely affects teachers' beliefs about their working conditions and their capacity to develop leadership skills. The discourse suggests that

there are levels of cynicism and disempowerment presented by this barrier to teacher leadership. A key factor in the debate is the discussion on extrinsic motivation and financial recompense for post of responsibility holders. Notwithstanding the fact that teachers uphold the vocational dimension of their role and derive great intrinsic reward from contributing to the development of the school organization, the current study suggests, however, that a frustration with externally-mandated demands and policy agendas has a negative impact on teachers' motivation. It results in extrinsic concerns, pertaining to transactional models of leadership, being fore-grounded.

*Subject department coordinators.* Any discussion on distributed leadership and the *how* of leadership practice needs to focus on the roles and responsibilities of subject department coordinators. The empirical evidence from the case-study schools indicates that the mechanisms by which subject department coordinators are appointed and the levels of agency and influence attributed to them are largely dependent on the stage of development of the individual school organization. The trajectories of leadership practice vary between schools, in some schools the posts are voluntary and rotate, while in others they are held either by a senior teacher or post holder.

In addition, the scope and range of duties, responsibilities and role definitions of the subject department coordinators also vary across the case-study schools, on a continuum from a practice which is merely functional and fixed at one end, to one where the coordinators are entrusted with leadership and engage with deep student learning and classroom practice, at the other end of the continuum. The model expounded by one principal, whereby the role of subject department coordinator is a voluntary one and remains with the incumbent for as long as s/he wants, indicates that this frame of instructional leadership practice is a fixed phenomenon. Key questions need to be asked regarding who has agency and where the nexus of decision-making is located. From an Activity-Theoretical perspective, it prompts one to explore the principle of historicity with intersecting developmental layers (Engestrom, 2008).

In other instances, there is an organizational intentionality to rotate the role and thereby develop the leadership skills of all members of the subject department teams. In the proposed intentionality to rotate the subject coordinators' positions and, thereby, to create a space for the leadership capacity of all teachers, there is an alignment with the activity-theoretical perspective that current changes in work organizations have the possibility to create historically new features of collective intentionality and distributed agency. By adopting a rotational department heads' system, there is a platform for all teachers to enact leadership and decision-making powers and, thereby, a distribution of agency ensuring that school leaders have a significant impact on student outcomes.

In all instances, however, and one of the most salient findings from the research data is that the construction of subject department teams is a shared phenomenon negotiated as part of a joint enterprise based on team-work. Students are at the centre of the discourse and subject department coordinators thus influence classroom practice and are "important gatekeepers to change and development within their subject areas" (Harris and Muijs, 2005, p. 19). The evidence also indicates that the subject department coordinator, in some instances, has a key role to play in engaging in professional dialogue with the school principal and also responds to demands for external accountability in meeting with a representative of the Department of Education and Skills' Inspectorate.

The significant divergence in practices across the case-study schools, however, prompts the need for a systems-wide debate on the enactment of this highly influential role. The challenge for school principals is to create the space for increased leadership opportunities for teachers. If this is to be achieved, both structural and cultural changes

are required within schools as “communities of practice”. If subject department coordinators are to have agency and voice in influencing high quality learning experience for students and in developing collegial relations within the subject team, it requires principals and senior management teams to create an open space for professional dialogue and the authentic development of the construct. Prior research shows that giving teachers opportunities to lead has had a positive effect on the quality of relationships and teaching within schools (Harris and Muijs, 2005).

*Volunteerism.* Principals’ and teachers’ narratives across the three case-study schools indicate that, in constructing a tableau of contemporary informal school leadership, volunteerism must be analyzed as a key lateral strategy in the enactment of leadership practice. The empirical data indicate that this voluntary model of teacher leadership is enacted (i) by non-post of responsibility holding staff taking on duties and responsibilities and (ii) by leading and influencing the extra-curricular life of the school. In exploring the volunteerist dimension of leadership from a “leader-plus” perspective, it must be remembered that the concept of volunteering is deeply-rooted in the Irish post-primary system, particularly in faith-based schools, where school activities are mediated by the Christian values of volunteering for the community. It is also mediated by commitment to the ethos of the school community which, in all instances, promotes the nurture, care and holistic development of the student.

