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Primary School Principal Turnover: Investigating the Factors Affecting Primary School Principal Retention

Thesis presented by

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for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University College Cork

School of Education

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2023

Declaration

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism and intellectual property.

Signed: Brian Cahill

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List of Abbreviations

ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
AP	Administrative Principal
BoM	Board of Management
COPSOQ	Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire
CSL	Centre for School Leadership
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Science
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Education Needs
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
FWC	Family-Work Conflict
HSD	Honestly Significant Difference
IBM	International Business Machines
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals' Network
JCT	Junior Cycle for Teachers
LAOS	Looking at our Schools
LPD	Leadership Preparation and Development
NAP	Newly Appointed Principal
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals

NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NIPT	National Induction Programme for Teachers
NPF	National Principals' Forum
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
NYC	New York City
NZCER	New Zealand Council for Educational Research
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDSL	Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership
PDST	Professional Development Support for Teachers
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SEN	Special Education Needs
SNAs	Special Needs Assistants
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SREC	Social Research Ethics Committee
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
TP	Teaching Principal
UCC	University College Cork
UCEA	University Council for Educational Administration
US	United States
WFC	Work-Family Conflict
WLB	Work-Life Balance
WSE	Whole School Evaluation

Abstract

With the position of school leader being recognised as a key stakeholder to student success, this study uniquely explores the turnover and retention of primary school principals in Ireland. The impact of recent policy reforms and curriculum developments on the working environment of school principals in Irish primary schools are explored in-depth within the current study, and a critical examination of how such changes in workload have impacted school leaders are further investigated.

This study adds to the research literature in the Irish context on educational leadership. The research specifically exploits a gap in the literature, with the voices of former school leaders coming to fruition in the current research analysis, The participating former school leaders provide a unique insight into the factors which influence the decision to step down. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on principal wellbeing, emphasising the connection between wellbeing, quality preparation, and professional development. This adds to discussions surrounding the affective implications of leadership, reform, sustainability, and turnover, challenging conventional assumptions, and providing fresh insights into these critical issues.

The research study employs a mixed-methods approach. Firstly, 467 current primary school principals participated by completing an online questionnaire designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Subsequently, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse group of participants including seven current school leaders and six former principals.

Quantitative findings reveal that a substantial number of principals report experiencing significant stress which affects their mental and physical wellbeing. Notably, teaching principals (TPs) express significantly more dissatisfaction with workload and are less likely to recommend the role to others. Furthermore, newly appointed principals exhibit higher stress levels compared to their more experienced counterparts, with differences in mental health impacts, strain, exhaustion, frustration, and confidence apparent. Qualitative survey data reveals that school leaders often grapple with overwhelming administrative tasks diverting their focus from teaching and learning. The adverse impact of principalship on physical health is highlighted, along with the challenges associated with maintaining a healthy work-life balance. TPs face a unique challenge balancing administrative duties and classroom teaching. Paradoxically, many principals express overall job satisfaction. Qualitative interviews delve deeper into turnover factors foregrounding workload, work-life balance, health concerns, and

the role of teaching principal as key factors affecting retention and turnover of Irish primary school leaders.

By unravelling the intricacies of principal experiences, this cutting-edge research yields actionable insights to inform strategic initiatives aimed at creating sustainable leadership pathways within the primary education sector in Ireland and further afield. It emphasises the pressing need for stakeholders to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the school principal and, significantly, seeks a full review into the viability of the role of teaching principal. Importantly, having gathered evidence, for the first time, from principals who have stepped down from the role, the research calls for the introduction of a formal step-down procedure for all primary school principals. The study underscores the necessity for mandatory pre-service training for all aspiring school leaders, guided the current research-informed evidence. Promising future research areas include addressing gender differences in school leadership and exploring the impact of principal preparation programmes. Additionally, under-researched areas such as workload in schools with special classes, leadership in start-up schools, and the experiences of loneliness and isolation among Irish primary school principals are identified for further investigation.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis introduction provides an overview and rationale for the research study. It begins by offering a background to the study which comprises a brief account of my personal journey to school leadership and an interest in researching the field of educational leadership. An overview of relevant studies of school leadership in Ireland, the importance of effective school leadership, and studies examining the effects of leadership retention and turnover is included. The aims of the thesis are provided along with research questions. There follows a succinct description of the chapters in this thesis.

1.2 Journey to Doctoral Inquiry: A personal rationale

My personal rationale for undertaking this study centres on a desire to understand the area of school leadership more fully in Irish primary schools. My personal journey into primary school leadership began in 2007 when I was appointed as deputy principal in my school. This afforded me the opportunity to become more closely familiar with the daily workings of a school principal. I became a member of the school board of management (BoM) at that stage, opening up another perspective of leadership and management. In 2011, I was appointed as a teaching principal of this four-teacher school in rural Ireland. This role was both challenging and rewarding in equal measure. After six years in the post, I made the very difficult decision to step-down from the role in October 2016. This timeline closely coincided with the birth of my first child. Furthermore, at that time I was studying a master's in education in University College Cork (UCC), and I found the role of school leader becoming increasingly incompatible with life outside of school. Since vacating the job, my area of research interest has continued to be school leadership. My master's dissertation focused on the area of teaching principalship. In this current study, I continue to further my research into the area of educational leadership focusing primarily on Irish primary school leadership. My personal decision to step-down has led to a desire to investigate this phenomenon in more detail. It prompted the

inclusion of other primary school principals who have made similar career transitions. Specifically, the research fills a gap in the literature with the inclusion of a population, who are often underrepresented in the discourse.

1.3 Research topic

The topic under investigation is school leadership retention and turnover. The researcher aims to further the discussion into the key factors that contribute to the turnover of school leaders. Studies have determined the importance of school leaders. Principals have been directly linked to student success (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004), with principals considered to be a central factor in the achievement levels of pupils (Kelley, Thornton and Daugherty, 2005). The presence of an effective school leader is considered more important than curriculum content or resources (Briggs *et al.*, 2013; Dodman, 2014). Principals are recognised as a catalyst for positive change (Dodman, 2014). The school leader greatly impacts the climate of a school (Kelley, Thornton and Daugherty, 2005). Lárusdóttir and O'Connor (2017) surmise that a school leader has "a powerful influence on the quality of educational provision and the achievement of students" (p.425). Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, (2020) contend that school leaders have a significant effect on features of the school organisation which positively influence the quality of teaching and learning. Grissom, Egalite and Lindsay (2021) echo this, finding that the arguments made by the previous authors about school leadership hold up. Grissom, Egalite and Lindsay (2021) argue that "the importance of school principals may not have been stated strongly enough in prior work" (p. xiv)

With school principals playing such an essential role in all facets of school life, the issue of understanding principals' reasons for staying or leaving such an important position become highly significant. A school leader's departure from the position can have a significant impact on the school. Principal turnover negatively affects student achievement, teacher retention and school climate (Grissom, Egalite and Lindsay, 2021). Continuity and stability in leadership roles is considered important for schools. It is reported to be highly unlikely that student achievement will improve with rapid principal turnover (Mascall and Leithwood, 2010). Longevity of tenure is vital in order to

effect positive change in a school. For positive and effective change in a school to be successful, a principal needs a minimum of three to five years to oversee this (Dodman, 2014). Sustainability of existing good practice is hindered when a principal leaves their post (Strickland-Cohen, McIntosh and Horner, 2014). All of this points to the need to understand the climate and conditions that encourage principals to remain in their roles or those that lead to principals leaving their posts.

1.4 Research Overview

This research centres on Irish primary school principals. In this context, Irish schools are governed by boards of management (BoM) established in 1975, and further defined by the Education Act of 1998 (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012). Policy reforms and curriculum developments have been consistently introduced and altered the working environment for school principals (Sugrue, 2008, 2009b). These reforms can be traced back to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report in 1991(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 1991). More updated policy reforms, such as the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy of 2011 and School Self-Evaluation (SSE), have increased workload challenges for school leaders (Skerritt, 2023). Additionally, these policy advancements have emotionally impacted leadership, leading to role conflict (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017), disrupted routines, causing frustrations among school staff (Weddle, Lockton and Datnow, 2019).

Irish studies consistently observe school leaders as reporting high levels of stress, burnout, and declining wellbeing (Darmody and Smyth, 2011, 2016; Riley, 2015; Burke, Kinnarney and Salokangas, 2022). These findings are consistent with international studies (Riley, 2014; Denecker, 2019; Riley and See, 2020; Lee and Mao, 2023). School leaders currently face increasing work demands, work long hours, and as a result, experience challenges in maintaining work-life balance (Reid and Creed, 2021; Wang, 2022). Limited time for teaching and learning further to their workload challenges (Fullan, 2014; Doyle Fosco, 2022). Social isolation and loneliness adversely affect stress levels and job satisfaction (Boyland, 2011; Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018; Hüsrevşahi and Şahan, 2021).

Former school leaders in Australia report inadequate systemic and individual support, increased accountability, reduced autonomy, and work intensification as key push factors for leaving their role (Heffernan, Courtney and Doherty, 2023). These challenges can lead to exhaustion, loneliness, and strains on personal relationships, and highlight the importance of providing adequate support for school leaders (Maxwell and Riley, 2017; Heffernan, Courtney and Doherty, 2023).

The examination of teaching principals (TPs) in rural and small schools reveals TPs benefit from enhanced relationships with staff, students, and the community. Challenges with workload, time management, and role sustainability persist (Wallin and Newton, 2013; Jutras *et al.*, 2020; Burke, Kinnarney and Salokangas, 2022; IPPN, 2022). The dual role of leading teaching and administration presents significant challenges for TPs, affecting their wellbeing and satisfaction (Boyd, 1996; Wallin and Newton, 2014; Wallin *et al.*, 2019; Jutras *et al.*, 2020; IPPN, 2022).

Eligibility for the role of Irish school principal is dependent on the size of the school, although there is no mandatory preparation required. The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) offer voluntary programmes like the Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership (PDSL) to address leadership preparation gaps (King and Nihill, 2019; Murphy, 2023). Ireland's absence of mandatory pre-training requirements for primary school principals contrasts with countries such as Scotland, Austria, France, Germany, Finland and the United States, all of whom have introduced mandatory national qualification or training programmes for aspiring school leaders (Su, Gamage and Mininberg, 2003; Lumby, Crow and Pashiardis, 2009; Harris and Jones, 2018b; General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2023). While debates exist around the effectiveness and necessity of mandatory certification (Bush, 2018; Normore and Lahera, 2019), there is a growing recognition of the need for such preparation due to the expanding role of principalships and the increasing complexities associated with differing school contexts (Bush, 2018; Murphy, 2023). Effective strategies to support and better prepare school leaders include succession planning and principal pipelines, which involve talent identification, tailored induction programmes, and mentoring initiatives (Bush, 2018; Cieminski, 2018; Murphy, 2023).

1.5 Aims of the study

The main aim of the study is to examine factors that sustain Irish primary school principals in their position and looks at factors that prompt change. The research aims to offer a fresh perspective into issues relating to primary school leadership by including both current and former school leaders. The study seeks to provide distinctive insights into leadership by interviewing former principals who have transitioned out of their roles. The study aims to further the understanding of educational leadership by capturing their unique perspectives on leadership within Irish primary schools. A fresh perspective through using both cohorts is pertinent, as presently there is a dearth of empirical research regarding and including primary school principals who have vacated the job.

The background of the study sets the stage for its aims, which revolve around examining the factors that sustain Irish primary school principals in their positions and exploring what prompts changes in leadership roles. By incorporating both current and former school leaders, the research aims to offer a fresh perspective into issues relating to primary school leadership.

1.6 Research questions

The key question for the research is as follows:

What are the dominant factors that determine primary school principal retention and primary school principal turnover?

The following are subsidiary questions that will be used to guide the study:

1. What motivating factors lead to principals assuming leadership roles?
2. What do current and former principals perceive as the positives associated with the role?
3. What do current and former principals associate as the main challenges of primary school principalship?

1.7 Outline of the thesis structure

There are a total of eight chapters in this thesis. The first chapter is an introduction to the overall thesis. It offers a personal rationale for exploring the area of Irish school leadership. The importance

of effective school leadership is discussed and the benefits of maintaining continuity within the role. The aim of the study is provided in keeping with the research questions. An outline of the thesis chapters is provided, followed by the introduction of key terms.

Chapter Two looks at relevant literature relating to school leadership both nationally and internationally. It is divided into distinct sections. The first section situates the background to the study and begins by introducing leadership, both from the Irish and primary school contexts. A brief overview of the establishment of the national system of education in Ireland is included. School patronage is discussed and recent changes to policy and curriculum are explored. These are included to show the conditions under which school leaders are presently working and show the influences behind these. The affective implications of leading reform are highlighted in this section also. The second section expands on the contemporary challenges experienced by school leaders in the role and links these to retention and turnover. It examines key literature pertaining to stress, wellbeing, and occupational balance for school leaders. Other subheadings include work-life balance (WLB), loneliness and isolation, and salary for school principals. The emotional burden and demands of school leadership are debated. A separate section is then entirely devoted to teaching principalship with connections to turnover made. International studies are engaged with, teasing out the positives and challenges of this unique role. Studies relating to teaching principalship in the Republic of Ireland are highlighted. There follows research outlining the central motivators for assuming the role of principal. The next section looks at the eligibility requirements for the role of primary school principals. The Irish context is compared and contrasted internationally. An exploration of leadership preparation in Ireland and internationally is undertaken. Support systems for newly appointed principals (NAPs) are then investigated. This section concludes with the steps that a school principal must enact in order to step-down from the role. The literature review then looks into solutions to the aforementioned challenges facing school leaders. Professional supports are explored through looking at succession planning and principal pipelines. Personal support then looks at areas include self-care, social support, and mindfulness. The literature review concludes with literature focusing on career stage theories and pathways to leadership.

Chapter Three provides a justification for the selected mixed methods approach from a paradigmatic and epistemological perspective. The convergent research design is explained. The chapter discusses the methods used, highlighting, and arguing for the need to engage in both quantitative and qualitative data gathering processes. These data collection procedures are outlined, with piloting, sampling, and analysis clearly outlined. The researcher outlines how the survey and interview protocol were generated, and accounts for the potential subjectivity and bias in the study. Limitations of the study are acknowledged within. Ethics are to the fore of the study, and fully accounted for in the methodology chapter. Recruitment and selection of participants are outlined within this chapter with the point of integration of data sets fully accounted for.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the quantitative data from the online questionnaires distributed to current Irish primary school principals. Descriptive data is firstly provided for the 467 current primary school principals who took part in the online survey. A summary of the main findings is shown both graphically and numerically. Following this, inferential data analysis of statistical significance is shown. This is provided in two ways – through a comparison of data provided by administrative principals (AP) [1]and teaching principals (TP), and then by career stage.

Chapter Five details the thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered through the online survey. Three themes emerge, with subthemes included. Direct quotes are provided, and these are coded as outlined in the chapter introduction.

Chapter Six presents the findings of the final phase of data collection. This chapter displays the findings from interviewing current and former school principals. It is presented thematically, with four themes examined. Once more, quotes are offered verbatim from interviewees. All interviewees are anonymised through the use of pseudonyms.

[1] The acronym AP usually denotes Assistant Principals. In this study it will be used to denote Administrative Principal

Chapter Seven brings the findings from the previous three chapters together through a critical, research-informed discussion. Areas of comparison and contrast are explored with explanations centred in academic literature.

Chapter Eight concludes the thesis. Recommendations are made for school leadership policy and practice, and also for further research. A brief personal reflection on the thesis journey is included, with plans to disseminate the research noted.

1.8 Conclusion

The introductory chapter of this thesis provides a comprehensive overview and rationale for the research study on school leadership retention and turnover in Irish primary schools. It begins with a brief outline of the personal journey of the researcher, from that of school leader to pursuing doctoral research in educational leadership. The significance of effective school leadership is highlighted, along with the importance of understanding factors contributing to leadership retention and turnover. The study further focuses on Irish primary school leadership, situated, and contextualised in the updated policy reforms leading to increasing workload challenges being experienced by these school leaders. National studies report stress, burnout, and declining wellbeing among school leaders as prevalent, mirroring international trends. The role of TPs in rural and small schools is introduced, highlighting both benefits and challenges.

Furthermore, the eligibility criteria and preparation for the role of Irish school principals are discussed and contrasted with international practices. Strategies to support school leaders, such as succession planning and principal pipelines, are introduced.

The aims of the study are outlined, emphasising the exploration of factors sustaining school principals in their roles and those prompting changes. The research questions are articulated to guide the study, focusing on motivating factors, perceived positives, and challenges of school principalship, linked once more to factors influencing retention and turnover.

The thesis structure is outlined, comprising of eight chapters. Chapter Two delves into relevant literature on school leadership, both nationally and internationally. Chapter Three justifies the mixed

methods approach and outlines the research methodology. Chapters Four to Six present the findings from quantitative and qualitative data analysis, while Chapter Seven offers a critical discussion based on the findings. Finally, Chapter Eight concludes the thesis with recommendations for policy and further research.

Overall, this thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of school leadership retention and turnover in Irish primary schools, providing insights for policy and practice in educational leadership.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this literature review, the author begins with an introduction to leadership and context. There follows an overview of governance structures and policy reforms to situate the study within the Irish context. The affective implications of such policy reforms are considered. Transitioning from the broader context, contemporary challenges of school leader turnover are explored. These factors include stress, workload, salary, and the emotional demands of school leadership. Central to the study is the role of the teaching principal, whose responsibilities and challenges are investigated both within the Irish context and internationally. The motivating and demotivating factors for assuming school principalship, alongside eligibility requirements and recruitment challenges are explored with turnover and retention to the fore. The literature review then notes the importance of leadership preparation, induction, and ongoing support for principals. It examines systemic strategies such as succession planning and principal pipelines, before exploring personal strategies such as social support systems, and resilience-building techniques to promote sustainable leadership. An overview of three career stage models is provided as these career stages can aid in better preparing aspiring principals and thus positively impacting retention of leaders. Attention is also given to career pathways as an alternative to career stages, aiming to inform preparation and foster effective leadership.

From the outset, leadership and context are introduced as crucial starting points for this literature review. This forthcoming section begins with an exploration of context as referenced by Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017). It will then outline the legislative and policy context in which Irish primary schools principals carry out their day-to-day role. This will be done by examining their governance structures, policy reforms, and contemporary curriculum developments.

2.2 Understanding contextual dynamics in school leadership

An important starting consideration for this research is to introduce leadership and context. It is argued that leadership and the enactment of it is "embedded in the context" in which it occurs

(Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017, p.172). School leaders operate within a variety of contexts with notable variations in their roles resulting. Braun *et al.* (2011) note four different, yet connected, categories of contexts that apply to school leadership. These are the 'situated contexts,' the 'professional contexts,' the 'material contexts,' and the 'external contexts'. Situated contexts involve a school's history, intake, and setting. The reputation and history of the school influences the work of school leaders. Professional contexts are those including values, teacher commitments, and policy management in school. These influence the enactment of policy in schools (Braun *et al.*, 2011; Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017). It is necessary to look beyond the school leader or specific individuals when discussing broad professional contexts and that *context* doesn't always refer to the entire school as individual teachers or subject departments may operate independently. Material contexts involve staffing, budget, buildings, ICT provision, and infrastructure (Braun *et al.*, 2011; Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017). External contexts consist of pressures and expectations placed on school leaders stemming from local and national policies (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017).

Osborn, Hunt and Jauch (2002) posit that studies into leadership need to be looked at in different ways and that various approaches are relevant for different circumstances. They use the analogy that "one cannot separate leadership from the context any more than one can separate a flavour from food" (p.799) to stress the indelible link between leadership and the specific environment in which it is situated. When examining the area of turnover and retention in this study, the specific context in which the school leaders work or worked cannot be ignored. Mindful of this, it is essential to consider the external context in which Irish primary schools are located.

2.3 Contextualising Irish primary schools

A review of Irish education undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) determined that the current Irish education system is greatly affected by the past (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 1991). While this review took place over thirty years ago, it has been argued that the structures of the education system are so deep that the last century continues to cast "long shadows" (Sugrue, 2004, p.197) over present structures. This assertion is based heavily on the links between primary schools and the Catholic Church. These

links exist to the present day with approximately 89% of primary schools currently operating under a Catholic patron (Meehan and O'Connell, 2021).

Links between schooling and Catholicism were first formed during the foundation of the national education system in 1831 by the British authorities in Ireland (Sugrue, 2004). The decision to establish this system was taken primarily by the then ruling British authorities in order to control and socialise the Irish population (Walsh, 2016). It was intended to formalise British control of teaching and learning content in Ireland in an era where many Catholics attended hedge schools (Sugrue, 2004). The British saw control of schooling as a means to make Ireland more governable (Harford, 2009) whereas the Catholic Church sought to instil religious values and loyalty through schooling (Walsh, 2016).

The Stanley Letter (1831) established the framework for the national system of education. The National Board was created, and this newly formed board assumed responsibility for managing the buildings, curricula, textbooks, school grants, teacher training, and inspection of schools (Walsh, 2016). Walsh (2016) informs that the majority of Protestant schools remained outside the system, preferring to remain within the Church Education Society. This allowed for the vast majority of schools to be managed by and vested in the Catholic Church. Although the original intention of the education system was to be non-denominational, Sugrue (2004) reports that by the 1850s a denominational nature had been established. With the church controlling recruitment and management of teachers in the majority of schools, the lives of pupils and parents were largely regulated by them through schooling (Walsh, 2016).

With previous domination of Irish society by the Catholic Church declining (Byrne and Devine, 2018), the current school patronage landscape of Irish primary schools now appears problematic (Meehan and O'Connell, 2021). There has been an increased demand for multi-denominational and non-denominational schools to be founded (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). In response, The Programme for Government (2011) established a forum on patronage and pluralism in primary schools. Recommendations by the forum's advisory group included the widespread divestment of patronage, future patronage arrangements and the inclusion of diversity in existing schools

(Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). The forum also advised that a state curriculum be introduced for children in denominational schools who do not wish to participate in religious education (Meehan and O'Connell, 2021).

Despite this, the reality of divestment "has been minimal" due to "marked reluctance to divest on the part of individual schools" (Meehan and O'Connell, 2021, p. 200). The deep-rooted nature of church state links is furthered by (Lynch, Grummell and Devine (2012). They point out that the majority of principals and teachers have undergone teacher training in church run teacher education colleges. Enrolment figures in Irish primary schools, as highlighted in the Department of Education preliminary figures released in 2023, shows that 88.9% of all school children in Ireland attend Catholic schools. Multi-denominational schools account for just under eight per cent of children (Department of Education, 2023). According to this bulletin, 88.4% of all primary school principals work in Catholic schools.

2.3.1 Governance of Irish primary schools

Boards of management (BoM) are in charge of the direct running, and decision-making in schools (Doyle, Muldoon and Murphy, 2020). While the BoM system was established in 1975, The Education Act (1998) created a statutory framework for managing and governing schools in Ireland. This Act has been described as "the most significant event" (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012, p. 31) to impact Irish schooling and governance. It was seen as an attempt to disrupt the influence of the Catholic Church in controlling Irish schooling. The Act is said to represent a departure from the prevailing hierarchical nature of governance considered features of Catholic schools (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012). While BoMs were introduced to largely replace individual clerical managers, they did not lead to an absolute release of power. The chairperson of boards continued to be largely held by the clergy and all chairpersons continue to be appointed by the patron (Walsh, 2016)

Currently, BoMs typically consist of eight members as follows:

1. a chairperson,

2. The school principal who typically serves as secretary to the board,
3. two community representatives,
4. a teachers' nominee,
5. two members of the parents' body and
6. a patron's nominee.

BoM Governance Manual 2019-2023 notes that the most effective boards are those that clearly understand their roles and responsibilities (Department of Education and Skills, 2019b).

Areas of special mention include:

- overall responsibility for school policies with special mention given to Child Protection and Anti-Bullying Policies
- responsibility for preparation of the school plan
- an awareness of School Self-Evaluation (SSE) and ensuring review of the effectiveness and efficiency of the Board itself
- budgeting issues and the appointment of a BoM member as Treasurer

BoMs, working as a cohesive unit, benefit school life (Department of Education and Skills, 2019b). However, Jeffers (2023) notes that many school boards have struggled to meet the demands of managing the school. This is in large part linked to the voluntary nature of boards. The Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2020 claims that it can be difficult for board members to dedicate sufficient time to deal with the range of tasks in their role and deems the voluntary nature of school governance to be unsustainable (Hislop, 2022). Darmody and Smyth (2013) also informed that boards often rely heavily on the advice and work of the principal.

2.3.2 Policy reform and curriculum developments

An era of "unprecedented review" of the education system emerged in the 1990s which resulted in significant alternation to the teaching and climate in Irish schools (Macruairc and Harford, 2008, p. 502). This can be traced originally to a review of Irish education conducted by the OECD (1991) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 1991) according to Sugrue (2009). He

claims that this report signalled a new period for Irish education, one that led to "major policy churn" and indelibly linked national educational reform with international policy and reform (Sugrue, 2009a, p. 372). The need for reform of the Irish education system was also prompted by a lack of legislative basis underpinning education (Harford, 2010; Fleming, 2020). This was corrected with the introduction of the Education Act 1998. Alongside the introduction of the aforementioned statutory framework for BoM, the Education Act (1998) required schools to prepare whole school plans and to promote parent associations (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012). All schools in receipt of public funding through the operation of grants were now subject to the control of the Department of Education (DE) and the Minister of Education. Compliance with circulars and documents issued by the DE was made mandatory. The inspectorate was now given a key role in evaluating the organisation and operation of schools (Fleming, 2020).

Further acts, reports, papers, policies documents and legislation have been introduced following the Education Act 1998. These have been introduced with "mesmerising regularity" (Sugrue, 2008, p.40). The rapid and relentless pace of change has transformed the working environment for Irish school principals (Sugrue, 2008). Table 2.1 summarises policy and legislation which have impacted upon the role of school leaders.

Table 2.1: Policy Reform and Legislation

Timeline of Key Reforms and Legislation in Irish Education
1991: OECD Review of Irish Education
1998: Education Act
2000: Implementation of the Education Welfare Act
2001: Teaching Council Act
2004: EPSEN Act
2011: The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy
2018: The Education (Admission to Schools) Act

Curricular events to note include the introduction of the primary language curriculum (PLC) in 2016, and a new primary Maths curriculum (PMC) being launched (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2023).

2.3.3 Internal school evaluation

As referenced in Table 2.1, the National Literacy and Numeracy strategy (2011), a highly significant change to school life, was introduced in July 2011. The stated aims of the strategy were to:

- improve teaching and learning in schools, to be achieved by greater use and analysis of assessment data;
- the provision of better evidence-based feedback to parents
- use of assessment data to inform schools' self-evaluation and implementation plans, with a focus on the need for more stringent accountability measures

As a direct result of this strategy, school principals were now required to set clearly defined goals and priorities for student learning under a system of school self-evaluation (SSE), and the strategy placed an onus on schools to involve all stakeholders in the wider community.

To support school self-evaluation (SSE) in Irish schools, the Department of Education (DE) published a new quality framework entitled, 'Looking at Our School' (LAOS). Schools are currently engaging in their third compulsory cycle of SSE (Skerritt, 2023). The LAOS quality framework is divided in two areas,

1. Teaching and Learning
2. Leadership and management

These two areas are each divided into four domains with statements of practice identified for each domain. The four key leadership and management domains are:

- Domain 1: Leading learning and teaching
- Domain 2: Managing the organisation
- Domain 3: Leading school development
- Domain 4: Developing leadership capacity (Department of Education, 2022)

Skerritt (2023) is critical of the document issued for Post-Primary Schools. Many of the arguments are applicable to the primary sector. The issuing of the document on 26th August so close to the beginning of a new school year is criticised (Skerritt, 2023). He ultimately contends that this latest iteration of LAOS has overlooked recent literature and accuses policy makers of ignoring "a wealth of scholarly thinking" (p.2)

Central to LAOS (2022) is the notion of distributed leadership (Skerritt, 2023). One of the key principles underpinning this document is leadership for all (Department of Education, 2022). The term 'school leaders' as used in the framework typically refers to the formal leadership roles held by school patrons/trustees, boards of management, principals, and deputy principals. It also extends to include teachers with posts of responsibility. The framework also recognises and seeks to support teachers in recognising their leadership attributes and qualities empowering all teachers to play a leadership role within the school. While authors such as Ni, Yan and Pounder (2017) believe that other organisational members now play a significant role in influencing school decisions, this is disputed by others. It is argued that the busy nature of teachers' daily work means that there is not adequate time to attend to the "add-ons"(Skerritt, 2023, p. 9).

Elsewhere, research into SSE has found a reluctance among school staff to involve parents and students (Brown *et al.*, 2020). These authors issue a "stark reminder" that changes in policy do not necessarily produce changes in daily school-based practice (p.531).

Research has examined the reasons behind the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). It is argued that this policy document is heavily influenced by, and reactionary to, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results of 2009. Conway and Murphy (2013) inform that disappointing Irish secondary school test results from 2009 led to the urgent appraisal of what was being taught in primary and post-primary schools in order to respond to a perceived crisis in standards.

Researchers believe that "one of the strongest lessons to come from the past decade of education reform is that the quality of policy implementation, rather than policy selection, is the key to promoting and sustaining educational improvement" (Harris and Jones, 2018b, p. 195). PISA

appears to have encouraged policy makers to look to other education systems for readymade solutions (Darling-Hammond and Rothman, 2011) rather than "considering the conditions and contextual factors that are most likely to make any chosen policy effective in practice" (Harris and Jones, 2018b, p. 195). Context matters and "the effectiveness of any policy cannot be independent of context and culture but rather is profoundly shaped by it" (Harris and Jones, 2017, 2018b, 2018a; Sellar and Lingard, 2018).

2.3.4 External school evaluation

The Irish inspectorate emerged in 1831 with the establishment of the national school system, making it among the longest established inspection systems in the world (Fleming, 2020). The Education Act (1998) provided the legislative base for the current system of evaluation used in Irish primary schools. The quality and effectiveness of education in schools, and the quality of teaching and effectiveness of individual teachers are all referenced under Section 13 (Fleming, 2020). This external evaluation of schools take place by DE appointed inspectors. The functions of the Inspectorate are to enact a programme of inspection in schools, to promote compliance with regulation and legislation, and also to provide an advisory role for schools (Ó Cúlacháin & O'Donovan, 2009). Whole school examinations (WSE) are seen as an important way for governments to hold schools accountable for the way they conduct education and a vital method in which they hold them responsible for outcomes (Richards, 2001). It is argued that the "growing pressure for accountability" demanded by a "more educated and consumerist-oriented parent population" can be satisfied by conducting WSEs (Sugrue, 2004, p. 199). The DE decided to publish all inspection reports on an individual basis from February 2006 (Macruairc and Harford, 2008). Critics have suggested that these published final inspection reports are couched in anodyne language (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008; Ehren et al, 2012). McNamara and O'Hara (2012) suggest that the reason benign language is used is to appease the influential unions such as the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). Individual teachers are not named in reports, and while the same concept applies to school leaders, their identities are easily identifiable (McNamara and O'Hara,

2012). Whilst there are no official sanctions following a WSE, reputational damage can occur to the school leader (Fleming, 2020). Furthering this, Fleming (2020) questions the impact of the evaluation on classroom practice. He describes the inspection model used in Ireland as "an audit" (p.90) and contends that the very notion a brief visit to a classroom would have any evaluative merit in the classroom performance "is farfetched" (p.82).

2.3.5 Examining the influences behind policy reform and curricular developments

A growing culture of evaluation has become an integral part of educational policy in Ireland (Macruairc and Harford, 2008), and is now fully engrained in primary schools and the daily work and priorities of school leaders (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012). This culture of evaluation has been termed performativity and accountability. Irish governments are now said to be using New Public Management as a mode of governance, with accountability and neo-liberalism being the reigning policy discourse in Ireland (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012). Ireland's economy has been said to provide a welcoming, accommodating environment for globalisation forces and neo-liberal market-driven ideologies (Gleeson, 2022). Skerritt (2019) posits that the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011, with its emphasis on skills, standards and the economy reflects neoliberal principles. School Self Evaluation (SSE), introduced as part of the previously referenced National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011), includes neoliberal ideals of evidence-based practice, measuring outcomes, programme reform and improving efficiency (Sugrue and Mertkan, 2017). (McNamara *et al.*, 2022) argue that accountability and economic logics dominate SSE. Critics contend that this accountability "reworks and erodes professional responsibility" (Skerritt, 2023, p. 5) and can "damage the goodwill of teachers" (Skerritt, 2022, p. 9). McNamara *et al.* (2022) warn that accountability and performativity can potentially undermine teachers' and school leaders' sense of professional responsibility.

Sugrue (2011) highlights the contradictory nature of policy reform being followed in Ireland. On the one hand, schools have been granted more autonomy through self-reflection, self-evaluation,

and self-assessment. However, this has been accompanied by centrally mandated curricular prescription and a recentralising of power.

Furthermore, it is argued that primary school, and the work of school leaders, was once characterised by the aims of nurturing children intellectually, emotionally, and culturally, so that they can become socially aware, confident and critical citizens (Hall and Pulsford, 2019). A reengineering of primary school has taken place according to Hall and Pulsford (2019) with difficulty enacting empathetic leadership in this current era of reform and accountability emerging in literature. Efficiency and effectiveness are prioritised, with moral and social values related to social rights, care, trust and equality sidelined (Lynch and Grummell, 2018). Lynch (2006) previously claimed that within the neo-liberal discourse, education is viewed as a market commodity and, the lifeworld of "care" becomes secondary. With the focus of Catholic schools being on the holistic development of the child and values of care and nurture to the fore, new managerial values lead to tension (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012). Schools are in effect being asked to remain true to culture but also to adapt to modern influences and expectations.

2.3.6 Exploring the Emotional Impact of Mandated Educational Reform and School Improvement Initiatives

In specific professional settings, Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) suggest that certain situations can lead to conflicts or tensions. The clash between the professional duties of teaching and the pressures of management and leadership can cause "role conflict". This is particularly relevant in the context of this study, which examines turnover and retention, especially in relation to teaching principals. The dual role of school leaders can lead to tensions as these school leaders balance the unique demands of their position (Clarke and Wildy, 2004; Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017). This tension is further exacerbated by the emotional struggle leaders face, dealing with conflicting feelings of optimism and pessimism. Examining material contexts also brings attention to the potential issue of swift turnover among principals, particularly in schools dealing with persistent "economic, emotional, and social challenges" (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017, p.175). These authors cite the

link between material contexts and external contexts which can paradoxically create pressures as well as support for schools. It has been suggested that this dynamic is driven by a neoliberal influence (Krüger and Scheerens, 2012). The enactment of school leadership in this neoliberal era of accountability and performance can negatively impact school leaders (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017; Weddle, Lockton and Datnow, 2019; Park and Datnow, 2022).

In their exploration of the emotional impact of policy reform, Park and Datnow (2022) carried out interviews with nineteen American school leaders. Their study underscores the role of emotions in educational reform, shaped by both context and interpersonal relationships. They discovered that the management of staff dynamics and the mediation of change can elicit emotional responses. Positive emotions were found to stem from a sense of autonomy and the successful execution of reforms, while negative emotions were linked to the challenges of managing externally imposed reforms, staffing issues, and difficult relationships with teachers (Park and Datnow, 2022).

Educational change was similarly found to have affective implications in the work of Weddle, Lockton and Datnow (2019) looked at teacher collaboration and found that reform efforts often involve a shift in teachers' daily routines and professional identities (Weddle, Lockton and Datnow, 2019). The authors gathered qualitative data over a three-year period using observation notes and interviews with teachers and school leaders. They found that frustrations result from differences in expectations for collaboration and teaching, as well as varying beliefs and ideologies about collaborative practices. Collaboration among teachers can sometimes lead to unequal emotional investment, causing tension among staff members. This impacts school leaders who can sometimes struggle to shift dynamics within teams, leading to persistent personal uncertainty about how to resolve tensions among teachers. Teacher collaboration can ultimately lead to feelings of frustration among both teachers and school leaders. Weddle, Lockton and Datnow (2019) findings suggest that "the interplay between collaboration and emotion is bi-directional" (p.339). They believe that collaborative relationships impacted teachers' emotional wellbeing, and teachers' feelings about

their colleagues also influenced their willingness to work together and share ideas (Weddle, Lockton and Datnow, 2019).

2.3.7 Summary

This section provides a contextual understanding of Irish primary schools, delving into the historical ties between the Catholic Church and Irish primary education. It highlights the pivotal role of the 1991 review by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in sparking educational change.

The governance structure of Irish primary schools, including the composition and roles of Boards of Management (BoMs), is discussed. The section also outlines the internal and external evaluation methods and relevant mandated reforms.

The importance of considering context when examining school leadership was explored through the work of Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) and Braun et al. (2011). The exploration begins and concludes with an examination of four interconnected contexts: 'situated', 'professional', 'material', and 'external'. These contexts are revisited, particularly in the context of the emotional implications of mandated reforms on schools and their leaders.

2.4 Contemporary challenges of school leadership

This section critically reviews international and national literature on the challenges faced by school leaders, focusing on issues related to turnover and retention. Factors influencing principal turnover include job satisfaction, salary, autonomy, individual characteristics (gender, age, experience), and workplace conditions (class size, parental involvement, administrative workload) (Rangel, 2018; Tekleselassie and Choi, 2021). The school context, particularly school size and administrative support, is a key determinant of turnover and job satisfaction. The review also explores challenges such as stress, wellbeing, workload, interpersonal relationships, and dissatisfaction with remuneration, identifying push factors and highlighting the emotional landscape of school leadership.

2.4.1 Stress, wellbeing, and occupational balance

2.4.1.1 International studies

Many international studies conducted have found evidence to show that those in leadership positions are reporting as stressed. In Australia, *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey* has been conducted on a regular basis since 2011 (Riley, 2014, 2019; Riley and See, 2020; Riley *et al.*, 2021; See *et al.*, 2023). Successive reports from this project have outlined the challenge of school leadership in an Australian setting. Data from 2020 concluded that Australian school leaders, as a group, are at risk of fatigue, mental health decline, and burnout (Riley *et al.*, 2021). A similar theme had been previously identified using data from 2018. The report, published in 2019, identified one in three Australian principals as being so distressed that their mental and physical health was at risk (Riley, 2019). The overall cohort of school leaders were recorded as having significantly higher levels of stress symptoms when compared to the general Australian population. Riley *et al.* (2021) found that Australian school leaders are heavily burdened with the management of the education, safety, health, and wellbeing of their pupils, staff, and school community. It has been suggest the situation is more serious and pressing than previously reported in the most recent iteration of the Australian survey, where the authors note "the starkness of the results" when compared to previous years (See *et al.*, 2023).

Long term sustainability for those in the role of Australian school leader has been questioned with evidence of waning energy levels of school leaders shown in patterns of declining results (See *et al.*, 2023). The 2021 report noted that school leaders showed high levels for meaning of work and commitment to the workplace, despite the challenges faced in their daily work (Riley *et al.*, 2021). At that stage, the data for school leaders were much higher compared to the general population, based on results of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ-II). The following year's data, 2022 data, shows a decline in these measures of meaning of work and commitment to the workplace and furthermore, recorded lowest levels of job satisfaction, mutual trust between employees, and trust regarding since the beginning of data gathering in 2011. Allied to this, measures associated with health and wellbeing now show the highest levels of burnout, sleeping

troubles, stress, depressive symptoms, somatic stress, and cognitive stress since the start of the survey (See *et al.*, 2023). Another Australian study, Looking Behind the Curtain, conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 principals to explore the main challenges of leadership (Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski and Blum-Destefano, 2018). Participants discussed the role as being physically draining, leading to physical and mental exhaustion. O'Neill and Glasson (2019) returned similar conclusions with twenty experienced school leaders. The authors defined the term experienced as those with more than ten years' service in two or more school settings. The majority of interviewees were found to be at elevated risk for blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, and weight concerns.

New Zealand studies carry a similar theme. The New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) found school leaders reporting significant job strain and associated negative health impacts that far exceed the general population (NZCER, 2020). The study found that New Zealand "school leaders are still scoring significantly worse than the general population in these health and wellbeing measures" (NZCER, 2020, p. 2). This appears to be consistent with a much earlier New Zealand study (Cubitt and Burt, 2002). This study featured the responses of two hundred and ninety-three primary school principals. The research examined the relationship between leadership style, loneliness, and stress. Results found that 89% of participants considered the job stressful.