In spite of this agency, however, there were discernible tensions as some of the principals who were interviewed feared that the tenets of the Croke Park Agreement, (which requires teachers to work a further 33 hours outside of school time), would adversely affect volunteerism and the spirit of collegiality in schools.

From the perspectives of the teacher interviewees, the response on the part of the government to the rupture of the social and economic sphere (recession and downturn in the economy) and resultant austerity measures have resulted in a different reality for them, in how teacher leadership is framed to meet the exigencies of the newly emerging reality. A number of teacher interviewees believe that there is not as much volunteerism as formerly, with government policy and the tenets of the new national employment arrangement (Croke Park Agreement) being the primary causal factors. There are further tensions regarding the casualization of teachers’ contracts and a view that there is more pressure to volunteer on young teachers who do not have permanent whole-time positions, as they aspire to acquire Contracts of Indefinite Duration (CIDs) of Fixed-Term Contracts.

The interview data also suggest that there are tensions and emotional conflicts experienced by teachers as they seek to find a balance between the multiple demands of their roles as teachers in this new reality and the lack of acknowledgement of the enormity of teacher voluntary input in enabling school communities to function as collaborative, effective organisations. Essentially in the new managerial framework, what is at issue here is a conflict of discourses regarding the governance and purpose of education and “the role of relational human beings within the process” (Lynch et al, 2012). Despite these factors, however, implicit in the teachers’ dialogues is the notion that identity is a fluid construct, influenced by school history and context. Many teacher interviewees espouse that continuity with the school’s traditions and values is central to their identity as teachers. They hold the aspiration that voluntary activities would not be withdrawn, as volunteerism is constructed as a fundamental practice in enabling sustainable informal teacher leadership practice.

In respect of the above discussion, while in activity-theoretical terms the tensions and contradictions cause disturbance and conflicts, there is an onus on the schools to produce

“innovative attempts to change the activity” (Engestrom, 2008, p. 206). While the tensions may arise due to external mandates, there is an onus of responsibility on school leaders to assiduously develop tools and creative ways of managing the emotional care of teachers.

### *Instructional Leadership*

An analysis on instructional leadership practice in the case-study schools is essential if we are to gain an in-depth insight into the core work of school organizations. I seek to illuminate how school leadership practice in the schools connects with its object, i.e. the core of schooling - teaching and learning (Spillane, 2006), and how this construct of instructional leadership converges with conceptualizations of distributed leadership practice (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006), by examining how leadership for learning is distributed in the schools. The argument will be made that effective school leadership today must meaningfully balance and combine administrative and managerial duties and responsibilities with educational vision and the building of professional learning communities, with the quality of teaching and learning being the main priority in realizing that vision. The research findings indicate that a number of characteristics are shared by all the case-study schools in the enactment of distributed leadership practice, with many instruments being utilized in the construction of this frame.

*Staff meetings* – Staff meetings constitute a key institutional routine which encourages a culture of cooperation and facilitates the distribution of instructional leadership practice. The feedback from principals indicates that there is keen awareness of the need for dialogue concerning practice.

*We have to start thinking about methodology much more as teachers. It has now come to the point where two out of every three [staff] meetings are about learning in the classroom (P1).*

*Very often at staff meetings we have teacher input. I would very often chair the business part of the meeting. Then, if there's input, I'd just hand over to members of staff at that stage, depending on what the topic is. We then go off in to various subject groupings and we work on some of those ideas ..... to try and percolate the ideas (P2).*

There is an intentionality in the imperative for organizational members to collectively reflect on teaching methodologies and innovations. This strategically developed “leader-plus perspective” enables new forms of “collaborated leadership” (Spillane, 2006) and is premised on individual teachers and members of subject departments engaging in meaningful professional dialogue. Implicit in the proposal for the collaborative model, is the notion that teachers assume the responsibility of devising methodologies to transform organizational learning and planning for the future direction of the school. The evidence also indicates that the use of different artefacts (e.g. outside facilitators, use of internal expertise as a leadership routine), enables a flatter leadership structure.

*Curriculum.* The teachers’ reflections mirror much of the debate and contemporary thinking on curriculum, as part of the processes of change in the twenty-first century school (Collins and Dolan, 2012). The key insightful considerations emerging from the narratives include: (1) curricular change is generally perceived as a change in subject content, with the move towards curricular change and reform being recommended by teachers as being an essential component in the construction of engaging learning environments for teachers and students. The lack of innovative change in some curricula perceived as having a constraining property, leading to teacher frustration and lack of agency. (2) Implicit in all narratives is the overarching presence of the terminal examination as a key determinant in shaping classroom practice. As suggested by one interviewee, due to the current architecture of the examination system and because of the



huge pressure on students to get points at Leaving Certificate, teaching and learning practices continue to be dominated by traditional norms of practice, whereby teacher input continues to be significant and prescriptive. The challenge for teachers in leading classroom practice is to mediate inherited, traditional norms by empowering students to become self-directed learners. (3) Teachers take the stance that in the construction and development of schools as professional learning communities, there is a need to engage with innovative teaching methodologies. On-going in-service training is identified as a requisite tool in enabling the acquisition of professional expertise.

*Reflective practice.* In respect of the above discussion, one principal asserts that, due to the examination system, learning is still very teacher-directed, with the public discourse on curricular content being outputs-driven. "My whole interest in teaching and learning is that we actually all become self-motivated ourselves, whether we're teachers or children. Children should be taught to be inquisitive and be encouraged to learn themselves." (P2). The rhetoric in the foregoing extract is a powerful argument for a distributed model of reflective practice to enable depth rather than breadth of learning. It also calls for teachers and students to engage in the co-construction of knowledge in a culture of holistic organizational learning. The challenge for principals is to provide opportunities for teachers to become reflective practitioners and to refract deeply embedded subjectivities about what constitutes knowledge and learning and, in this way to engage and empower teachers to build professional learning communities. The creation of such a culture of learning also calls for continuous professional development for principals and a space for them to be self-reflective and self-evaluating.

*Accountability.* In order to extend the debate further, issues pertaining to accountability regimes, assessment procedures and teacher and student identity in the face of new technology need to be addressed. In the interviews with the teachers, elements of the discussions centre on how the demands for participation in a global knowledge economy shape the re-framing of curriculum and teacher practice. In respect of the new Project Maths one teacher interviewee opined as follows: "I'm not sure of the thinking behind it, but this new course is supposed to drive the results and increase levels in Maths. I'd kind of be a purist in Maths. I wouldn't agree with making courses easier, I think it's down to external forces." Another view, "If you allowed yourself become too immersed in it [accountability], you could become quite robotic. I'd never lose sight of my ethos, I'm able to reconcile the two." The foregoing rhetorics suggest that change is carefully interrogated and negotiated, with teachers, as practitioners, deriving identity, empowerment and agency through engaging in reflective enquiry. Mediating external accountability demands by clarifying and supporting the internal values and ethos of the school is a fundamental component of this reflective enquiry.

The challenge for school leadership is to mediate the two paradigms, by providing a space to enable teachers to engage in reflective enquiry, to refract deeply embedded subjectivities about what constitutes deep learning and, thereby, provide leadership for school improvement. This would enable educators to become more sophisticated in their ability to develop capacity for teaching and learning in schools (Sergiovanni, 2001). It is also essential that there is central investment to support principals in that endeavour.