In Europe, Denecker (2019) also investigated occupational stress among school leaders. Looking at the prevalence of stress among French speaking principals in Switzerland, a mixed methods investigation combined online surveys with data gathered from semi-structured interviews. A total of one hundred and forty-six principals participated in the online surveys, with thirty-nine being subsequently interviewed. School principals considered the job to be very stressful. 46% feel that occupational stress has a negative impact on the health and 53% claim work-related stress impacts their personal life. Furthermore, one in five considers quitting at least once a month due to stress (Denecker, 2019).

Despite the convincing case made for the presence of stress in leadership appearing overwhelming, alternative views exist. A Swedish study (Håkansson *et al.*, 2021) also found school leaders not to be overwhelmed or significantly stressed. With a cohort of just under two thousand principals surveyed, about half of the principals reported no or negligible lasting stress symptoms in a Swedish study examining occupational balance and stress (Håkansson *et al.*, 2021). The researchers conducted two surveys with participants and associations were found between occupational balance, overtime work, a supportive private life, supportive colleagues at the leadership level, supportive management and no or negligible stress symptoms. Further contradictory research perspectives on the stresses and pressures faced by principals is provided by Kaufman (2019). Contrary to their expectations, school principals did not report an elevated level of stress.

In contrast, a negative impact on health and wellbeing for school leaders extends to American studies (Boyland, 2011; Sogunro, 2012; Fullan, 2014). Very high stress levels experienced by principals are a significant concern in retention and longevity of their tenure (Levin and Bradley, 2019; Mahfouz, 2020). School leaders in England have similarly been found to be struggling (Chaplain, 2001; Phillips, Sen and McNamee, 2007; Sen and Phillips, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic is linked to stress among principals in England also (Thomson, Greany and Martindale, 2021)

2.4.1.2 Irish studies

While contexts differ, Irish studies are consistent in their findings along with the majority of their international counterparts.

A report examining job satisfaction and occupational stress was compiled by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) on behalf of The Teaching Council from data obtained through the Growing Up in Ireland research in 2011 (Darmody and Smyth, 2011). The findings drew on data gathered from 898 Irish primary school principals. The study found that while the vast majority of principals were happy in their job (93%), the role is associated with occupational stress (70%). Among primary school principals, those who have teaching responsibilities report higher stress levels, indicating the challenging nature of combining the two roles. Teachers also report

significantly higher stress levels in schools where the principal has teaching responsibilities (Darmody and Smyth, 2011). Teaching principals (TP) were found to be much less satisfied with the role than administrative principals. The area of teaching principalship will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

The IPPN and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) funded similar research to *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey* by Australian Professor Philip Riley into Irish principals and deputy principals. This report was titled *Irish Principals & Deputy Principals Occupational Health, Safety & Wellbeing Survey* (Riley, 2015). Riley (2015) received data from over six hundred primary school principals and found that primary principals and deputy principals scored less than the general population on both wellbeing and mental health measures. The report showed ranges in mental health from very good to very poor. Exploring the area of teaching principalship in the report, TPs and deputy principals report lower levels of physical and mental health, coping, confidence, autonomy, and personal wellbeing. TPs were also found to have the highest levels of work-related stress (Riley, 2015). The report presented strong evidence of the negative factors associated with the role.

A follow-up to Riley (2015) was published by the IPPN in November 2022 (IPPN, 2022). The IPPN report is entitled *Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action - A Roadmap to Sustainability.* Data reported in this publication outlines concerns around the demands of school leadership on health and wellbeing. The incidence of burnout, stress, and depressive symptoms among Irish primary school leaders was almost double that of the general working population. Furthermore, incidence of sleep trouble and cognitive stress was more than double the wider population (IPPN, 2022). All of these results had increased since the 2015 study conducted by Professor Riley.

The wellbeing of school leaders in the middle of the COVID-19 school closure was investigated by researchers from Maynooth University (Dempsey and Burke, 2020). Many respondents were reported as feeling the pressure of the previous nine weeks leading their schools from a distance at

the time of research. Personal issues around COVID-19 were found to be having an impact on principals' wellbeing. The most affected aspect of principals' wellbeing was their social wellbeing, which relates to social inclusion. Not one of the principals described themselves as flourishing psychologically through the COVID-19 crisis. In spite of this, the wellbeing of the vast majority of principals was reported to be at moderate levels (Dempsey and Burke, 2020).

Burke, Kinnarney and Salokangas (2022) explored stress experienced by post-primary school leaders in Ireland. The study conducted both quantitative and qualitative analyses to identify the primary sources of stress among these leaders. The quantitative aspect of the study revealed that three main issues were causing stress among school leaders: relational issues, systemic issues related to external pressures, and systemic issues related to daily responsibilities within the school. Relational stressors, such as people management, emerged as the most frequently mentioned source of stress. Systemic external pressures included factors like circulars, timeframes, inspections, and issues arising from the education system itself, such as lack of qualified teachers and student enrolment challenges. Systemic role-related stressors pertained to workload, role expansion, and compliance issues within the school environment. The qualitative analysis, based on responses from 267 secondary school leaders in the Republic of Ireland, indicated that almost half of them experienced a significant amount of stress. Interestingly, the most stressed leaders reported finding their work the most meaningful. It was surmised that this could be attributed to the concept of obsessive passion, which may lead to overwork and reduced well-being (Burke and Dempsey, 2021). The importance of social support in mitigating stress and burnout among school leaders was identified with a perceived lack of support noted as a contributing factor to higher stress levels. The study underscores the critical need for school leaders to prioritize their well-being through emotional management, physical health maintenance, and reflection on work meaningfulness. Neglecting personal well-being risks not only heightening stress but can also result in early retirement. This poses a very real threat to leadership sustainability. The authors firmly attest that the research underscores the critical need for attention to the paid to the mental and emotional health of school

leaders. They call for proactive measures to support their school leaders' wellbeing (Burke and Dempsey, 2021)

2.4.2 Workload, working hours, and work-life balance (WLB)

The role of the educational leader continues to expand (Doyle Fosco, 2022), with the role appearing to have changed enormously in the last two decades. School leaders are presently described as being "under unprecedented pressure" with large volumes of workload presenting (Mahfouz, 2020, p. p.440).Wang (2022) reaffirms that school principals' work is intensifying with principals are working long hours. Workload can impact negatively on school leaders. The area of workload, often termed work intensification, can lead to excessive work related stress, burnout, and mental health issues (Federici and Skaalvik, 2011; Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Wang, Pollock and Hauseman, 2018).

Fullan, (2014) outlines an exorbitant increase in responsibility and tasks for leaders.

> They are expected to run a smooth school; manage health, safety, and the building; innovate without upsetting anyone; connect with students and teachers; be responsive to parents and the community; answer to their districts; and above all, deliver results (p.6)

Academics argue that the complexity and intensity of principals' work "has been well established" (Heffernan, MacDonald and Longmuir, 2022, p. 9) in literature. More recently, the issue of workload and the challenges facing school leaders during COVID-19 were outlined (Parveen *et al.*, 2022). The main challenges facing school leaders, and the school community in general, were related to (1) self-care, wellbeing, and safe school opening; (2) learning continuity and quality of education; (3) ensuring distributive leadership; (4) emotional and mental health; (5) equity gaps; (6) digital divides; and (7) cyber security of online education.

As part of research into working patterns of school principals, ten American public school principals were interviewed three times each during the 2018–2019 school year (Reid and Creed, 2021). A central argument in this study is that school leaders are spending a large volume of time working or engaging in school activities outside of designated working hours. Three prominent themes emerged

from the interviews. Firstly, they found that principals prioritise being visible during the school day. This in turn causes them to complete paperwork and other administrative tasks outside of traditional school hours, either in the evening or at weekends. Secondly, visibility at school and community events is an extra workload on principals, but one that they devote time to. Thirdly, principals spend time being virtually visible via email and various social media platforms (Reid and Creed, 2021). The authors believe that policy changes such as reformed teacher evaluation systems, and recent technological advancements such as social media, have had an impact on the workload of principals and suggest that the associated time spent engaging with these platforms are increasing (Reid and Creed, 2021). This finding is supported by Mahfouz (2020). Mahfouz (2020) contends that social media platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter) negatively influence stress levels of school leaders.

Eighteen principals took part in one-hour semi-structured interviews examining work job demands and work intensity in Canada (Wang, 2022). The sheer magnitude and intensity of the role of the principals was identified as the greatest challenge by all. The demanding workload of being a principal is evidenced in the long hours principals work, with interviewees reporting regularly working in excess of sixty hours per week. The fragmented nature of the role and interrupted work schedule presented as challenging. Principals described being expected to address the continuous flow of issues, concerns, and dilemmas presenting throughout the school day (Wang, 2022). This led to inadequate time to focus on their students with school leaders noting a tension between their administrative tasks and the aim of improving the teaching and learning within their schools. Most study participants indicated that they resort to completing their work outside of school time. Job demands and work intensity are said to contribute to increasing levels of stress and emotional exhaustion among principals (Wang, 2022).

Role ambiguity and an ever expanding workload is mirrored in the findings of (Turkoglu and Cansoy, 2020). The research established clear links between workload and work-family conflict (Turkoglu and Cansoy, 2020). The main sources of workload for thirteen Turkish principals were

time pressure, human resource-based problems, unnecessary formal daily routines, and high email volume. A theme of principals as "being responsible for everything" was highlighted (Turkoglu and Cansoy, 2020, p. 181).

Recently, one hundred and thirty interviews were conducted with education stakeholders across Australia, England, New Zealand and Canada to explore the issue of work intensification alongside school autonomy and accountability (Thompson, Mockler and Hogan, 2022). Issues relating to school leaders emerged. The researchers found that interviewees expressed widespread concerns around policy expectations, principal workload, and work–life balance. It was argued that two main aspects of work intensification presented in data gathered. First, concern over a lack of time to undertake the tasks required for both teaching and school leadership was expressed. Secondly, the changing nature of the role of school leader emerged. School leaders reported investing significant time and energy in aspects of running a school as a business. They saw this as being detrimental to leading teaching and learning (Thompson, Mockler and Hogan, 2022).

Following categorisation of relevant literature, Tintoré *et al.*, (2022) cited the following eight areas as the main problems and challenges faced by school leaders arising from their scoping review:

1. Difficulties managing relationships with all members of the school community
2. The need to handle multiple tasks
3. The challenges in managing the daily demands of the job (budget, resources, buildings)
4. The predominance of a traditional management model over a model of pedagogical leadership
5. The accountability pressure to achieve standards
6. Dealing with scarce and ineffective staff
7. Lack of preparation for the job and ineffective career development
8. Lack of parental involvement and support (Tintoré *et al.*, 2022, p. 558)

Supovitz, D'Auria and Spillane (2019) argue that improving the conditions for high quality teaching should be the main aim for school leaders. Strengthening and improving the educational experiences

for students is paramount to the work of all school leaders. They forward the argument that school leaders are struggling to find time to engage in substantive improvement efforts and instead find themselves "putting out fires" (Supovitz, D'Auria and Spillane, 2019, p. 8).

Irish studies and member surveys detailing the difficulties faced by primary school principals echo international research. The IPPN have written and referenced workload and stress for school leaders in Irish primary schools. The IPPN consider there to be "a crisis relating to the sustainability of school leadership in Irish primary schools" (IPPN, 2022, p.10). The key issue undermining the sustainability of their role as school principal is the number of tasks and responsibilities that divert their attention away from their core purpose as a school leader (IPPN, 2022). The two top stressors for primary school leaders taking part in their survey are the sheer quantity of work and lack of time to focus on teaching and learning. The IPPN (2022) dug deeper into the issue of work intensification by analysing Department of Education (DE) circulars that have issued since 2016, as well as policy guidelines and relevant education legislation. They referenced these through the lens of the quality framework for leadership and management offered in LAOS. Through this analysis, the IPPN found that all of the 162 documents analysed detailed tasks and responsibilities for school leaders that fell within the domain of Managing the Organisation. Fewer than 25% of those documents detailed tasks and responsibilities for school leaders that fell within the domain of Leading Teaching and Learning (IPPN, 2022).

Darmody and Smyth (2016) also named increasing workload as a primary contributor to stress. They posit that a growing workload disrupts principals aiming to fulfil their duties efficiently. The condition of the school building and facilities in general, the disciplinary climate of the school, and the openness of teachers to new developments and ideas also featured as contributing to occupational stress as outlined by these authors. Further exploring this area, they found that primary school principals were more likely to experience occupational stress than classroom teachers. Citing Lacey (2003), Darmody and Smyth (2016) reported the areas of strongest dissatisfaction among school

principals included the effect of the job on their personal lives, supervision of work, and adequacy of administrative support and intensity of work.

2.4.3 Interpersonal relations, loneliness, and isolation

Several studies have found collegial support to be important for mental health and school leader wellbeing (Simon and Gibson, 2019; Collie, Granziera and Martin, 2020; Doyle Fosco, 2022). Despite this, principals are frequently described as socially isolated and experiencing loneliness within schools (Crawford, 2012; Spillane and Lee, 2014; Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018; Buonomo *et al.*, 2020; Hüsrevşahi and Şahan, 2021). This sense of isolation and loneliness can result in decreased commitment to the workplace resulting in an intention to quit emerging (Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018).

Crawford (2012), in an exploration of the effectiveness of principal preparation in Scotland, furthered the argument of isolation in the role of principal. The research examined how novice principals reflect on the adequacy or otherwise of their preparation. While contending that formal preparation had helped them gain confidence as a novice principal, a key finding was that principals were unprepared for the isolation of being a principal (Crawford, 2012).

An American study by Spillane and Lee (2014) examined the transition of new incumbents into the role of principal. They similarly found isolation and loneliness being experienced by novice principals. This mixed-methods, longitudinal study examined a sample of novice principals from a cohort of new Chicago Public School principals. The authors using interviews at two time points to gather their data. Spillane and Lee (2014) found that loneliness featured despite Assistant Principals and other formally designated leaders assisting them in their work. The authors credit loneliness of the role as stemming from novice principals' sense that they were ultimately and solely responsible for critical school decisions. These new principals struggled with feelings of professional isolation and loneliness. Bauer and Silver (2018) echo this finding. They report on professional and social isolation resulting from a sense of isolation when making key decisions.

A Turkish study also explored the loneliness felt by school leaders, detailing the causes and results of this loneliness (Hüsrevşahi and Şahan, 2021). Following interviews with fourteen school leaders, two causes of loneliness were determined. The first was hierarchical power conflict. School leaders stated that they mostly experienced loneliness in situations of power hierarchy. Secondly, interviewees believed that workload caused loneliness. They stated that other administrators and teachers they work with did not perform the assigned tasks at the desired level. They further contended that loneliness resulted from a lack of support and a feeling that they were the only responsible person to meet the school needs (Hüsrevşahi and Şahan, 2021).

Chaplain (2001) acknowledges workload as an occupational stressor for school leaders and adds role conflicts and handling relationships with teaching staff as major stressors. Interpersonal relationship contributing to stress are mirrored by Boyland (2011) and Whittall *et al.* (2002). Both these studies state that conflict compounds stress and workload. They mention conflicts including those associated with students, teachers, and members of the school community. Conflict and bullying have garnered attention in literature (Blase and Fengning, 2008; Mannix McNamara *et al.*, 2018; Reio and Reio, 2018; Mannix-Mcnamara *et al.*, 2021). The 'dark side' of school culture (Mannix-Mcnamara *et al.*, 2021) and incivility among staff can be detrimental to teachers and school leaders. It can hinder the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom (Mannix-Mcnamara *et al.*, 2021).

2.4.4 Salary

Salary presents as an area of dissatisfaction for principals. International studies contend that principals are dissatisfied with role remuneration, feeling that salary does not reflect the scope of the role they undertake (Zeitoun and Newton, 2002). Papa (2007) concentrated on two New York State Education Department administrative datasets for an American study into school leadership retention and recruitment. The author found salary and compensation to be a key factor in the retention and appointment of principals (Papa, 2007). In contrast, the issue of salary did not feature as a determinant in other research (Cooke and Licciardi, 2009; Durow and Brock, 2013).

2.4.5 The emotional demands of school leadership

Within the broader discussion of determinants of school leader turnover and the challenges facing school leaders, effective leadership practices emerge as a critical factor influencing school leader retention rates. The importance of positive relationships and supportive environments fostered by effective leadership can reduce turnover intention in school principals (Brennan and Mac Ruairc, 2011; Kaiser and Thompson, 2021). The work of Maxwell and Riley (2017) highlights the significant emotional demands placed on school principals. Principals are expected to navigate a wide range of emotions in their work, from managing staff and parent interactions to responding to students' emotional needs. These emotional demands often require principals to strike a delicate balance between caring and assertiveness, which can be emotionally taxing. Additionally, the study highlights how the successful management of education reforms and compliance demands can further contribute to emotional burden (Maxwell and Riley, 2017). The importance of addressing emotional labour and ensuring adequate support for school leaders to mitigate turnover intentions among educators is clearly stressed (Maxwell & Riley, 2017).

Educator wellbeing and job satisfaction are linked to retention rates. Exploring educator wellbeing within the Australian context, Hine *et al.*, (2022) emphasise the role of positive relationships, supportive leadership, and collaboration in reducing turnover to allow educators to flourish and thrive. Positive relations were also highlighted in an examination of patterns of emotional practice in leading Irish primary schools (Brennan and Mac Ruairc, 2011). The opposite was also found in both these studies: inadequate support and emotional strain can increase turnover intentions (Brennan and Mac Ruairc, 2011; Hine *et al.*, 2022). The cultural context of a schools plays a crucial role in influencing educator wellbeing. This is particularly evident in disadvantaged areas, where additional emotional challenges may escalate turnover if adequate support systems are not in place (Brennan and MacRuairc, 2017). The authors intentionally sampled principals from both disadvantaged and middle class Irish primary schools in this research. They conclude that "leadership is an emotional practice" (Brennan and MacRuairc, 2017, p. 142) and that for school

principals in designated disadvantaged areas the personal and professional can prove difficult to separate.

2.4.6 Lessons from former principals

Heffernan, Courtney and Doherty (2023) set out to investigate school leader turnover by seeking the opinions of former school leaders. They claim that the voices of former school leaders are rarely heard when exploring school leadership issues. For the purpose of their study, turnover was defined as leaving the profession before retirement age. They explored turnover through the use of push and pull factors. Push factors are those factors that push leaders to leave, with pull factors being those that pull someone to the next phase of a career. These pull factors could include exciting new opportunities or better conditions to entice a move. The Australian study consisted of 56 respondents in total (Heffernan, Courtney and Doherty, 2023). As the majority of respondents described push factors for leaving the role, pull factors were omitted from the study's findings. For these former school leaders, a lack of systemic and individual support featured a push factor. Respondents recalled instances where they deemed support to be inadequate. They felt inexperienced principals needed better support to successfully transition into the role. Heffernan, Courtney and Doherty (2023) report that respondents discussed how support sometimes concealed increased accountability and control, which added to their challenges. They also expressed concerns about reduced autonomy impacting their ability to meet the needs of their school communities. The increased complexity of the role was outlined with work intensification highlighted. Untenable expectations from staff and community members, bureaucracy, challenging relationships, and crisis management were cited as factors for pushing school leaders to leave. Negative implications for their health and wellbeing were noted with these former principals referring to exhaustion, physical and verbal aggression, loneliness, and strains on personal relationships (Heffernan, Courtney and Doherty, 2023).

2.4.7 Summary

This section of the literature portrays a consistency of studies highlighting the widespread challenges of stress, burnout, and declining wellbeing among school leaders. The central determinants of

turnover were discussed. These challenges include high workloads, lack of work-life balance, interpersonal conflicts, and emotional demands.

Table 2.2 Summary of Key Findings and Relevant Literature on Challenges Faced by School leaders

Key Findings	Relevant Literature
Australian school leaders face burnout and fatigue, with declining job satisfaction and increasing stress.	Riley (2014, 2019, 2020, 2021); See et al. (2023)
New Zealand school leaders report significant job strain and worse health outcomes compared to the general population.	NZCER (2020); Cubitt and Burt (2002)
European school principals, particularly in Switzerland, find their job very stressful, with negative impacts on health and personal life.	Denecker (2019)
Swedish school leaders, while not overwhelmingly stressed, still experience some stress symptoms, with about half reporting no or negligible stress.	Håkansson et al. (2021)
Irish primary school principals experience high job satisfaction but also significant occupational stress, particularly among those with teaching responsibilities.	ESRI (2011); Riley (2015, 2022); Dempsey and Burke (2020); Burke, Kinnarney, & Salokangas (2022)
Workload intensification and long working hours are evident among school leaders, leading to stress, burnout, and mental health issues.	Mahfouz (2020); Wang (2022); Federici and Skaalvik (2011); Darmody and Smyth (2016); Fullan (2014); Reid and Creed (2021); Turkoglu and Cansoy (2020); Thompson, Mockler and Hogan (2022); Tintoré et al. (2022); Supovitz, D'Auria and Spillane (2019); IPPN (2022)
School leaders are increasingly expected to handle a wide range of responsibilities, including administrative tasks, community engagement, and student support, leading to role ambiguity and work-life imbalance.	Fullan (2014); Reid and Creed (2021); Wang (2022); Turkoglu and Cansoy (2020); Thompson, Mockler and Hogan (2022); IPPN (2022)
Challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated workload issues for school leaders, impacting areas such as self-care, learning continuity, distributive leadership, and equity.	Parveen et al. (2022)
Collegial support is crucial for school leader mental health, yet principals often experience social isolation and loneliness within schools,	Simon and Gibson (2019); Collie, Granziera and Martin (2020); Doyle Fosco (2022); Crawford (2012); Spillane and Lee (2014);

leading to decreased commitment and intention to quit.	Ozcelik and Barsade (2018); Buonomo et al. (2020); Hüsrevşahi and Şahan (2021); Bauer and Silver (2018); Chaplain (2001); Boyland (2011); Whittall et al. (2002); Blase and Fengning (2008); Mannix McNamara et al. (2018); Reio and Reio (2018); Mannix-McMamara et al. (2021)
Salary dissatisfaction is prevalent among school leaders, who feel their compensation does not reflect the scope of their responsibilities, impacting retention and recruitment.	Zeitoun and Newton (2002); Papa (2007); Cooke and Licciardi (2009); Durow and Brock (2013)
School principals face significant emotional demands, including managing staff, parent, and student interactions, which can lead to emotional strain and turnover intentions if not adequately supported.	Maxwell and Riley (2017); Brennan and Mac Ruairc (2011); Kaiser and Thompson (2021); Hine et al. (2022); Brennan and MacRuairc (2017)
Former school leaders cite inadequate systemic and individual support, increased accountability, reduced autonomy, and work intensification as key factors contributing to turnover, impacting health and wellbeing.	Heffernan, Courtney and Doherty (2023)

2.5 The role of the teaching principal (TP)

Following an examination of turnover and retention determinants within the realms of school leadership, the next section focuses on the role of the teaching principal.

2.5.1 Definition

Researchers internationally, investigating the work of TPs, have examined this area through focusing on rural schools or small schools. The definition of rural schools is primarily related to the number of pupils enrolled. This figure has ranged from 70 to under 140 pupils for primary schools (Hargreaves, 2009). Categorisation of rural schools has also included the small number of staff employed in the school; the school's geographical location; and having principals with significant teaching commitments (Raggl, 2015). Preston and Barnes (2018) explored the definition of rural and conclude that there is no agreement on the term rural. In Australia, rural and remote are defined as any centre with a population of less than 10,000 (Preston and Barnes, 2018). This figure of 10,000

applies to the United Kingdom who use 10,000 residents as their terms for defining rural. New Zealand and the United Nations indicate that no internationally recognised definition for rural is in place (Preston and Barnes, 2018). In other studies, the term small is used when looking at teaching principals. In the Netherlands, no official definition of what constitutes a rural school is in place (Deunk and Maslowski, 2020) so the authors extended the definition from rural to encompass what is a small school. They define small schools as primary schools with fewer than 100 students and schools with fewer than 50 are defined as very small (Deunk and Maslowski, 2020) In certain instances, both terms rural and small have been combined. The scoping literature review by Fargas-Malet and Bagley (2022) is one example with its terms of definition stated to be a review of literature in "small rural schools" in Europe. They contend that the definition for a small rural European school has varied across many countries and many studies. Most definitions have been in accordance with enrolment numbers, with these small European rural primary schools typically having fewer than 100 pupils (Fargas-Malet and Bagley, 2022). Difficulty also arises in defining a teaching principal. A teaching principal is generally defined in literature as a principal who has a "double load" or a dual role in teaching and administration (Clarke and Stevens, 2009). Difficulty arises in the fact that teaching commitments of a principal varies across studies, and at times the commitments are not fully outlined. A study of 12 TPs by Wallin and Newton (2014) stated that the criteria being used to explore teaching principalship was that the principal must have at least 20% of his or her work as teaching. In contrast, research in the Netherlands (Deunk and Maslowski, 2020) explored small schools but failed to outline the teaching commitments of participants. Deunk and Maslowski (2020) informed of the system of multi-school principals in small primary schools in operation in the Netherlands. These are part-time principals of two and sometimes three schools simultaneously (Deunk and Maslowski, 2020).

In Ireland, small schools are defined as those with four mainstream class teachers or fewer (Department of Education, 2023). Primary schools having fewer than 174 pupils have TPs (Department of Education, 2023). The exception to this is when schools have two or more special

classes in operation. In the event of two or more special classes in the school an AP post is automatically in place with no specified enrolment threshold existing.

While there are many studies conducted into the role of school principal, Newton and Wallin (2013) noted a dearth of literature into the area of teaching principal. Owing to that fact that most studies work from the assumption that the principal is operating in a non-teaching capacity, Newton and Wallin (2013) argue that the teaching principal is therefore viewed as "an aberration and a less than ideal position to occupy" (p.68).

2.5.2 International Studies

2.5.2.1 Positives of being a teaching principal

Boyd (1996) argues that all principals should be TPs. The central premise for this argument is from an instructional leadership viewpoint. Boyd (1996) believes that principals must be grounded in the realities of the classroom. Boyd (1996) further argues that being in the role of TP establishes credibility with staff, provides the principal with added insight into teaching issues and curricular concerns, and enhances efficacy as an instructional leader. Successful teaching principals in rural settings are described as change agents (Preston and Barnes, 2018). An understanding of their community is deemed essential to be successful, with an effective rural leader being visible, accessible and approachable within the community (Preston and Barnes, 2018).

Many of the positives associated with leading in a rural or small school setting focus on relationships with people (Preston and Barnes, 2018). Three areas have been outlined:

1. Relationships with staff,
2. Relationships with students, and
3. Relationships with the school community

Collaboration among and with staff has been highlighted as a positive of the role of TP (Boyd, 1996; Wallin and Newton, 2013; Preston and Barnes, 2018). Due to small staff numbers, rural principals are in an ideal position to build trust among staff and promote collaboration (Preston and Barnes, 2018).

TPs benefit from building relationships with students. Indeed, the burden of administration can be diluted and lessened through having a focus on teaching and maintaining daily interaction with pupils (Boyd, 1996). Preston and Barnes (2018) believe that TPs and students benefit from their small school setting. This allows schools leaders to get to know all pupils personally, which may be difficult in larger school settings. Appreciating the added advantage of getting to know pupils much more, Newton and Wallin (2013) noted that TPs consistently rate their experiences as being positive despite their heavy workloads.

Wallin and Newton (2014) conducted interviews with twelve Canadian rural principals. These TPs were found to have a sense of joy and enhanced purpose owing to the relationships they cultivated with the school communities. Working in small school setting was seen as an advantage. A similar sentiment echoes from Bagley and Hillyard (2019). Both TPs in their ethnographic research believe stronger parental involvement is fostered and present in small school settings which benefits learning. Preston and Barnes (2018) highlighted the community aspect of a TP's work. They contend that successful TPs are often active within their school communities. Other researchers have found that rural principals need to immerse themselves in their rural settings in order to be successful (Clarke and Stevens, 2009; Lock *et al.*, 2012). Preston and Barnes (2018) term this as place leadership.

Lock *et al.* (2012) interviewed eight principals in their Australian study. The autonomous nature of the role is considered as a positive aspect. Positive team spirit and collaboration is also noted. These TPs were attracted to the role due to a love of teaching in remote communities, a desire for a personal challenge and a desire to contribute to a remote setting (Lock *et al.*, 2012).

Personal benefits to being a TP have been noted (Boyd, 1996; Mulford et al., 2008; Newton and Wallin, 2013). Self-esteem of small school principals was noted by Boyd (1996) and Newton and Wallin (2013). Furthering this, Mulford et al. (2008) argue that TPs have enhanced feelings of accomplishment and confidence which emerge from coping and surviving "the trials and challenges of being a leader of a small school" (Mulford et al., 2008, p. 546). Boyd (1996) argued that burnout

can be offset by teaching. According to Boyd (1996), teaching can be a positive diversion from administration.

2.5.2.2 Challenges facing TPs

The aforementioned positive factors or benefits associated with being a TP are presented as negative or proving difficult in other studies. Paradoxes have been identified in studies into the area of rural small school leadership (Lock *et al.*, 2012).

Having previously identified relationships with students as a benefit of TP, students evoke feelings of guilt among TPs (Wallin *et al.*, 2019). The dual role can negatively impact preparedness to teach (Deunk and Maslowski, 2020) with interviewees noting that their preparation is not optimal when performing a dual role. The greatest source of guilt for TPs in a study by Wallin *et al.*, (2019) was over perceptions that ultimately they were doing a disservice to pupils. Much of this guilt stems from workload and time management issues present for those in dual role. Wallin and Newton (2014) similarly noted the concerns that TPs expressed regarding the impact administrative workloads took on their relationships with students. Challenges surrounding workload and time management dominate studies that reveal the challenges facing TPs. Australian studies into small school settings agree that workload impacts TPs. Starr and White (2008) state that TPs are over-burdened in a role "that cannot be executed thoroughly due to a lack of time for any particular task" (p. 6). Clarke and Stevens (2009) also found workload and work life balance to be negative issues for teaching principals. Starr and White (2008) feel that workload for teaching principals is compounded due to constant interruptions and the lack of adults working alongside them to share the heavy burden. Farrell (2010) believes that that the education system "expects the teaching-principal to manage all tasks, large and small, important and trivial, in a competent manner" (p.25), despite increases in tasks and lack of staff to whom such tasks can be delegated. The knock-on impact from workload may be acutely felt in the personal lives of teaching principals. Clarke and Stevens (2009) claim that teaching principals often struggle to find a balance between their personal and professional lives. They note that work duties are often prioritised at the expense of their personal lives and families.

Newton and Wallin (2013) note a similar challenge occurring for dual role leaders in their Canadian research. They found that teaching principals viewed their work positively but cited the effect their demanding roles can have on their personal lives as cause for concern. Many participants found their administrative duties took place outside of the school day. With participants indicating that work-life balance is a concern, maintaining a healthy balance between the two can be problematic (Newton and Wallin, 2013).

Staff relations, earlier referenced as positive and beneficial, may paradoxically be an area of tension for TPs (Wallin *et al.*, 2019). TPs in this study by Wallin et al. (2019) were careful about balancing the complexities of relationships at work that filtered out into the community. This rural, small school setting for this study meant that TPs knew about staff members personal lives. This might result in a failure to address certain issues these principals knew existed. The desire to avoid conflict was said to extend beyond to school setting to include potential conflict with members of the community. A complex network of relationships exists for TPs in rural settings (Wallin *et al.*, 2019). Friction is considered inevitable in small school settings (Wallin and Newton, 2014). TPs were called upon to deal with community tensions or friction due to the impact they had on schools in smaller settings.

Lack of administrative and ancillary support exacerbates workload. Principals of larger schools naturally have greater capacity to delegate and share management tasks. Small school settings have many of the same tasks to deal with but much less staff with which to share the responsibility (Farrell, 2010). When delegating tasks, professional tensions can occur. Dictating to those who are considered friends can be problematic in small school settings (Newton and Wallin, 2013). With distributed leadership considered essential for leadership success, TPs have spoken about trying not to distribute any more to teachers in small school settings (Wallin and Newton, 2014). In this study, TPs buffer staff from additional demands perceiving them to be already overburdened. This was reported as stemming from care and concern from staff, rather than a desire for control or power (Wallin and Newton, 2014).

Wallin (2001) believes context plays a large part in difficulties that can be attributed to teaching principals. While writing extensively in Canada, the findings are generalizable. Wallin (2001) argues that rural Canadian principals face significant public expectations to contribute to community life. Hardwick-Franco (2018) have described working in rural settings as being akin to living in a fish bowl. (Clarke, Stevens and Wildy (2006) note that Australian teaching principals suffer the same issue of contributing while trying to maintain an appropriate professional distance with community members. These authors describe the change process as slow and complex for newly appointed principals. They noted that a newly appointed principal may encounter difficulties in changing the culture of rural settings (Clarke, Stevens and Wildy, 2006).

With workload, time management, striking a work life balance and difficulties embedding change all mentioned, Clarke and Stevens (2009) found that TPs were anxious and overwhelmed as a result. They also document feelings of guilt and dissatisfaction over frequent interruptions to teaching time. As a result, many TPs feel that they are not prepared to deal with the tensions and dilemmas that are associated with their double roles (Mulford *et al.*, 2008). Guilt emerges as a theme in the work of Wallin *et al.*, (2019). They similarly found TPs expressing sentiments of guilt in a perceived failure to achieve their vision of being an instructional leader. They felt guilty having to reschedule classroom visits or other appointments to deal with more other tasks at short notice. (Wallin *et al.*, 2019).

These feelings of guilt increase when questions of school viability arise. For many they are fighting for the school itself as if schools become too small, they will be closed (Starr and White, 2008). School closures and pressure on TPs emerged in the writing of Bagley and Hillyard (2019). They noted an ever-present threat of school closure in rural settings with school survival dependent on pupil numbers. Bagley and Hillyard (2019) noted the closure of small rural schools throughout Europe or a constant threat of closure due to a lack of funding, diminishing resources, difficulties in attracting and retaining staff, allied to decreasing pupil population.

Studies mentioned thus far are in rural and remote areas of Canada and Australia. Access to supports is affected by location. Wallin (2008) discusses a lack of opportunities for professional learning due to limited access to centres of professional learning such as universities or colleges. Location also results in teaching principals having limited opportunities to be mentored (Wallin, 2001). Clarke and Stevens (2009) feel that pressures for TPs are heightened by the isolation of small schools in rural or remote areas. These authors claim that limited opportunities are available for TPs to exchange views with their peers. Fewer staff within the school obviously restricts collegial ways of operating (Clarke and Stevens, 2009). Developing the curriculum and introducing initiatives is further highlighted as problematic in more recent research (Autti and Bæck, 2021). Extra administrative work is created for few members of staff when striving to introduce and embed curricular change (Autti and Bæck, 2021).

2.5.3 TP in an Irish context

The IPPN (2022) inform that 54% of primary school principals are TPs. This dual role mean that TPs are expected to expected to perform their responsibilities effectively as class or Special Education teachers while also attending to administrative duties as school principals (IPPN, 2022). Irish studies expand on and affirm aforementioned difficulties that face Irish primary school TPs. Murphy and Devine (2023) claim that there is longstanding evidence of disproportionate challenges faced by TPs (Murphy, 2019; Murphy and Devine, 2023). Dempsey and Burke (2020) recorded TPs wellbeing was lower than APs wellbeing in research into leadership conducted during COVID-19 school closures. In other Irish research, TPs were found to be much less satisfied with the role than administrative principals (Darmody and Smyth, 2011, 2016) in an investigation into occupational balance and wellbeing. Darmody and Smyth (2011) have questioned the viability of the role for those in the position of TP. Riley (2015) once more noted higher levels of work-related for those in a leadership role as a TP. Exploring the area of teaching principalship in the report *Irish Principals & Deputy Principals Occupational Health, Safety & Wellbeing Survey*, TPs report lower levels of physical and mental health, coping, confidence, autonomy, and personal wellbeing. Teaching

principals were also found to have the highest levels of work-related stress (Riley, 2015). The IPPN (2022) recorded differences between TPs and APs in the perceived sustainability of the role for school leaders. They found that TP sustainability rating was lower than that for APs (IPPN, 2022). With many studies supplying quantitative data, and others lacking empirical robustness, a need for an in-depth qualitative exploration of the role of the TP in Ireland is apparent.

Grubb and Flessa (2006) have described the job of teaching principal as being too big for one person. While their research is based in America, it echoes sentiments expressed around the Irish system. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2008) acknowledge the unsustainable expectations with regard to the role (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). Drea and O'Brien (2003) believe that it is impossible for TPs to deliver on all aspects of the role unless they exceed working hours consistently. They conclude that the perception throughout the ranks of Irish principals is that the role is impossible to effectively manage.

An argument has been made that the responsibilities of the principal in relevant legislation and guidelines are predicated primarily on the role of admin principal (IPPN, 2014). The IPPN argue that the teaching principal role is viewed as a teaching position and that full-time teaching responsibilities are given priority over leadership duties (IPPN, 2014). Drea and O'Brien (2003) suggest that while principals are either administrative or teaching, both roles are viewed as leadership/management roles. The difficulty for teaching principals is that they assume all the leading and management duties, while also teaching full time. Drea and O'Brien (2003) also discussed "the competing demands faced particularly by teaching principals to be firstly a principal and secondly a class teacher" (p.5), drawing the conclusion that the workload is perceived as 'undoable'. McDonald (2008) emphasises that the position of TP is problematic and unsustainable with workload issues experienced due to smaller staff numbers. This leads in turn to a narrower sphere of collective expertise among staff (McDonald, 2008). The IPPN (2022) believe there to be an unfairness in the role of TP when contrasted with AP. They stated that the inequity of the situation is heightened due to the remuneration of school leaders. TPs are remunerated in accordance

with the number of mainstream class teaching posts in the school. This figure, it is argued, fails to account for the actual number of staff the school leader is leading and managing (IPPN, 2022). The IPPN (2022) referenced that TPs may be leading and managing SNAs, bus escorts, ancillary, and cleaning/maintenance staff allied to the management of those in teaching positions. The state that the "current method of using pupil numbers to determine such status is no longer fit for purpose" (IPPN, 2022, p.17).

2.5.4 Conclusion

This section delved into the role of Teaching Principals (TPs), drawing on international studies and focusing on the context of rural and small schools in Ireland. It discusses the various definitions of rural schools and TPs, highlighting the dual responsibility of TPs in leading both teaching and administrative tasks. The benefits of being a TP, such as improved relationships with staff, students, and the community, are discussed alongside the challenges, which include workload, time management, and role sustainability. The section provides a comprehensive exploration of the complex nature of the TP role and the challenges it entails.

2.6 Motivating factors for becoming a school principal

A literature review shed light on contributing factors when one decides to seek a role as school leader (Lee and Mao, 2023). The American review found intrinsic motivation to be a factor in thirteen studies. Ten of these studies found that teachers were consistently motivated to enter principalships because of a desire to make a difference in education. Another report in this review mentioned self-confidence as a key reason (Winter and Morgenthal, 2002; Lee and Mao, 2023).

Hancock et al. (2019) examined motivating factors for German and American principals. German participants accounted for 145 responses and 124 US principals took part. In both countries, principals were attracted to their leadership roles by opportunities to influence their learning environments. They were motivated by a desire to positively impact teachers and students. The role of school leader was seen as a highly influential position. Within the role, participants liked having opportunities to exercise autonomy and control over areas such as curriculum and content, personnel

assignments, teaching schedules, and student learning. The principals were attracted to the principalship in order to positively influence these learning outcomes. Another reason for becoming a principal cited by respondents in both countries was the desire to experience personal professional development and growth. Participants also felt it to be personally rewarding overcoming issues such as hectic work schedules, personnel problems, and dealing large quantities of paperwork (Hancock *et al.*, 2019)

The influence of others and how this may impact a prospective principal emerges in literature. Principals in two studies referred to being encouraged by previous principals to aspire to leadership, citing it as a significant decisional factor (Farley-Ripple, Raffel and Welch, 2012; Murphy, 2023)

2.6.1 Demotivating factors for becoming a school principal

Some teacher leaders considered to have great potential for senior leadership can be reluctant to take on the role (IPPN, 2022). One of the most cited reasons for females displaying this reluctance is family commitments (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Hoff, Menard and Tuell, 2006; Méndez-Morse *et al.*, 2015; Lee and Mao, 2023). Female teachers in a principal preparation program expressed uncertainty about assuming principal positions due to concerns related to children and family responsibilities (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). Female educators indicated that they would wait for family responsibilities to lighten before applying for an administrative position (Hoff, Menard and Tuell, 2006). A study of female Latino school principals – achieving a healthy work-family balance is often cited as the biggest challenge for female principals (Méndez-Morse *et al.*, 2015).