The preponderance of evidence indicates, however, that the enactment of empowering methodologies is constrained by the assessment and examination systems and adherence to prescriptive, externally mandated accountability regimens. While teachers support and recommend a move toward curricular change and reform, they are of the view that they are denied agency by being marginalized in the top-down, decision-making process. Engaging teachers and positioning them centrally in the processes of curriculum design and assessment procedures is imperative if teachers are to play a significant role as

empowered leaders of classroom practice. This entails teachers pro-actively asserting their voice and school principals play a pivotal role in this regard.

A further curricular challenge includes the integration of new technology, as an artefact, in the classroom. The unprecedented pace of technological change and innovation impacts on teaching and learning. One teacher proffered the view “students have become spectators, with the technology that they’re spending their time on. It’s now getting students to focus and engage and to take on board the leadership that if there’s a problem that they can’t work out, that they try again and again, that seems to be gone.”

The rhetoric suggests (i) that the integration of new technology represents a fundamental departure from traditional norms of teaching and learning and (ii) that students are passive recipients of information and that the discourse of knowledge is determined by wider global market ideologies. What this view implies is that learning is linked to the instrumental purposes of human capital development and economic self-maximization (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). This creates new pressures for teachers, particularly for those who pre-date the technological era, to change with a curriculum that is relevant to young people’s lives, while simultaneously leading and enabling problem-solving and, thereby, fulfilling the intrinsic aims of education. The challenge for school leaders is to mediate the contrasting paradigms by providing time for dialogue and reflection to enable flexible and holistic teaching and learning environments and to enable teachers to adapt to the new technologies.

How principals enact their instructional leadership roles: The principal’s instructional leadership role focuses on coordinating instruction and curriculum and requires the principal to be “hip deep” and deeply engaged in stimulating, supervising and monitoring teaching and learning in the school (Hallinger, 2005). Following interviews with the protagonists, four key dimensions were extracted as being pertinent to the principal’s leadership role.

*Shared practice.* The findings indicate that, in all contexts, principals are deeply committed to the pursuit of excellence and to providing a positive and supportive environment for teaching and learning. There is a recognition that, while the principal, as *príomhoide*—principal teacher and leader of learning in the school sets the standard and influences the learning environment, both directly and indirectly, the practice is a shared one, involving many agents. There is a broad acknowledgement of the professionalism and expertise of teachers and an assertion that the solo leader cannot lead on his/her own. This proposes a view of the school community, as a community of practice, where relationships are dynamic and where power, influence and leadership are distributed to teachers who are directly involved with teaching and student learning in the classroom.

*Teacher learning and professional development.* Opportunities for continuous professional development and on-going teacher learning are in operation at many levels and seen as a priority in all case-study schools. Teachers are facilitated to attend courses organized and convened by their subject associations and also those provided by the Department of Education and Skills. The principals perceive the role of the instructional leader as being one where teachers are affirmed and encouraged to engage in life-long learning. This aligns closely with the viewpoint from the literature that, in maximizing teacher leadership and teacher learning and by placing teachers at the centre of change and development, there is greater opportunity for organizational growth (Harris and Muijs, 2005).

*Sharing expertise.* Teacher leadership and teacher learning are further enhanced and enabled by organisational routines which focus on interactions among teachers, the object of which is to share leadership and expertise.

*We're working at a culture of sharing with the subject departments (P1).*

*Teachers talk to each other in relation to giving information and resources.*

*It's all communication, it can be structured and it can be with anyone. (P2).*

The clear intentionality in these leadership practices, both formal and informal, is to lead to improvement in classroom practice and, thereby, lead to improvement in student learning.