Location emerges as a deterrent. Small, rural schools can face more challenges in terms of recruiting and selecting principals (Pijanowski, Hewitt and Brady, 2009). An earlier study reported superintendents from small, rural school districts consider the principal shortage as more extreme than those from large urban districts (Whitaker, 2003).

Studies have cited financial benefits as an important factor that educators consider when deciding to assume or remain in principal positions (Pounder and Merrill, 2001; Winter and Morgenthal,

2002; Pijanowski, Hewitt and Brady, 2009). The belief in some studies is that the current average salary does not adequately compensate principals for their working hours and responsibilities (Cooley and Shen, 2003; DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Papa, 2007). The was echoed in more recent research school principals' compensation is still not equal to the time, effort, and skills required in the role (Levin and Bradley, 2019). Other findings suggest that salary alone is not sufficient to recruit talented principals (Lee and Mao, 2023).

Long working hours cited as an influential factor allied to a change in dynamics with colleagues (Pounder and Merrill, 2001; Zeitoun and Newton, 2002; DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Farley-Ripple, Raffel and Welch, (2012) explored the influence of relationships. They found that poor working relationships can deter participants from seeking administrative positions, while positive working relationships, interacting with students, and strong district support can attract school leaders to the role.

The following table shows a summary of the main findings linked to relevant literature.

Table 2.3 Factors Influencing Leadership Role Assumption

Factors	Literature	Findings
Motivating Factors		
Intrinsic Motivation	Lee and Mao (2023)	Teachers were motivated to become principals due to their intrinsic desire to make a positive difference in education.
Desire for Impact	Hancock et al. (2019)	Principals in Germany and the US were attracted to leadership roles to positively influence learning environments and impact teachers and students.
Autonomy and Control	Hancock et al. (2019)	Principals were motivated by the autonomy and control they could exercise in curriculum, personnel assignments, teaching schedules, and student learning.

Personal and Professional Development	Hancock et al. (2019)	The desire for personal and professional development, coupled with the satisfaction of overcoming challenges, motivated individuals to become principals.
Influence of Others	Farley-Ripple, Raffel, and Welch (2012); Murphy (2023)	Encouragement from previous principals was a significant factor motivating aspiring leaders to pursue school leadership roles.
Demotivating Factors		
Family Commitments	Browne-Ferrigno (2003); Hoff, Menard, and Tuell (2006); Méndez-Morse et al. (2015); Lee and Mao (2023)	Female teachers expressed reluctance due to family concerns, impacting their decision to assume principal positions. Achieving work-family balance was a challenge.
Location	Pijanowski, Hewitt, and Brady (2009); Whitaker (2003)	Small, rural schools faced challenges in recruiting principals, with superintendents in these areas perceiving a more extreme shortage compared to urban districts.
Salary	Pounder and Merrill (2001); Winter and Morgenthal (2002); Cooley and Shen (2003); Papa (2007); Levin and Bradley (2019); Lee and Mao (2023)	Financial benefits play a crucial role in decisions to assume or remain in principal positions. Salary may not adequately compensate for the role's demands.
Long Working Hours	Pounder and Merrill (2001); Zeitoun and Newton (2002); DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003)	The demanding nature and long working hours associated with the role serve as demotivating factors for individuals considering becoming school principals.
Working Relationships	Farley-Ripple, Raffel, and Welch (2012)	Poor working relationships can deter individuals from seeking administrative positions, while positive

		relationships and strong district support attract school leaders.

2.7 Eligibility requirements for the role of school principal

In accordance with Section 15 of the Education Act 1998 the BoM / Education and Training Board (ETB) manages the appointment of teaching staff on behalf of the patron. This is done in accordance with relevant legislation, Rules for National Schools, and current DE Circulars. All appointments are subject to the approval of the patron and appointments are by open competition (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2019). Circular 02/02 outlines the eligibility criteria for Appointment as Principal Teacher in Irish primary and special schools (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2002). There are two sets of criteria issued which depend upon the number of pupils in the school.

1. To be deemed eligible to apply for the post of principal teacher in ordinary primary schools with less than 80 pupils, applicants must be qualified primary teachers and have satisfactorily completed probation as primary school teachers.
2. To be deemed eligible to apply for the post of principal teacher in ordinary primary schools with 80 pupils or greater, applicants must have a minimum of five years qualified whole time teaching service, two of which must be in a recognised primary school in the Republic of Ireland (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2002)

There is no appeal mechanism in place following interviews and selection (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2019).

Primary principals fall into two categories: Administrative Principals (AP) and Teaching Principals (TP). APs have no teaching duties and TPs have full teaching duties as well as administrative duties. A mainstream primary school may appoint an AP once the enrolment is 174 pupils. In the event of two or more special classes in the school an AP post is automatically in place with no specified enrolment threshold existing. Primary schools having fewer than 174 pupils have TPs (Department of Education (DE), 2023). TPs are entitled to release days, whereby the DE pays a substitute teacher

to teach in a TP classroom. Each school with a teaching principal has 37 release days in the 2023/24 school year. Schools with one special class receive four additional release days in the 2023/24 school year (Department of Education (DE), 2023). In certain instances, acting principals temporarily assume the role of principal on short term (under one year) or long-term basis (for a minimum of one school year) while the principal is on leave.

2.7.1 Stepping down as school leader

The options are presently limited for primary principals in the Republic of Ireland seeking to leave the role. There is no formal step-down facility and no fixed length contracts. According to Department of Education Circular (2004), the post may be relinquished if a permanent vacancy arises in their school. Upon relinquishing the post, the former principal becomes the most junior teacher at the school. If enrolment numbers drop to such a level that the school loses a teacher, the most junior teacher (i.e., the former principal) is automatically placed on the redeployment panel and leaves the school. Furthermore, the principal also loses the pension credits that they have accrued during their time in the role. The Irish Primary Principal's Network (IPPN) highlighted these issues, along with the lack of a clear job description, to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education in October 2014 and published a position paper on the matter in 2015 (IPPN, 2015). The other option available to leaders who wish to leave the role is to source employment elsewhere.

2.7.2 An international comparative for eligibility as school principal

Eligibility for the role of Irish primary school principal currently has no mandatory pre-training requirements. Those who take part in pre-training do so through self-selected means. This has seen provision for leadership preparation in the Republic of Ireland as "a novel phenomenon" (Cunningham, 2013, p. 28). The Irish eligibility context contrasts significantly with other international countries. For example, Scotland has a mandatory national qualification for school leadership eligibility (General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2023). Meeting what is termed the Standard for Headship is demonstrated through successful completion of the Into Headship programme, a national qualification. Different leadership preparation contexts are explored in the

International Handbook (Lumby, Crow and Pashiardis, 2009). It is informed that Austrian principals must complete a training course, French aspiring principals have to complete Ministry of National Education funded qualification programmes, and aspiring school leaders are required to complete a structured preparatory programme in Germany. Finland also demands that potential leaders must hold a master's degree and complete a certificate in educational administration (Lumby, Crow and Pashiardis, 2009).

Mandatory training and preparation are not only restricted to Europe. In Ontario, Canada, a potential candidate for leadership must have qualification and experience as a teacher, school level certification, specialist qualifications and/or master's degree, and must also have completed a principal's qualification programme (Schleicher, 2012). Aspiring American principals must have at least three years teaching experience, a master's degree and have obtained licenses and certifications from mandated leadership programs (Su, Gamage and Mininberg, 2003). In New York City (NYC), candidates apply to the principal candidate pool for eligibility to apply for future vacancies and must have obtained a school leader licence (New York City Department of Education, 2023). Harris and Jones (2018) drew upon evidence from a comparative study of educational change and transformation in seven education systems: Australia, England, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Russia, and Singapore. The 7 System Leadership Study (7SLS) noted that mandatory preparation was required in Indonesia since 2009 and Malaysia since 2013. Harris and Jones (2018) concluded that all of the seven systems have introduced, or are currently producing, national leadership qualifications or programmes. They further note the presence of national bodies to oversee the delivery of national leadership standards.

2.7.3 Mandatory certification debate: preparing principals for effective school leadership

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that leadership can significantly impact learning outcomes in schools (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020; Murphy, 2023). This research contends that effective leadership is essential for school improvement efforts and that school leaders are vital

for setting conditions for quality teaching. These all significantly contribute to an improvement in student outcomes (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020; Murphy, 2023). Cowie and Crawford, (2007) unequivocally argue the case for mandatory principal preparation. This view is further supported by Bush (2018). The author believes it to be unrealistic to assume that experience alone will teach principals everything they need to know. Bush (2018) believes that there is "a moral obligation" (p. 68) to prepare leaders, with the role being very different to that of a class teacher. King and Stevenson (2017), discussing the Irish context, highlight the existing gap between preparation and appointment procedures. They claim that teachers have been promoted to the role of school principal with inadequate levels of preparation. An Irish doctoral thesis found significantly high numbers of newly appointed principals (NAPs) come to senior management without sufficient leadership training or management experience (Cuddihy, 2012). Researching leadership in an Irish context also led Murphy (2023) to argue that formal preparation is necessary.

While the evidence for pre-training for school leaders appears overwhelming, dissent exists around making this mandatory criterion for eligibility to the role of principal. A mixed methods study of serving and aspiring post primary school principals demonstrates mixed views among participants about mandatory certification (Cuddihy, 2012) with equal access to such courses cited. This is supported by Poekert, Alexandrou and Shannon, (2016) finding that teachers' parenting commitments can inhibit access to leadership development programmes.

Internationally, the quality of principal preparation programmes has been contested (Normore and Lahera, 2019). These authors wrote on the evolution of educational leadership preparation programmes and noted recurring criticisms of preparation programmes internationally. These include lack of rigour in selecting candidates, a lack of quality course content, ineffective delivery systems, and fragmented programme structures. Leadership preparation programmes have also been accused of being heavily influenced by governments (Lumby, 2014). Lumby (2014) also accuses previous research findings of being biased. The author asserts that research into leadership preparation fails to consider the effectiveness of principals who have not participated in a

preparation programme. This leads to a difficulty in truly examining the impact of preparation programmes rigorously.

Debates also centre on whether engagement with leadership preparation courses should be as a means of certifying principals or more to do with academic learning (Bush, 2018; Murphy, 2023). Given the importance of context and culture for school leaders (Harris, Jones and Adams, 2016; Harris and Jones, 2018a), being mindful of creating "cloned" leaders has been noted (Walker, 2015; Murphy, 2023). The difficulty in finding a balance between quality and quantity of candidates exists (Anderson *et al.*, 2011). These authors claim that while the call for standards to be introduced is rooted in concern for improving quality and training of future school leaders, it fails to deal with the shortfall in supply of numbers.

Despite this, Bush (2018) states that there is a "growing realisation that headship is a specialist occupation that requires specific preparation" (p.67). The following reasons are then offered:

- the expansion of the role of the school principal;
- the devolution of powers to school level;
- the increasing complexity of school contexts;
- recognition that there is a moral obligation;
- recognition that effective preparation and development make a difference.

2.7.4 Developments in leadership preparation in the Republic of Ireland

Research into leadership preparation in the Republic of Ireland indicates that principals believe they are inadequately prepared for the role (Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants, 2018). Fitzpatrick Associates was commissioned by the Department of Education (DE) in January 2017 to undertake a report into continuing professional development provision for school leaders. The research explored what a range of school leaders in Ireland articulated as their professional development needs. 503 responses were received with the finding that principals felt unprepared for the role returned. Sugrue's (2009) research affirms this sentiment finding that only a minority of new

appointees reported feeling well prepared for their new role. Furthermore, Anderson *et al.*, (2011) linked inadequacies in Leadership Preparation and Development (LPD) to the reluctance of teachers in aspiring towards leadership roles.

Those in Irish settings who have undertaken voluntary training before accepting the role advocate the positives of such professional learning. Self-reported positives of voluntary formal preparation were increased confidence levels, improved judgment in decision-making and problem-solving, and increased opportunities to make professional networks in a recent Irish study (Murphy, 2023). Leaders in this research believe that formal preparation is important.

Reported benefits of pre-training were also outlined by McGuinness and Cunningham (2015). They investigated the Toraíocht programme, a non-mandatory accredited programme of preparation for school leadership, introduced in 2008. The authors sought the view of six novice principals who had undergone the programme and contrasted their views with six other principals who had not taken part in such a programme. McGuinness and Cunningham (2015) found that newly appointed leaders felt that they had a deeper understanding of the role and were more ready to enact their duties if they were part of the programme. These participants believed such professional learning afforded them an enhanced perception of the complexities the position entails and offered them access to a wider support network upon appointment thereby easing transition into the role.

Steps have been taken to improve Irish leadership preparation and leadership in general despite the continued absence of mandatory leadership preparation. The decision to establish the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) and its formal launch in 2015 are seen as a positive developments (King and Nihill, 2019). The CSL is described as collaboration between the Department of Education (DE) and principal professional bodies (Murphy, 2023). The CSL's focus is on constructing and facilitating "a system-wide developmental continuum for school leaders" (Murphy, 2020, p.7) in the Republic of Ireland. The CSL consultation paper (CSL, 2015) findings once more align with the argument that newly appointed principals receive training prior to taking on the role. They examined a number of different education systems and found that:

- Most systems have quite rigorous identification and selection of participants for aspiring principalship programmes. Applicants must demonstrate readiness for the role.
- A preparation qualification for principalship is usually a mandatory requirement
- In most systems, the induction programmes for newly appointed school leaders merely build on previous learning accumulated in other areas of the continuum (p.2)

With the a lack of a robust, mandatory system of pre-training in Ireland, more extensive induction training is now necessary for current school principals to overcome this shortfall in leadership training (CSL, 2015). In order to adequately prepare future school leaders, the Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership (PDSL) promoted by the CSL is now available to aspiring principals. The PDSL is jointly designed and accredited by multiple universities, is partly funded by the DE and accounts for approximately 250 participants annually (Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants, 2018; Murphy, 2023). Although not mandatory, it is seen as a significant development in leadership preparation (Murphy, 2023). King and Nihill (2019) believe that this training will positively impact on leadership practice in schools in the future.

2.7.5 Selection process

When a vacancy arises in a school, a series of actions are immediately enacted. A committee consisting of the Chairperson of the BoM, and two independent assessors appointed by the patron's body are charged with establishing the criteria for the job, then short-listing potential candidates and finally interviewing potential candidates. The current criteria against which school leaders are selected and appointed is based on a framework that underpins the SSE process (Department of Education, 2022). Following receipt of standard application forms, and letters to application to candidates and shortlisted and called to interview. Ratification of the successful interviewee is then sought from the BoM, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the Patron upon completion of interviews (Ummanel, McNamara and Stynes, 2016).

Criticism of the nature of selecting principals in Ireland exists (Eamon Drea and O'Brien, 2003; Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008). A report by HayGroup Management Consultants, prepared by Drea and O'Brien (2003), recommended the need for "a set of management processes designed to enhance the selection and assessment of candidates for appointment" (p.36). Sugrue (2015) speaks to a lack of dynamism in recruitment practices for principals. He believes that this makes the transition into the role more difficult, especially for external appointees. Doubts were also cast on the selection process by an OECD report (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008). It argues that a lack of attention was being paid to the selection and training of interview panels. A systematic literature review into recruitment of school leaders in the United States also returned a similar finding (Lee and Mao, 2023). The authors noted that a few studies found that those overseeing appointments rarely have the means to properly assess the skills necessary for the role and the process of appointments may be open to bias. A participant in the recent Irish study by Murphy (2023) pointed to difficulties when encountering the same person on many interview panels.

A cross border study between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland to examine why some teachers apply for the role and others do not states that "it is essential that the selection process is sufficiently rigorous and tests a range of skills appropriate for principalship" (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2009, p. 15). Having suitably qualified personnel overseeing this process is necessary. Murphy (20203) believes that there has been some change recently. He discusses a move from career structures moving towards career actions (Murphy, 2023). Murphy (2023) discusses a move away from previous structures whereby stakeholders deemed preparedness to lead in schools solely as experience based on seniority. This view has changed towards a healthier, more productive tension according to the author. Participants in his study supported this, believing that they would not be appointed to the role of school leader without some form of formal preparation. Participants do still see appointment processes as contingent on the views of those charged with selecting and appointing. They believed that there is more scope for selection and appointment processes to engage actively with current research and become more transparent in methods of operating (Murphy, 2023).

2.7.6 Challenges and trends in school principal recruitment and retention

The most recent IPPN study investigated the area of recruitment and retention of school principals (IPPN, 2022). They detailed that leadership changes had occurred in 39% of the schools that responded to their study. Furthering this they found that in 60% of those cases, the principal had not reached the age of retirement but was rather stepping away from their leadership role early or to a different role. The average number of applications received for those vacant positions was 5.5 and that in 7% of those cases the role had to be re-advertised (IPPN, 2022, p.10). They also report that 16% of the 376 principal posts advertised between September 2021 and August 2022 were readvertised (IPPN, 2022).

IPPN (2022) examined figures in the area of retention. The figures show that 48% of principals responding to the survey indicated that they were either highly likely or likely to be in their current role in 5 years' time. Exploring why, the study found that the lack of step-down facility features prominently (IPPN, 2022, p.11). There has been a reported difficulty in recruiting and attracting principals to the role of school principal in Ireland according to media reports (O'Brien, 2017, 2021). The most recent Irish Times article was entitled *Crisis in recruitment and retention of school principals will only worsen* (O'Brien, 2021) highlighting what they believe to be a worrying situation. Some nations have deemed the dearth of school leaders an "emergency" (Australia) and New Zealand described school leaders as a "disappearing species" (Bolton, 2019).

There are factors, both personal and professional, positive, and negative, that impact an individual's decision to apply for principalship.

2.7.7 Induction and initial supports for principals

Having successfully attained the role of school leader, many newly appointed principals (NAP) reported difficulties adjusting to the role (Sugrue, 2009). A study conducted for the Professional Development Support for Teachers (PDST) by O'Donnell and Treacy (2014) found three recurring themes regarding NAPs. These themes were:

- workload volume,
- The dawning realisation of the gravity of the role, with new principals realising that they now have ultimate responsibility for the school, and
- Isolation from peers and the school community generally (CSL, 2016)

Oide is a new support service for teachers and school leaders in Ireland (Oide, 2023). Oide is funded by the Department of Education and formed from the integration of four previously existing support services. These services are the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).

To date, the PDST have offered an induction programme called Misneach for NAPs. A total of ten days of professional development, spread over two school years, are offered to school principals. The CSL website outlines that "relevant topics are explored and discussed with valuable opportunities provided to voice concerns, seek reassurance and share experiences with other newly appointed principals" (CSL, 2020).

The CSL then offers mentoring support for all NAPs who may wish to avail of such support for their first year in the position. Statistics from the CSL website shows 556 school leaders have been trained as CSL mentors since 2015. These figures also show that the number of mentoring relationships has increased from 150 in the 2016/17 school year to 327 in the 2019/20 school year.

A coaching service from CSL is also provided and outlined on the Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants report (Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants, 2018). They note that the programme of one-to-one coaching of school principals put in place by the CSL is a confidential and anonymous programme consisting of six meetings between principals and professional qualified coaches. While the rationale for the programme was originally centred on confidential coaching to those experiencing "professional difficulty", this was soon made available to all principals. Much

higher levels of satisfaction are reported with coaching than with mentoring in a recent Irish study (Murphy, 2023).

Bush (2018) deems an effective induction process to be “essential” (p.69) in light of the many difficulties faced by new principals.

2.8 Leadership Support Strategies

The section examines strategies crucial for supporting school leaders in navigating their demanding roles effectively. Deliberately layered, it first discusses systemic solutions by investigating succession planning and principal pipelines. It then deviates to include various other factors such as social support networks, self-care practices, personal access to professional development, and the cultivation of resilience and positive psychology.