The empirical evidence implies that leadership is conceptualized as a collective phenomenon, and in line with Activity Theory (Engestrom, 2010), there is an intentionality to distribute agency and to unleash the collective capacity of teachers, by encouraging the sharing of expertise and bringing the construction of knowledge outside the individual classroom. It is clear from the second iteration that, the unleashing of this type of distributed agency has an emergent quality. It is intended that by sharing expertise, teachers will learn from each other and support each other. Both statements imply interdependencies and co-performance of leadership routines and indicate *how* teachers share responsibility and *how* leadership practice is distributed among formal and informal leaders (Harris and Muijs, 2005; Spillane, 2006).

*Principals' involvement in classroom teaching and learning.* As already discussed, the focus in any learning community is the learning – are the students learning? One of the criteria used to evaluate how students learn is for the principal, teachers and students to have a collaborative dialogue and engagement on the issue and, thus, to eliminate teacher isolation and open the heretofore impenetrable classroom door. Traditionally, in the Irish education system, the teacher had virtual autonomy in his/her classroom. The following three elucidations indicate three diverse modes of belonging and practice and belonging.

*I would do it with teachers new to the school, but not with established teachers. I would not formally assess. (P1).*

*Never, I'm not in favour of the practice. Leave surveillance to the inspectorate. I'm always in and out of classes with messages, you'd soon know what's going on (P2).*

*I would go in and find out how students are getting on. For example, if I'm taking a free class, I could be looking at copies (P3).*

While the evidence indicates that there is no consistency in practice across the schools, the indication is that, in line with the TALIS (2009) findings on Direct Supervision of Instruction in the Schools, collaborative dialogue with teachers on the learning taking place in their respective classes does not form a significant part of the culture and practice of Irish post-primary schools.

As evidenced in the above statements, an integral component of the principals' instructional leadership practice in the case-study schools is visiting classrooms on a regular basis. These quick and short "classroom walkthrough" (Kachur et al, 2010) represent an important tool utilized by principals to informally observe classroom practice and student learning and to form an impression on what is taking place in the classrooms. While the principals' statements indicate that these routines are designed to observe teaching and learning, there is no explicit acknowledgement that this the function of the routines as feedback is not provided. An important dimension not included is a shared and collaborative dialogue with the teacher(s) on the learning that is taking place in the classroom.

While the argument is cogently made (Gladwell, 2005) that instantaneous impressions can have efficacy, the key question needs to be posed, can principals assess the quality of learning and teaching in a short observation? The argument may be made that such short

visits are flawed for two reasons. First, if principals are not equipped with an observation protocol and a clear understanding of the purposes of classroom visits, their observations can be ineffective (Pitler and Goodwin, 2009). Second, if teachers and students are not engaged in the conversation, they are denied agency and are not permitted to be active members of the learning process. The above analysis suggests that this aspect of leadership merits urgent discussion in the national educational landscape. Because it presents a significant challenge to our schools, it may well be the *new kid on the block* as we move forward. The comment by one principal, *leave surveillance to the inspectorate*, also merits attention. It prompts the need for discussion on the role of the inspectorate in respect of where school leadership will be located in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Across all the case-study schools, there is an explicit recognition of the complex and challenging role of the school principal, whose leadership role and identity are constructed in terms of mediating external variables, in the guise of mandated policies and accountability regimens, with the internal life of the school community. There is an implicit recognition that, in mediating these contrasting realities, the hierarchical construct is a constraint and the notion of the heroic solo leader at the apex of the organizational structure no longer pertains. Among all participants, there is widespread support for a distributed model of leadership, though it is important to point out, that the concept does not explicitly form part of the discourse in the case-study schools.

What the findings clearly reveal is that leadership is multidimensional with transformational, moral and shared dimensions. What is also clear from the evidence is that any attempt at analyzing leadership practice must recognize that school principals figure very prominently in the narrative, enjoying multiple leadership styles and strategies to affect leadership distribution. While implicitly, across all the case-study schools, there is an expectation that school principals create the environments to enable the diffusion and distribution of leadership practice, the tone of the discourses, however, indicates that this is a reciprocal process.

While there are inconsistencies in the discourses and different constructions of leadership across the case-study schools, procedurally, however, what is clear is that leading and managing are not static activities, the whole process is relational and grounded in emotional subjectivities and organizational connectedness. A distributed leadership perspective suggests that the development of leadership needs to give careful attention to the school situation, including tools, routines and other aspects (Spillane, 2006). The current research findings show how any enactment of leadership practice, in the case-study schools, is underpinned by and embedded in an ethos of care, nurture and higher-order values. What is clearly evident in participants' narratives is that leadership practice constantly interweaves and mediates external, prescriptive legislative requirements and accountability mandates with a commitment to the school's ethos and value system. The evidence clearly indicates that both the process and influence relations have a top-down, bottom-up and lateral character. Consistent with the literature (Wenger, 1998), this type of production also emphasizes the influential space occupied by teachers in the leadership process, as across the case-study schools, they express a commitment to safeguarding ethos.

Two salient points emerge from the evidence in respect of managerial leadership; (i) there is no single global view of what constitutes managerial leadership and (ii) the trajectories of leadership practice vary between schools, as schools are at different stages on the road to constructing agentic, distributed and enabling models of practice. Notwithstanding these aspects, however, there are a number of components common to

all schools, which merit further discussion. There is considerable focus on capacity-building, with authority and agency being distributed and embedded, in both formal and informal structures. The formal positional structures are constructed in middle management teams, with the informal structures being more fluid and emergent and are often specific to a single task or pursuit, including extra-curricular activities.

A key dimension of informal school leadership, which has a uniquely Irish character and which does not receive significant attention in the distributed leadership literature, is volunteerism. The findings suggest, however, that there are fears and tensions being expressed by the participants that the recent embargo on promotional posts may adversely impact on teachers' willingness to volunteer. This is a challenge for the distribution of school leadership, has implications for practice in schools and, in Engestromian terms, opens up a new layer of work for analysis.

In activity-theoretical terms, the embargo on promotional posts and attendant depletion of the middle management structure of schools, may be constructed as one of the primary disturbances or contradictions currently pervading our activity systems. A key assumption underpinning the empirical evidence is that the embargo has led to a considerable increase in the administrative and managerial work of the principal and deputy principal and detracts from their instructional leadership role. In the current austerity context, the leadership behaviours of the principal are opportunistically and strategically managed, they distribute leadership by persuasion, negotiation, asking favours and expending considerable emotional energy by employing motivational tools. Regarding this point, however, as schools engage with these new and emerging realities, the challenge for school leadership is to construct the disturbance as both a challenge and opportunity to negotiate and produce new meanings.

In exploring the how of leadership practice, a key finding in the evidence from the case-study schools is that distributed models of instructional leadership practice are variously enacted. While all principals espouse that they are instruction-oriented and are strongly committed to student learning and achievement, practices are configured differently in schools, largely determined by school histories and contexts. In some instances, strong collaborative cultures exist, where new forms of "co-performance" are enacted, for example, as subject departments engage in meaningful professional dialogue, reflective and innovative practices. In other instances, more traditional forms of engagement exist, with collaborative cultures being more evolutionary in character.

Across all the case-study schools, however, a significant finding, and meriting further research and discussion, is that the isolationist culture continues to pertain. Traditionally in Ireland, the teacher has had virtual autonomy in the classroom, operating behind a "closed door" culture. Across the case-study schools, the 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.

The empirical evidence raises critical questions concerning the future direction of teacher-leadership and the distribution of that leadership in Irish post-primary schools, and how it might be operationalized. The findings also reveal that there is a challenge for school leaders to make visible and explicit the concept of distributed leadership. Meaning must be negotiated internally in school organizations by looking at constructive, creative changes and leadership configurations that would have the greatest potential for the development of school leadership. As there is a dearth of research in the Irish educational

context, there needs to be a contextual programme of leadership research drawing on diverse methodologies.



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