2.8.1 Succession planning

A compelling case can be made for adequately preparing school leaders, considering the significant affective impact of balancing the complexities and challenges inherent in their roles. With issues such as appointment shock and the need for perceived legitimacy by school-based colleagues to be led apparent, the importance of providing comprehensive leadership preparation and development programmes is evident.

Leadership development, succession planning, and principal pipelines are essential strategies to address turnover and ensure effective leadership within schools. Cieminski (2018) outlines a structured approach to succession planning encompassing talent identification, development, selection, onboarding, support, evaluation, and future leader development .

Bush (2018) proposes a six-phase model for leadership preparation and induction, emphasizing the need for ongoing professional learning and mentoring. The six phases are:

- Succession planning – identifying future leaders
- Leadership preparation – sound preparation

- Recruitment and selection – customised selection in order to match qualified candidates to appropriate schools
- Induction – an ongoing process focused on professional learning
- Mentoring
- In-service development – ongoing development in which leadership learning is seen as a career-long process (Bush, 2018, p.69)

Evaluation studies like those conducted by Simkins, Close and Smith (2009) highlight the effectiveness of tailored induction programs and work shadowing experiences in easing leadership transitions into the new role.

Research underscores the necessity of purposefully identifying and developing potential leaders to build a sustainable pool of talent within the education system (Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010). Initiatives like the Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI) (Gates *et al.*, 2019) have demonstrated significant improvements in student achievement and principal retention rates through focused efforts on leader standards, preparation, selective hiring, and on-the-job support. The PPI, implemented in large American urban public-school districts, demonstrates how a structured approach to leadership development can result in improvements in educational outcomes for students and aid retention.

In the Irish context, research highlights the need for diverse preparation methods and support networks, including formal programmes and peer mentoring, to address fragmented provision of leadership preparation and support (Murphy, 2023). The author's dynamic framework emphasises tailored support for principals to prepare them for the role and the inevitable emotional challenges. The Unlocking Potential programme in Victoria, Australia (Clemans *et al.*, 2016) outlines a principal-specific approach to leadership preparation. This university programme focuses on site-based development and adapting to local contexts as opposed to standards-based programmes. Unlocking Potential advocates for relationship-building, interdependence, and lifelong learning in

unlocking leadership potential. It also aims to help participants decide if ultimately, they want to pursue a career as a principal

Despite the advantages to induction programmes, some newly appointed principals (NAPs) are reluctant to participate according to Murphy (2023). These participants report anxiety about being away from their schools during training, viewing on-site training as a possible solution.

Comprehensive leadership preparation, succession planning, and principal pipelines are essential for addressing turnover and ensuring effective leadership within schools. Structured approaches to succession planning, tailored induction programmes, and mentoring initiatives can contribute to smoother leadership transitions. Purposeful identification and development of potential leaders, along with localized approaches to succession, are crucial for building a sustainable pool of talent. Effective leadership development programmes that prioritise professional learning in key areas such as conflict management and decision-making can better equip school leaders to tackle the many challenges thus aiding retention and reducing turnover.

2.8.2 Social support

Studies have highlighted the benefits of, and importance of, social support for school leaders. Social support has been identified as crucial in mitigating some of the negative consequences of the principalship (Beausaert *et al.*, 2016). Elsewhere, principal networks have been identified as an important support system and linked to a reduction in principal turnover (Sugrue, 2015; Levin and Bradley, 2019; Heffernan, 2021). Support networks were shown as being important in addressing loneliness for school leaders in Israel (Dor-Haim and Oplatka, 2020).

2.8.3 Self-care and wellbeing

It is considered important for school leaders to attend to their own physical wellbeing (Simon and Gibson, 2019). A study of Canadian principals found that school leaders with the lowest stress levels identified getting regular sleep and exercise in their top ten coping skills (Allison, 1997). While it may take time to establish healthy patterns, they are considered invaluable for coping with the

stresses associated with leadership. Carter (2018) found that as a novice principal progressed in her work, she found ways and ultimately benefitted from engaging in such as exercise, developing a regular pattern for healthy eating and regular sleep. O'Neill and Glasson (2019) reported that increased motivation towards self-care was linked to school leaders measuring their health indicators.

2.8.4 Access to professional development

Access to professional development and training is also considered important for school leaders (Collie, Granziera and Martin, 2020). Noting that "principals cannot thrive at work if they do not have access to the training they need" (Collie, Granziera and Martin, 2020, p. 417), these authors highlighted the importance of school principals having access to job resources. This study gathered data from almost 6000 principals in 22 organisation for OECD countries. It concluded that principals who do not have adequate access to resources, especially those facing high job demands, will find their wellbeing threatened (Collie, Granziera and Martin, 2020).

2.8.5 Increasing self-efficacy

Research has found that self-efficacy directly influences the effort and persistence of principals and their levels of resilience when faced with challenges and setbacks. Federici and Skaalvik (2011) confirm that self-efficacy is negatively related to burnout but positively related to job satisfaction. They thereby contend that a concerted effort is needed to increase principal self-efficacy by those responsible for improving the quality of leadership in schools. It is proposed to allow inexperienced principals the opportunity to participate in mentoring programs specifically developed to increase self-efficacy (Federici and Skaalvik, 2011).

2.8.6 Mindfulness training

Substantive work has focused on interventions such as mindfulness training and other mental health support approaches for school leaders (Beausaert *et al.*, 2016; Mahfouz, 2020). The practice of mindfulness for alleviating stress among school leaders is also advocated for (Wicher, 2017; Wells

and Klocko, 2018). Mindfulness is defined as "a mental discipline aimed at training attention" (Hassed and Chambers, 2014, p. 6). Mindfulness practice has garnered attention due to the increased wellbeing reported by people who have partaken in training (Dane, 2011; Dane and Brummel, 2014; Allen *et al.*, 2015; Good *et al.*, 2016; Wells and Klocko, 2018). Allen et al. (2015) reviewed 27 studies into mindfulness in a variety of occupations, primarily health care settings. They concluded that mindfulness was effective in reducing employee stress and determined that mindfulness has the potential to reduce stress levels in employees and positively impact changes in their engagement and job performance. Mindfulness has been demonstrated to be effective in coping with emotional demands by reducing stress levels, reducing burnout and improving job satisfaction (Hülsheger *et al.*, 2013; Maxwell and Riley, 2017). It is also argued that preparing principals with coping strategies before they encounter many inevitable occupational challenges may increase workplace wellbeing (Wells and Klocko, 2018). Wicher (2017) determines that "mindfulness has the potential to become a school principal's best friend" (p.26). He argues that regular mindfulness practice can protect school leaders against unhealthy thought patterns and behaviours. If unchecked these may lead to feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress. Positively, mindfulness can also improve work effectiveness by increasing attention and focus (Wicher, 2017). Therefore it is argued that implementing mindfulness training is an approach worthy of serious consideration for all principals (Wells and Klocko, 2018). Mindfulness is also championed for qualities improving qualities such as awareness, being fully present for what is occurring, compassion, listening, nonreactivity, patience, and self-compassion are cultivated through mindfulness practice (Wells and Klocko, 2018). The use of applications on phones that guide the user through mindful exercises have also been shown to improve employees' wellbeing in high stress workplaces (Bostock *et al.*, 2019) and may be worthy of consideration in educational settings.

2.8.7 Strength building and resilience

Twenty four human strengths were outlined in the Values in Action Classification of Strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). This piece is used to support prior work by Seligman and

Csikszentmihalyi (2000) that provided evidence to show that particular strengths may increase resilience and protect against mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. Further to this, 'transcendence strengths' of hope, appreciation of beauty, gratitude, humour and spirituality were documented in playing a significant role in recovery from depression (Huta and Hawley, 2010). It is then argued that nurturing hope and gratitude can provide a barrier against certain cognitive vulnerabilities that can increase the negative symptoms associated with depression and anxiety (Wicher, 2017). By applying these theories to school leaders, and actively nurturing and building the strengths of hope and gratitude, one will improve their wellbeing and resilience and make them more effective. This all leads to the development of a healthier and more positive school climate (Wicher, 2017).

2.8.8 Gratitude and positive psychology

The notion of gratitude has been described as one of positive psychology's more effective interventions (Wicher, 2017). Gratitude has been shown to build wellbeing and can reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety and burnout (Waters and Stokes, 2015). Waters and Stokes (2015) asked participants to focus on, and document three good things per day that participants were grateful for. This exercise was shown to have inspired school leaders to find a better balance between negative and positive aspects of their work, while also serving to broaden their perspective of their own school context. Wood, Joseph and Maltby (2009) further highlight the importance of "noticing and appreciating the positives" (p.443). This increased positivity correlates with improved decision-making and increases in creative and flexible thinking. On the other hand, negativity is associated with narrowing thinking patterns and school leaders are thus less open to new ideas and find themselves more reactive (Isen, 2001). Being in the right emotional state to make decisions, solve problems and negotiate interactions with all members of the school community is critical to the effectiveness of a school leader (Wicher, 2017).

2.8.9 Summary

This section emphasises the critical importance of succession planning and principal pipelines in adequately preparing school leaders to navigate the complexities of their roles. It highlights the necessity of comprehensive leadership development programmes, tailored induction processes, and mentoring initiatives to address turnover and ensure effective leadership within schools. Additionally, it underscores the significance of social support, self-care practices, professional development, mindfulness training, strength building, and gratitude in promoting the well-being and resilience of school leaders, ultimately contributing to a positive school climate and improved educational outcomes.

2.9 Career stages of school leadership

In literature, there are three prominent career stage models related to school leadership:

1. The Four Phases (Day and Bakioglu, 1996),
2. Career Stages of Headship (Weindling, 2000; Earley and Weindling, 2004, 2007), and
3. The Principal's Career Stages (Oplatka, 2004, 2010; Oplatka and Lapidot, 2018; Dor-Haim and Oplatka, 2020)

"The Four Phases" proposed by Day and Bakioglu (1996) describes four distinct stages in a school leader's career journey. Initiation marks the beginning, characterised by idealism, uncertainty, and adjustment as new principals learn to navigate their roles. Development signifies consolidation, growth in confidence, and constructive self-examination as school leaders gain experience. Autonomy represents a phase of self-assurance but also resistance to change, where leaders may feel confident in their abilities but express dissatisfaction with external mandates. The last career phase, Disenchantment, denotes a decline in personal confidence and enthusiasm for the role towards the latter stages of a career. When disenchanted, leaders may feel trapped and experience a decrease in motivation and energy.

In Career Stages of Headship (Earley and Weindling, 2007) seven stages exist. Preparation Prior to Headship sets the stage, focusing on socialisation into the role as leaders prepare to take on their job. Entry and Encounter signify the initial months marked by the realities of leadership roles, where leaders encounter challenges and complexities within their schools. Taking Hold represents a grace period for implementing changes smoothly, while Reshaping and Refinement involve major adjustments and fine-tuning in subsequent years with leaders having gained confidence and experience. Consolidation encompasses the period of implementing planned changes, leading to Plateau, where leaders may experience a slowdown in effectiveness as they reach the later stages of their careers.

"The Principal's Career Stages" proposed by Oplatka (2004, 2010) offers another perspective, suggesting four stages in a principal's career trajectory. The earliest stage, Induction, features socialisation, adjustment, and coping with insecurities as new principals transition into their roles. Establishment represents a phase of growth, confidence, and transition to a pragmatic view of the role as leaders become more experienced and comfortable in their positions. Maintenance v Renewal reflects mid-career contrasts in enthusiasm, where some leaders may experience stagnation while others seek new challenges and opportunities for growth. Disenchantment denotes a decline in confidence and enthusiasm towards the latter stages of a career, where leaders may feel disillusioned and contemplate retirement or career changes.

Dissenting voices exist around the notion of disenchantment and plateau with Earley and Weindling (2007) firmly stating that "there is a growing body of evidence that long periods in the same post led to deterioration, both in levels of job satisfaction and job performance" (p.77).

The writing of Flintham (2003) held a similar view, noting a "plateau effect" (p.4) for those in leadership. Flintham (2003) interviewed fourteen principals who had left their post in advance of the normal retirement age, and also another participant who was due to leave. In his work, *When Reservoirs Run Dry,* he categorised these early leavers into three separate groups:

- strider heads,

- stroller heads and
- stumbler heads.

Strider heads have successfully left leadership roles to take up a new career path; stroller heads left the role over work-life balance concerns; and stumbler heads resigned involuntarily due to stress, ill-health or burn out. Flintham's stroller and stumbler head categories align with Earley and Weindling's (2007) assertion that leaders plateau and also with Day and Bakioglu's (1996) final stage of school leaders' disenchantment. Flintham (2003) believes that the plateau can occur from years seven to ten. Earley and Weindling (2007) recorded a similar finding, and they believe that principals had a decline in effectiveness due to the plateau effect.

Nonetheless, understanding these career stages can aid in better preparing aspiring principals, anticipating career challenges, and fostering resilience throughout their professional journey.

2.10 Career pathways

Building on from, and offering an alternative to, career stage theory is the exploration of principals' career pathways. This is described as presenting a crucial area of research that Murphy (2023) suggests is underdeveloped, particularly knowledge of the early career stages (Farley-Ripple, Raffel and Welch, 2012; Davis, Gooden and Bowers, 2017; Murphy, 2023). It is argued that strengthening an understanding of these pathways to leadership is crucial for improving the quality of leadership preparation (Murphy, 2023). The literature stresses the need to gain insights into principals' experiences, perceptions, and preparedness as they grapple with assuming leadership roles (Stevenson, 2006; Oplatka, 2012).

In the early career stage, Oplatka (2012) explored the challenges facing principals. This involved adapting to the role, facing reality shock, mood swings, and the learning of essential leadership skills (Oplatka, 2012). Although these challenges are recognised, there still exists a lack of knowledge and understanding of principals personal views regarding their preparedness, particularly during the initial transition and early steps into the leadership role (Stevenson, 2006; Farley-Ripple, Raffel and Welch, 2012). Irish studies have advanced the understanding on the specific challenges faced by

principals (Sugrue, 2015; Ummanel, McNamara and Stynes, 2016). These studies are consistent in finding principals as feeling underprepared and over-burdened by administrative tasks (Sugrue, 2015).

Principals note the importance of both formal and informal leadership preparation in equipping them for their roles (Harris, Jones and Adams, 2016). Formally university programs contribute valuable insights and skills. On-the-job learning and active engagement with the school positively enhances their professional growth. Despite this, Sugrue (2015) argues for more comprehensive and structured leadership preparation initiatives to effectively prepare and equip leaders for an ever evolving and highly demanding role.

It is also argued that socialisation into the role of school leader must also be considered, mindful of the change from teacher into a formal leadership position (Moorosi and Grant, 2018). The authors explore the socialisation and identity development of Southern African leaders. It is noted that the process of socialisation consists of stages four key stages namely, anticipatory socialisation, professional socialisation, organisational socialisation, and personal socialisation. Moorosi and Grant (2018) findings stress the importance of anticipatory socialisation where future leaders are shaped by family, school and community influences and can form attitudes relevant to leadership (Moorosi and Grant, 2018) The study also suggests a more deliberate use be made of school management teams and to recognise the importance of formal teacher leader roles, such as Deputy principalship, as crucial preparation for principalship.

Building on this research, Murphy (2023) explored the pathways to principalship in an Irish context. The findings revealed that many principals had serving as teacher leaders before moving into formal leadership roles in their school. Principals stressed the importance of positive mentorship and coaching in their transition to leadership roles. Despite facing challenges and difficulties in the role, many principals demonstrated resilience and a commitment to continued professional growth (Murphy, 2023).

2.11 Conclusion

This chapter comprehensively examined an array of topics relevant to school leadership in Irish primary schools and in the wider international landscape of educational leadership. The literature review begins by contextualizing the study within the broader landscape of Irish primary schools, emphasizing the importance of understanding both the Irish and primary school contexts, drawing on insights from scholars such as Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017). It then proceeded to critically examine the contemporary challenges faced by school leaders, with a focus on affective implications and turnover and retention issues. Pertinent literature by Weddle et al. (2017) and Park and Datnow (2022) was included to showcase the affective impact of mandated reforms and school improvement initiatives. Subsequently, the determinants of turnover in school leadership positions were investigated in both the Irish and international contexts. The emotional, affective demands of school leadership were central to discussions on determinants, turnover and retention. The review served to highlight the emotional demands placed on school leaders and the subsequent implications for their wellbeing. To address these challenges, suggested solutions and mitigating practices were proposed. Firstly, these comprised of systemic solutions in the form of principal succession and principal pipelines. Next, solutions encompassing social support networks, well-being initiatives, professional development opportunities, and mindfulness were discussed. The literature review then concluded with a synthesis of the different career stages of school leadership, noting that an understanding of these may also alleviate the turnover of school leaders.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a description and justification for the methodological approach used in this study. This chapter is arranged into a number of parts. Firstly, the focus is on the research questions and the overall aim of the research. The theoretical underpinnings for the PhD study are then introduced, with central concepts from the supporting literature then outlined. The position of the researcher within this study is then established and contextualised. Following this, a rationale for choosing a mixed methods approach is presented, and then justified with alignment to the selected paradigm. A full description of the data gathering instruments used in the study then occurs. Each of the two instruments is individually discussed outlining design, piloting, data collection and data analysis. The integration of both data instruments is discussed. Limitations are acknowledged, ethical approval considered, and issues of reliability and validity included before coming to the chapter conclusion.

3.2 Research Purpose

This study aims to explore factors influencing recruitment, retention, and turnover of Irish primary school principals.

The main research question is:

- What are the dominant factors that determine primary school principal retention and primary school principal turnover?

Subsidiary research questions are:

1. What motivating factors lead to principals assuming leadership roles?
2. What do current and former principals perceive as the positives associated with the role?

3. What do current and former principals perceive as the main challenges of primary school principalship?

3.3 Theoretical Underpinnings for the PhD

Different definitions have been proposed for conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Miles and Huberman (1984) define a conceptual framework as "the current version of the researcher's map of the territory being investigated" (Leshem & Trafford, 2007). They argue that conceptual frameworks evolve alongside research. Leshem and Trafford (2007) suggest that conceptual frameworks provide a theoretical overview and order within the research process. King et al. (1994) emphasises the importance of theory in successful empirical research (Leshem and Trafford, 2007). They suggest that a clear alignment with the literature serves two purposes: it clarifies the focus of the research and aids readers in understanding the goals and methods of the study.

Maxwell (2012) believes that conceptual frameworks and theoretical frameworks are synonymous. According to this author, the theoretical framework is viewed as presenting a theory of the phenomena under investigation.

In light of Maxwell's (2012) work, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 provides a solid theoretical foundation to frame the research and with which to compare and contrast the evidence data. The literature review effectively captures the central concepts related to retention and turnover. The emotional toll of leadership referred to in sections such as workload, working hours, and work-life balance and also in sections on stress, wellbeing and occupational balance provide a framework for understanding turnover. Similarly, the literature review thoroughly examines the main challenges of primary school principalship, aligning with another subsidiary research question. Debates around leadership preparation and support, access to professional development, and supports for leaders further speaks to both turnover and retention. The subsidiary question relating to motivating factors for assuming the role of school principal can also be specifically critiqued against literature provided in Chapter 2. Furthermore, the positives associated with the role of primary school principals can be explored and viewed through the lens of literature provided. This includes literature exploring

supports, professional development, and increased self-efficacy as these contribute to job satisfaction, retention, and overall effectiveness in school leadership.

3.4 Researcher positionality and critical reflexivity

All research has been described as being representative of the position or standpoint of the author (Mertens, 2019). It is considered important for researchers to acknowledge that all texts are incomplete and to be aware that any study cannot claim to contain all universal truth. Knowledge in itself is contextual; and the researcher must acknowledge the context of the research (Mertens, 2019). The need for a researcher to display a heightened self-awareness for personal transformation and critical subjectivity is stressed (Mertens, 2019).

Reflexivity for researchers involves an acceptance and awareness that they are already part of the social world they are researching (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). Researchers bring their own history, their own biographies and values to the research situation and participants behave in particular ways in their presence (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). Research cannot be a neutral activity, and researchers are not neutral. The researcher in this study brings their own values, biases, and world views to the topic. These play a key role in all stages of research and are in effect the lenses through which they look at and interpret the already interpreted words of participants (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). Researcher bias is a key issue and Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) stress the need for researchers to self-appraise their role in the research process and product. They note that every stage of the research can be affected. Some of the ways that research is affected is from the initial choosing of the research topic and questions, access to the field, relationships with participants, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and insider and outsider research. In short the researcher may project something or a lot about themselves onto the research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017).

For full reflexivity to be acknowledged, researchers should disclose their own selves in the research and interrogate all stages of the process (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). As it is not possible

to eliminate researcher effects, as researchers are part of the world that they are investigating, researchers should go beyond private reflection and disclose their biographies and positioning.

To this effect, my personal history and career trajectory to-date must be acknowledged and disclosed. My career is as a primary school teacher. I have worked in the primary education sector for the over twenty years. I was originally appointed as a class teacher, and subsequently progressed to deputy principal. My role culminated is being appointed as a teaching principal in a rural four teacher school. I chose to voluntarily step down from my role as teaching principal and return to the post of teacher in this same school following six years of service in my leadership role. I have the unique position of attaining both the insider and outsider voice in this study. I can align myself with former principals who participated in this study. I similarly, however, can position myself with current principals and I have first-hand, experiential knowledge of the role in which they serve.

As the study involves working with current primary school principals, and principals who have stepped down from the role, an awareness of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand is essential (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). My position as an insider researcher for those who have stepped down may be advantageous. It has been argued that such insider status can aid in providing researchers more rapid and more complete acceptance by their participants. This then translates to participants being more open with researchers and may lead to more robust data gathering (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Alternatively, questions about objectivity, reflexivity, and authenticity of a research project may be raised because perhaps one is too close or too embedded in a project and may be too similar to those being studied (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Asselin (2003) claimed that there is a higher risk of role confusion in research when the researcher is familiar with the research setting or participants through a role other than that of researcher. To that effect, the participants in this study are not known to me personally and all methodological choices, sampling procedures undertaken, and the overall data analysis measures are clearly and transparently outlined in this chapter. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) contend that being a member of the group under investigation does not unduly influence the process in a negative way.

This is offset by “detailed reflection on the subjective research process, with a close awareness of one’s own personal biases and perspectives” (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 59). They further this argument stating that “the core ingredient is not insider or outsider status but an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one’s research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience” (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 59).

3.5 Pragmatism as a paradigm

The concept of paradigms was first introduced by Kuhn in his book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962). According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017), Kuhn defined paradigms as “the set of practices that define a scientific discipline at any particular moment in time” (p.34) incorporating: the research topic; the kinds of research questions to be asked; how to structure the research questions; the ways of working; and how to interpret results (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). Punch (2009) adds that essentially a paradigm is “a set of assumptions about the world, and about what constitutes proper techniques and topics for inquiring into that world” (p.16). Paradigms, according to Punch (2009) tell us about three areas:

1) Ontology: The form and nature of reality and what can be known about it.

2) Epistemology: This tells us about the relationship between the knower and what can be known, and

3) The Methodological question: Speaks to how the inquirer goes about finding out what can be known (Punch, 2009, p.16).

This doctoral thesis is framed by a pragmatic paradigm. In considering this stance, the researcher’s desire is to emphasise practicality and flexibility in addressing the research questions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). The pragmatic paradigm recognises the existence of multiple truths and realities (Punch, 2009). This is true where one considers the landscape of school leadership and the dualities evidenced in the literature review. My ontological perspective, within the pragmatic paradigm, informed my decision to use both quantitative and qualitative methods, and also to

incorporate data and insights from both current and former primary school principals. The researcher, positioned within the pragmatic paradigm, therefore values the integration of quantitative and qualitative data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). The decision to use a fixed methods design, particularly a convergent design, underscores the researcher's epistemological belief in the importance of triangulating data to enhance validity and reliability (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). The study integrates theory into the research design as outlined clearly in this chapter, with the points of integration explicitly outlined in table 7.1. This highlights commitment to grounding the study in relevant literature, espoused by Greene (2008) and Mertens (2019). The study duly aims to provide reliable insights into the factors influencing primary school principal retention and turnover and provide practical pragmatic recommendations and conclusions.

3.6 Research methods

In keeping with the title of this thesis, a mixed methods research approach is used for this study. Several definitions for mixed methods have emerged according to Creswell and Plano Clark (2017). Rather than aiming for and relying on one definition for mixed methods, the authors choose to rely on a definition of the core characteristics of mixed methods research. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) inform that in carrying out mixed methods research, the researcher:

- Collects and analyses quantitative and qualitative data in response to research questions,
- Integrates the data methods and their results,
- Organises these into specific research designs that provide the logic and procedures for carrying out the research, and
- Frames these within theory and philosophy

With the previous section attending to theory and philosophy, this section considers both quantitative and qualitative methods individually, and then explains the rationale for choosing a mixed methods approach for this research in fitting with the pragmatic paradigm.

Quantitative research is a research strategy that emphasises quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman, 2012). Quantitative research, in essence, is a numbers-based collection of and analysis of data. Quantitative research broadly considers the relationship between theory and research as deductive and has an objectivist conception of social reality and knowledge (Bryman, 2012). A hypothesis may be tested although this does not always have to be the case. Quantifying and measuring data is advantageous as when one measures data, we are given a "consistent device or yardstick" that enables researchers to be "consistent over time and … consistent with other researchers" in their findings and analysis (Bryman, 2012 p.164). Furthermore, measuring numerically provides the basis for more precise estimates of the degree of relationship between concepts (Bryman, 2012).

Qualitative research is a research strategy that emphasises words rather than the quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman, 2012). Braun and Clarke (2013) support this definition and add that working qualitatively involves working with "words as data, collected and analysed in all sorts of ways" (p.3). Underpinning qualitative research is an interpretive view, with the observer located in the world of the research. Denzin and Lincoln, (2008) further this viewpoint commenting that qualitative researchers will study things in their natural settings and attempt to interpret and bring meaning to the location. Qualitative research has many benefits according to Braun and Clarke (2013). The focus of the researcher can be on people, allowing their meanings and experiences to come to the fore. Although the data can be narrow, it is described as "rich data" with "thick descriptions" that accommodate and explore differences and divergences with data more than quantitative research can (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.4).

Both approaches are not without their critics. Quantitative research has been accused of "riding roughshod over the fact that people interpret the world around them" and that a reliance on instruments and procedures of measurement may hinder "the connection between research and everyday life" (Bryman, 2012 p.178). Bryman (2012) further adds that answers provided by people may be at odds with their real-life behaviour.

Similarly, there has been criticisms labelled at qualitative methods of research. Qualitative researchers have been described as “being too impressionistic and subjective” according to Braun and Clarke (2013, p.405). An over-reliance on the researcher's own view of what is important must be considered and the propensity for researchers to be unduly influenced by a personal relationship with participants is also noted by the same authors. Elsewhere Bryman (2012) outlined that qualitative research has been criticised for being difficult to replicate. Furthermore, a problem with generalising findings is prevalent due to the nature of qualitative research being conducted in small scale studies (Bryman, 2012).

While fully aware of the merits and criticisms of quantitative and qualitative research, a mixed methods approach is considered to be most appropriate for this study. This is due to the nature of the research question. In effect, the choice of mixed research methods is driven by the research questions. This is advocated by Cohen, Manion and Morrison, (2017) and is very much in keeping with the pragmatic paradigm. Returning to, and linking mixed methods to the pragmatic paradigms, mixed methods research argues for compatibility between quantitative and qualitative methods (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017).

The use of a mixed methods approach allows this researcher to seek corroboration between qualitative and quantitative data sets. It also allows the quantitative and qualitative data to complement one another. A better understanding of the research problem will ultimately be uncovered by mixing both qualitative and quantitative data. The main research question cannot essentially be answered through the deployment of qualitative or quantitative approaches alone. With the focus on uncovering and investigating the dominant factors that determine primary school principal retention and primary school principal turnover, it is necessary to firstly quantify various factors such as the numbers of principals who perceive the job as stressful, who have consider stepping down and also those who state their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the job and elements within it. Conducting qualitative interviews with school leaders following this initial quantitative phase allows the voices of participants to be heard, a weakness often attributed to quantitative

research. To seek a more rounded and truer version of retention and turnover determinants, it is argued that those who have vacated the role should be included qualitatively. Returning to, and linking mixed methods to the pragmatic paradigms, mixed methods research argues for compatibility between quantitative and qualitative methods (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). The adoption of a pragmatic paradigm and the use of mixed methods are necessary and important in this research. The benefits of mixed methods are that they increase corroboration of the data, and result in less biased and more accurate conclusions being reached (Reams and Twale, 2008).

3.7 Research design

Research designs are procedures for collecting, analysing, interpreting and reporting data (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). Decisions of design for data collection should, and are in this case, guided by the purpose of the research and the paradigmatic belief of this researcher (Greene, 2008; Mertens, 2019). Pragmatic design characteristics allow for, and feature qualitative and quantitative data being collected to answer the research questions (Mertens, 2019). This study follows a fixed methods design as the use of quantitative methods and qualitative methods are predetermined and pre-planned (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

This design follows the convergent design described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017). This design, often called the parallel design, fits the convergent design as the results of the quantitative and qualitative data are brought together to be compared and contrasted (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). By comparing and contrasting the data sets, a more complete understanding of the research question can develop. It can serve to validate one set of findings with the other, checking if responses are similar quantitatively and qualitatively (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). Three distinct and separate findings chapter are provided in this study.

These consist of:

- the quantitative survey results,
- the qualitative survey findings, and
- qualitative interview findings from current and former primary school principals.

The online survey allowed for the gathering of quantitative and qualitative data concurrently. Four open-ended questions were embedded within the largely quantitative survey. Quantitative and qualitative data from the comprehensively designed survey were analysed separately and are reported in chapters 4 and 5 respectively. Following completion of online surveys, interviews were conducted with current and former primary school principals. The findings of these are presented in Chapter 6.

Data collection occurred in two distinct interactive phases. This research commenced with the collection and subsequent analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from the online surveys. Following completion of surveys, further qualitative data was gathered using interviews. For this study, the quantitative data and qualitative data gathered through surveying a wider population provide a detailed picture of the research problem. Including a follow-up interview phase to the online surveys afforded the opportunity to extract supplementary qualitative data from the study participants and afforded a fuller description of the research problem to emerge. Comparing and contrasting the data sets in the discussion chapter (see chapter 7) ensure the research questions are fully answered.

With the main research question focusing on dominant factors determining retention and turnover of primary school principals, it was envisaged that the quantitative survey results would provide numerical and statistical data to provide an overview of dominant factors. Additional qualitative data was also sought in keeping with the pragmatic approach to determine areas of comparison and areas of contrast. This researcher was interested in the words, and personal stories of school leaders. The addition of the embedded qualitative section in the survey, along with follow-up interviews, garnered the rich data required to satisfy the main research question and subsidiary questions. Allowing former primary school principals voice their narrative allows for a fuller, more rounded picture of retention and turnover factors, the positives associated with primary school leadership and the challenges of such a role.

3.8 Sampling

3.8.1 Sampling in the pragmatic paradigm

Working within the pragmatic paradigm allows the use of methods deemed the most appropriate for obtaining answers to the research questions (Mertens, 2019). These methods can be mixed and drawn from other paradigms. The importance of selecting suitable sample sizes and designs for both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study is stressed (Mertens, 2019). Empirical precision is achieved by ensuring appropriate sampling for the quantitative phase, with descriptive precision provided by suitable sampling for the qualitative portion of research (Mertens, 2019).

3.8.2 Sampling for this study

For this study, a sequential identical sampling/multilevel sampling strategy is utilised. Identical sampling involves having the same people take part in both phases, namely current primary school principals taking the survey and being interviewed. Multilevel sampling is then achieved when former principals take part in the qualitative phase having not taken part in the survey. Therefore, different people from different populations have been chosen for the different approaches of the study in line with the definition of multilevel sampling offered by Mertens (2019).

3.8.3 Sampling for surveys

In order to recruit for the online surveys, purposive sampling is used in the quantitative phase of online surveys. Participants have been purposively selected owing to their occupation being an Irish primary school principal as referenced by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017). This group are considered ‘knowledgeable people’ (Ball, 1990) for the purposes of this study.

3.8.4 Sampling for interviews

Firstly, random stratified sampling was used when interviewing current principals. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) described a stratified random sample as being a two-stage process. The wider quantitative population was divided into homogenous, discrete groups based on tenure in the role.

This division was deliberately chosen to coincide with literature referencing career stage theory (Oplatka, 2004, 2009, 2010, 2012; Earley and Weindling, 2007; Earley, 2016, 2020; Oplatka and Lapidot, 2018; Dor-Haim and Oplatka, 2020). This resulted in three distinct groups being created following from career stage theory section 2.9 in the literature review.

Interviewees within these groups were randomly chosen for interview using the random.org website. With some principals declining or failing to respond to an invitation to interview, seven current principals were interviewed in total. Two principals in the early career stage, three in the middle career stage, and two in the late career stage were interviewed.

When sampling former principals, purposive sampling and snowball sampling were both used (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). In keeping with purposive sampling, the researcher sought a particular characteristic for inclusion, namely former primary school principals who had stepped down from the role. An element of snowball sampling was required to recruit participants. The researcher was initially able to identify principal groups, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the National Principals' Forum (NPF) and call on current primary school principals who had knowledge of people who vacated the role. A small sample of former principals were recruited, with some of these in turn identifying and recruiting other former principals, owing to the term snowball sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). In total, six former principals agreed to participate in the study.

3.9 Ethics

As this research involved human participants, ethical approved was requested and granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC), University College Cork (UCC). While ethics committees and codes of conduct set out guidelines for researchers, it is the ultimate responsibility of the individual researcher to ensure their research is conducted with appropriate adherence to ethical standards. SREC and other regulatory ethical committees "have a 'gatekeeping' function, to prevent unethical research from taking place, to ensure no harm come to participants, and to ensure that due attention has been given by research proposers to the ethical dimensions of their research"

(Cohen et al., 2018, p.115). Key elements of ethical consideration for this study are presented under five headings with evidence provided as to their adherence:

1. Informed consent
2. Anonymity
3. Data Storage
4. Interviews as potentially sensitive
5. Considerations for the ethical analysis of data

3.9.1 Informed consent

With informed consent seen as "a cornerstone of ethical behaviour" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p. 123), it is a key area of deliberation for this research piece. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) put forward the writing of Diener and Crandall (1978) as a means of providing a definition. They state that informed consent is defined as "those procedures for individuals to choose whether or not to participate in the research, once they have been told what it is about and what it requires" (p.122). Four central elements are involved in this definition: "competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension" (Cohen et al., 2018, p.122). Competence "implies that reasonable, mature individuals will make correct decisions if they are given the relevant information" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p. 122). Voluntarism involves lack of coercion to take part and that research participants decide to become involved (or not to) fully aware of the risks involved. Full information suggests that consent is fully informed. The term "'reasonably informed consent'" is offered for research where the full extent of the investigation and how it will unfold are not yet known but that all relevant information has been provided (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p. 122). Comprehension means that participants must fully understand the nature of the research project, "even when procedures are complicated and entail risks" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p. 122). By including these four components when inviting participants to take part in my

research, the rights of participants were appropriately considered (Diener and Crandall, 1978). The right to refuse to take part or to withdraw also needed to be considered for this study. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) state that "informed consent implies informed refusal" (p. 122).

With this in mind, and in line with UCC's Code of Research Conduct (2019), informed consent was sought. This occurred in two separate ways, with current principals differing from former principals. With the survey only applicable and available to current primary school principals, the nature and purpose of the study was provided to all participating in the survey (see Appendix 1). As per the online overview, participants were informed that "the purpose of this study is to examine the school leadership experiences of current and former primary school leaders in the Republic of Ireland". An overview of the questionnaire was provided with "items on school demographics, your pathway to becoming a school leader, wellbeing as a school leader and your view of the positive and challenging aspects of the role" being noted. The right to withdraw at any time was included along with the opportunity to discuss the risks and benefits of participation. As stated in the survey, "Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate, and should you choose to do so you can refuse to answer specific questions or decide to withdraw from the study". Data storage mechanisms were included, with participants informed that data would be stored for a minimum of ten years. It was stated that the intent was to "publish the outcomes of the research as part of a PhD submission". Furthermore, it was noted that "the information you provide may contribute to research publications and/or conference presentations".

Participants consented to and showed willingness to participate in follow-up qualitative interviews by voluntarily leaving an email address upon completion of the questionnaire. Participants were informed of the nature of this interview at this stage. It was stated that "by leaving your email address and ticking the consent box to proceed with this questionnaire, you are also consenting to take part in a virtual face-to-face interview using the Microsoft Teams platform at a later date". Participants were informed that the interview would be recorded (see Appendix 1).

Former principals were provided with an information sheet and consent form similar to the information sheet provided with the online questionnaire (see Appendix 2). A right to withdraw was included, with principals provided with the opportunity to "withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview". In the event of such a request principals were informed that "the material will be deleted".

3.9.2 Anonymity

The second ethical issue that directly related to my research is anonymity. By way of a definition, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) cite Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1992). They ascertain that a participant is "considered anonymous when the researcher or another person cannot identify the participant from the information provided" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p.129). UCC's Code of Research Conduct (2019) makes it clear that anonymity is essential. Paragraph 7.6 states that "confidentiality/anonymity (as appropriate) ... must be protected through implementation of appropriate safeguards" (p.14).

In order to ensure anonymity, all participants were assigned a pseudonym in the reporting of findings that emerged from the process. The consent form (see Appendix 2) informed interviewees that "anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity". Survey respondents were assigned a generic identifier in the reporting of qualitative findings. This code included a number, one automatically assigned upon completion of the survey. Two other pieces of information are provided in the coding – whether the principal is an administrative principal (AP) or a teaching principal (TP), and the length of time served in the role. An example of a completed code reads as such: (24, AP, 6 years).

With the offering of anonymity, this researcher was acutely aware that the potential for deductive disclosure existed as the participants are current or former primary school principals. Walford (2005) explains the concept of deductive disclosure as occurring when people can reassemble or combine data to identify a person or an institution. Oliver (2003) cited in Cohen et al. (2018) notes that it is impossible to give absolute guarantees of anonymity, especially where certain individuals

are in named posts (e.g., a school principal). It is argued here that the use of pseudonyms is no guarantee of anonymity. In this regard, UCC's Code of Conduct (2019) is especially important. The principle of honesty is essential in this regard (UCC, 2019) and also respect and dignity for participants. Drawing from a nationwide pool of primary school principals for interviews, deductive disclosure issues were controlled. Applying pseudonyms and fully informing participants, further ensured full compliance with ethical standards were maintained. Cohen et al. (2018) also note the use of "password-protected files" (p.130) to further safeguard anonymity.

3.9.3 Data storage

Section 8 of UCC's Code of Research Conduct outlines the necessity to plan the management of data, protocol around record keeping and retention of such records and data. Best practice requires that data and records "be stored securely for a minimum period of ten years after the completion of the research project" (UCC, 2019, p.17). Data for this particular research topic consisted of consent forms for interviews, the interview transcripts, and questionnaires. As previously outlined, consent forms were required from former principals who choose to take part in interviews. In order to ensure safekeeping of data, consent forms were gathered electronically. These were saved on my UCC OneDrive account. Passwords were used to protect all files which only the researcher and supervisors having access as necessary.

Another area of data management and storage directly pertaining to this study was the online questionnaire method. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) note that an 'I accept' box (p.146) can be used to ensure informed consent. As this study did not involve data collection from children or vulnerable participants, it was not necessary to obtain written informed consent. Therefore, the consent was gathered through the check box on the first page of the questionnaire. By doing this, they will be indicating that they are over eighteen, have read the information sheet and that they give consent to be take part. Participants were unable to proceed unless they ticked the consent box. Questionnaires were completely anonymous, and data was unable to be withdrawn once submitted.

3.9.4 Interviews as potentially sensitive

The interviews for former primary school principals may be classed as a sensitive topic depending on the experiences of each individual person. Some participants may have had negative experiences in the role that may have arisen during the course of interviewing. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) argue that "If the research involves participants in a failure experience ... researchers must ensure that the participants do not leave the situation more humiliated, insecure, alienated and worse off than when they arrived" (p.126). My experience as a past principal who also stepped down from the role possibly provided empathy and reassurance in this regard. These authors advise that interviewers should "... spend a few minutes with participants afterwards in order to thank them for their participation, answer their questions, reassure them that they did well and generally talk to them for a while" (p.137). When the recording ended, an informal conversation took place with each interviewee. This was done as a courtesy and thanks offered once more to all interviewees. As noted earlier, a research benefit may be that it will lead to "increased self-awareness in the participants" (Oliver, 2003, p.35 cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p.128). This cohort has been under researched in Irish studies and offering a voice to this group is worthwhile. While the researcher did not anticipate any negative outcomes from participating in this study, the contact details for the DES Employee Assistance Service (EAS) were provided as per Appendix 2.

3.9.5 Considerations for the ethical analysis of data

The final consideration that came into effect is the ethically appropriate analysis of the data. While data analysis techniques are fully outlined in sections 3.12.4 and 3.13.4, it is important to note that data analysis must be done in an ethical and fair manner (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). The use of appropriate data analysis techniques is a must. Examples of inappropriate data-analysis techniques include and are not limited to:

- "being unfairly selective with regard to the data used;

- ignoring, omitting, or concealing data that do not 'fit' what the researcher wishes to show, or using data to support a preconceived or preferred view;
- projecting one's own values onto the data, and presenting the researcher's own views and own preferred frameworks for data analysis which distort data analysis;
- ignoring outliers;
- failing to give sufficient 'voice' to participants, for example, in qualitative research;
- failing to consider rival interpretations and explanations of the findings"

(Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p.138)

The need for vigilance and reflexivity is essential (Creswell, 2012). "The research is only interpretation of the findings, and the researcher has to make this clear (being reflexive)" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p.140). UCC's Code of Research Conduct (2019) furthers this and states that "Researchers must always be prepared to question the outcome(s)" and that results should "be checked before being made public" (UCC, 2019, p.13).

Discussion on the ownership of data is importantly ethically (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). In my study, this was agreed with participants before data collection begun and at the point of signing consent forms. Oliver (2003 cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) claims that raw data should remain the property of participants but once it has been analysed and interpreted, ownership changes. Once more, informed consent and information letters made this clear as per Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

3.10 Limitations

Limitations exist and are acknowledged with this research. A small sample of interviewees, seven current principals and six former principals, opens the study up to potential issues of generalisation. One of the issues with sampling for interviews was access to former principals. This group is relatively small, and some former principals were unwilling to interview. The issue of sample size

has largely been offset by the first phase of data gathering. This comprised of a sizeable number of current principals in the quantitative online survey stage.

The study is potentially open to accusations of bias as the researcher is a former school principal who willingly choose to step down from the role. To combat this, the researcher has at all stages of data collection and analysis been transparent in matters relating to bias and reflexivity. The point of data integration has been fully explained.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered are self-reported. The survey data was constructed in order to ascertain participants' perceptions of matters relating to wellbeing, job satisfaction, and areas of management. Having obtained such a large sample size and carrying out such a robust and rigorous analysis of the data quantitatively, central issues and statistically significant findings emerged. These were interrogated further qualitatively.

3.11 Validity

Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) offer an overview of recent and relevant discussions on validity as it relates to mixed methods research. They inform that validity is a long-standing issue for mixed methods projects. The term validity has itself been debated with alternative suggestions including legitimation, construct validity, quality, and inference quality (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) sort through the discussion before concluding that a set of general principles guide their perspective on mixed methods validity. They suggest how these principles are applied to each of the mixed methods designs forwarded in the book and previously outlined in section 3.6. Having most closely aligned myself with a convergent design, Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) suggest that four validity threats exist. These threats mentioned by the authors are outlined (in bold) and immediately followed by researcher strategies used to minimise these threats (in italics):

1. **not using parallel concepts in data collection for both the quantitative and qualitative databases**

The researcher created parallel questions addressing the same concept. Four qualitative questions were embedded in the online survey addressing the same concept relating to retention, turnover, positives and challenges of the role.

2. **Having unequal quantitative and qualitative sample sizes**

   This was minimised in two ways. The same sample sizes were used for the first stage of data gathering, achieved by including quantitative and qualitative aspects to the online survey. The researcher acknowledges the different intention for interviewing. This provides data from former principals and allows for a deeper investigation of the research questions with current principals.

3. **Keeping results from the different datasets separate**

   The data is analysed separated and integrated into a discussion chapter encompassing all data

4. **Failing to resolve disconfirming results**

   The researcher engages in strategies to understand disconfirming results by conducting new analyses and probing at interviews.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) add that threats to validity can be minimised at the design stage by choosing an appropriate timescale, appropriate methodology for answering the research questions and appropriate instrumentation for data collection. When analysing data, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) call for the use of appropriate statistical treatment of data, the avoidance of poor coding of qualitative data, the avoidance of inferences and generalisations beyond the capabilities of the data, and the avoidance of subjective interpretation of data. With a full outline of data analysis techniques in sections 3.12.4 and 3.13.4, robust, rigorous, and transparent treatment of all data types was adhered to.

3.12 Methods

Two data gathering instruments were used in this research study. Firstly, an online survey was conducted to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from a large number of current primary school principals. Secondly, online interviews were conducted concurrently with seven current and

six former primary school principals. Both research instruments are individually discussed to provide detail on the design, piloting, collection, and analysis of each. Following that, integration is discussed and outlined.

3.12.1 Online surveys

3.12.1.1 Design

The online survey was designed to include closed-ended and open-ended questions. It was divided into four distinctive parts (see Appendix 1).

Respondents were initially asked to consent to take part in the study in question 1. Following acceptance of this, they were then taken to the next section. In total 467 participants consented and 1 refused.

Part one of the survey focused on biographical and geographical information. Respondents were asked for gender, with an option not to say included. A dichotomous question to decipher teaching and administrative principals was included and principals were asked how long they had served in the role. Location of the school, school type and management body, and personal qualifications were asked. Questions on leadership preparation and factors influencing the decision to become a school principal completed this section. A matrix question asked principals to rate the factors influencing the decision to become a school principal. Matrix questions enable the same kind of response to be given to several questions. The matrix layout helps to save space and enables the respondents to fill in the according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017).

Part two sought self-reported data on areas of wellbeing. Respondents noted the hours worked per week from four options provided. A matrix question was used to gather information regarding feelings encountered in the previous week engagement, excitement, exhaustion, stress and strain. Attitudes regarding stepping down included an open-ended request to elaborate further. This closed-ended and open-ended sequence was repeated for likelihood to recommend the role. Levels of motivation, perceived levels of confidence, alongside physical and mental health impacts of the role

were investigated. Participants were asked to rate how much their work means to them and for their general perception of current levels of job satisfaction.

Part three sought attitudinal data regarding the positives and challenges of the role. A matrix question was once more used to gather data regarding importance to supports available. This part of the survey concluded with two open-ended questions seeking the most positive aspects of the role and areas that school leaders would like to change. The open-ended question is considered an attractive device for those sections of the questionnaire that invite an honest, personal comment from respondents in addition to ticking numbers and boxes. The open-ended responses "might contain the gems of information that otherwise might not be caught in the questionnaire" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p. 475). They put the responsibility for the data more firmly into respondents' hands, allow an opportunity for the respondent to shed light on an issue, and therefore "has much to recommend" its inclusion (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p. 476).

The survey closed with section four. This was an option to take part in a qualitative interview and thanks being expressed.

The overall structure of the survey mirrored best practice according to literature. Commencing with unthreatening factual questions and moving to closed questions and finally to open-ended questions is typically considered to be the best format for questionnaire design (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2010).

The creation of the online questionnaire was based on a research informed evaluation of the literature review and the research questions. The selected questions were deliberately and meticulously planned, following discussions with my research supervisors, to ensure that there was a coherent link between the literature and the research questions. The key headings and concepts of the literature review are reflected in the questions posed to school leaders. The literature review explores stress, wellbeing, occupational balance, motivating factors for assuming leadership roles, challenges associated with leading primary schools, supports available to school leaders, and career stages of school leadership. The online questionnaire was shaped significantly by the literature. For

instance, questions related to stress, job satisfaction, mental and physical health, and feelings at work were directly created from literature review sections which explored stress, wellbeing, and challenges in school leadership roles. Questions regarding satisfaction with workload and working hours were directly linked to the background knowledge sought from participants. This leads to the researcher exploring data more thoroughly from different principal groups. For example, teaching principals responses could then be compared to those of their administrative counterparts. Career stage theory offers another lens through which to explore data. The inclusion of questions regarding participants' previous roles and pre-training is informed by the literature on career pathways and succession planning. The motivating factors for the role are specifically sought in line with the literature review and also aligned with the research questions.

3.12.1.2 Piloting

Piloting the questionnaire is considered to be "crucial to their success" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p.496). Furthermore, these authors contend that a pilot can help to ensure categories are comprehensive, exhaustive, and representative, while checking the reliability, validity, and practicability of the questionnaire. An ethical recommendation from SREC was to pilot the survey with ten respondents. This was done with local principals or principals with whom I had an established professional working relationship. Suggestions were made regarding the inclusion of management body categories and school types. It was suggested to seek three areas that leaders would change in their role to allow for a wider range of responses. With recommendations accepted, and changes made, the survey was distributed to the general population.

3.12.1.4 Data collection

Following approval from my PhD supervisors, the survey was released for circulation in May 2021. Principals known personally to me were sent a hyperlink to the survey and asked to aid circulation. Members of the cohort in UCC and other contacts on social media site X (formerly Twitter) did the same. This yielded a poor response rate of less than 50. With the survey live over the summer months, I felt that a larger sample group was necessary to adequately answer the research questions and allow for generalisation to be achieved. With feedback received that May and June are

particularly busy periods for school leaders, I decided to put another push on for responses when schools reopened in September and October 2021. This final push occurred when I sourced an online government database of all primary schools. I emailed the survey directly to all the school email addresses provided on the database. This resulted in 468 responses being received, of which 467 were complete and included in this study. It was agreed with my PhD supervisors that the online survey had received an acceptable response rate. The survey was duly closed to responses during the midterm break in October 2021.

3.12.1.5 Quantitative analysis

Having closed the questionnaire to responses, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was deemed most suitable to analyse the data. International Business Machines **(**IBM) SPSS version 28 was downloaded and licenced from UCC. Responses were prepared for entry into IBM SPSS. A codebook was created (see Appendix). The researcher removed or modified data that was incorrect, incomplete, duplicated, or improperly formatted. Missing responses were treated carefully by assigning a code of 999 to them methodically to minimise adverse effects at data analysis stage. The cleaned Microsoft excel sheet was then imported to SPSS. Five random responses across all variables were thoroughly checked to ensure that the importing from Microsoft excel to SPSS was successful. Upon transfer to SPSS, variable names were inputted per question along with variable labels and values. Levels of measurement (nominal, ordinal) were assigned to each variable. An error check was conducted by means of running a frequency distribution for each variable to see if all data fell between the expected ranges

The next step was to run descriptive and frequency data analysis across the entire sample. Research questions and the review of literature were to the fore at this stage.

Inferential statistics were then used to compare responses between two groups: administrative principals (APs) and teaching principals (TPs). With these two groups, an independent t test was used. Following this, a chi-square test was conducted to determine statistically significant differences between the two groups. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for this stage of quantitative analysis. This allowed for a robust examination of the data at this stage.

For a comparison of the mean scores of more than two groups, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used as advised in literature (Pallant, 2020). In this instance categorical variable were created for an exploration of three career stages

1) Early career stage (first or second year as school principal)

2) Middle career stage (three to eight years of service)

3) Late career stage (nine years or more of service as school principal)

Upon completion of the ANOVA, the researcher needed to determine where the significant effects are (Mertens, 2019). This was done using Tukey's post hoc procedure. This post hoc test allows the researcher to focus on which of the variables exhibit the main effect demonstrated on the initial analysis. Appendix 5 documents the steps taken to conduct each of the tests using SPSS.

3.12.2 Interviews

3.12.2.1 Design and scheduling

The research interview is "defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009 p. 3). For the qualitative part of the research, a smaller number of participants were randomly selected as outlined in Section 3.7. Former principals were included for the first time in the data gathering stage of this research study. These interviews were designed to provide the in-depth information required to help support, build upon, and understand the initial quantitative findings. Protocol for semi-structured interview was designed to allow greater flexibility during the interviews to probe responses and elicit as much rich data as possible (see Appendix 4). The lack of probing considered a disadvantage in surveying (Bryman, 2012) is alleviated. Bryman (2012) argues that interviewers can depart significantly from any protocol that is being used. The ability to vary the order and even the wording of questions or vary question order is considered an advantage (Bryman, 2012).

The interview protocol for current and former school leaders was created to complement and enrich the questionnaire findings. It was also designed to align with the themes identified in the literature review. Questions regarding motivations for becoming a principal provide qualitative insights that directly correspond to the quantitative data on the motivating factors explored in the survey. By enriching this research through qualitative measures with former school leaders, findings relating to leadership pathways and succession planning can be gathered. Additionally, discussions on stress management align with the sections from the questionnaire that ask participants about the main challenges, coping strategies, and support systems from which they draw. Further exploring the effectiveness of their Board of Management aligns not only with questionnaire data but also speaks to the literature on supports for principals and the governance of schools in Ireland. Considerations of stepping down offer qualitative perspectives that speak to the key concepts of retention and turnover being explored. Furthermore, insights from former school leaders provide valuable reflections on career transitions, and additionally enrich the discussions on turnover and career pathways in the literature review. Careful planning and feedback from research supervisors led to the creation of eight questions with added prompts being devised for current school principals. The same protocol was used to interview former principals. Four additional questions exclusively relevant to principals who had stepped down were also included.

3.12.2.2 Piloting the interviews

The interviews with each current and former principal were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and recorded as set out in the information letter and following ethical procedures.

An initial pilot interview was conducted with a former school principal known both personally and professionally by me. This former school leader, now working in third level education, provided valuable insights into question order. The pilot interview served a functional purpose. It ensured that scheduling of the interview and the subsequent recording of the interview was successful. It allowed a check for general time completion, and further tested the uploading of audio recording to Otter.ai for transcription.

3.12.2.3 Collection of interview data

Appointments were arranged on a case-by-case basis with seven current principals and six former principals. Having received such a large response to the online surveys, it was felt that a limited number of in-depth, quality interviews would suffice. The interviews were conducted between May 2022 and July 2022.

An attraction of online interviewing is that many issues with regards time and location can be alleviated (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). Furthermore, potential differentials of power between interviewer and interviewee may be reduced (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). Disadvantages exist also in that the interviewee has no control over the circumstances of the interviewee who may become distracted (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). A reliance on technology can present with issues as was the case in this study, when one interview failed to record. Despite the difficulties, and cognisant of the disadvantages, it was felt that online interviews allowed a geographical spread of interviewees to be recruited within the current research.

Following each interview, all recordings were transferred to Otter.ai for transcription purposes and visual recordings were deleted from the computer. Each interviewee was then assigned a pseudonym.

The following table shows the demographics of current school leaders interviewed.

Table 3.1 Demographic Profile of Interviewed Current School Leaders

Current Principals	Principal Position	Principal Path	Location	Tenure (years)
Elizabeth	AP	Former TP (external appointment)	Leinster	10
Kylie	TP	Internal appointment (Teaching in the school)	Munster	2
Sarah	TP	Master's in education (external appointment)	Connacht	1
Denise	AP	Teacher leader (internal appointment)	Munster	2
Laura	AP	Deputy Principal (internal appointment)	Leinster	4
Carol	TP	No formal preparation (internal appointment)	Munster	12

Harry	TP	PSDL (external appointment)	Munster	3

The following table outlines the profile of former school leaders participating in interviews

Table 3.2 Demographic Profile of Interviewed Former School Leaders

Former Principals	Principal Position	Career path	Location	Tenure (years)	Next steps
Áine	TP	Deputy principal (internal appointment)	Munster	7	Stepped down to teaching position in the school
Mairead	TP	Deputy principal (internal appointment)	Leinster	6	Moved to another school as a teacher
Siobhan	TP	No formal experience (outside appointment)	Leinster	3	Stepped down to teaching position in the school
Alison	TP	Completed Post-graduate Diploma in School leadership (external appointment)	Munster	3	Moved to a new school
Eleanor	TP	Teacher (internal appointment) master's in education.	Connacht	12	Moved to a new school before leaving teaching
Paul	TP	No formal leadership preparation (external appointment)	Munster	17	Moved to a new school as a teacher

3.13 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Brooks and Normore (2015) outline that the subjective interpreter of data contained in qualitative research should make the process of analysis as rigorous and as transparent as possible. This section provides an account of reflexive thematic analysis which addresses subjectivity and bias. Subjectivity is addressed in this chapter, as the researcher acknowledges personal biases, experiences, and perspectives at the outset of the analysis. This is considered best practice according to Braun and Clarke (2022). The author has further maintained reflexivity through the activities of maintaining a reflective journal, adopting a critical friend, and critically engaging with supervisors

at all stages of the analysis. Constructive criticism pushed me to reconsider my assumptions, leading to deeper analysis and more robust findings. My supervisors have been vital in challenging my biases that may be present as a former teaching principal. One such example is a comment dated December 8th, 2022. Here Dr Moynihan is recorded as stating that

> "*This findings piece opens the door for a really powerful discussion and solid connection to the existing literature. The only critical comment that strikes me at this time is the overall balance of the argument. It is quite negative overall, though powerfully so, and I can't help wondering if there is any strong positivity to be gleaned from the data" (Dr. Joseph Moynihan)*

After receiving this feedback from my supervisor, I revisited the analysis of interview data with a renewed focus. This process highlighted the importance of remaining vigilant against the influence of personal biases.

In using reflexive thematic analysis for the qualitative phase of the thesis, the researcher sought to convey both a set of organising concepts and a story to represent the "rich, complex, and multifaceted" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.20) data from the interviews through the themes present in the findings section. Structured under the six phases proposed by Bruan and Clarke (2021), robust analysis of the qualitative data is now presented.

3.13.1 Evidence of the six phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was conducted according to the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). Each of the phases are hereby outlined with relevant examples of analysis included. Appendix 6 further documents the steps taken to thematically analyse the interviews.

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the dataset

This phase involved becoming immersed with the content of the interviews. Initially, recordings of the interviews were listened to, and later reading and re-reading of all interviews was undertaken. Some notes were taken regarding each interview, and the full interviews as a whole.

Phase 2: Coding

Segments of data that appeared interesting, relevant, and meaningful to research questions were identified and code labels applied. This involves more than just summarising the content, it is about applying an analytic take on the data according to Braun and Clarke (2021). The dataset was coded systematically and thoroughly. Upon completion, code labels were collated, and the relevant segments were compiled for each code. The authors detail that coding can take place either explicitly (semantic coding) or more conceptually (latent). Table 3.3 outlines a compilation of explicit coding taken from data with principals discussing boards of management.

Table 3.3 Explicit Coding

Codes Applied	Statements regarding Boards of Management
Delegation	"practical things like can someone look into this, get a price for this or contact someone on that."
Policy	"they don't read them, nobody really reads anything…"
Pushback	"I'd prefer now if there was a little bit more pushback, sometimes someone to kind of tease things out with, maybe look at it from a different perspective."
Volunteers	"but they're volunteers how much can you really ask of them? I wouldn't say they've any concept of the responsibility …"
Community/trust	"everyone is there for the goodwill of community and the school, they're putting a lot of trust in me that I make the right decisions…"
Insurance/delegation/ volunteers	"decisions around insurance it's very much a it'll be grand you know nothing can happen. I'd be saying we're not going to chance it it's tricky you don't want to obviously put people off it's hard enough to get anyone on it…"
Volunteers	"the old board had to be run on for a year because we couldn't get any volunteers…"
Volunteers	"don't lean too heavily on anyone because it's very hard to fill those roles…"

Phase 3: Generating initial themes

Compiling clusters of codes that seem to share a core idea or concept related to the research question took place at this stage of data analysis. Themes are constructed based around the data and describe broader, shared meanings. These are considered as "candidate themes" (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 35)

Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes

The initial candidate themes are tested for viability in the overall analysis. This involved returning to the dataset and checking if they make sense. Consideration is given to the relationship between the themes and existing knowledge with the wider context of research.

Table 3.4 provides an overview of coding related to factors influencing principals' decision to step down from the role.

Table 3.4 Coding for Themes

Themes	Examples
Workload and Work-Life Balance	- Overworked and neglected personal life (Mairead).
	- Desire for a healthier work-life balance (Áine).
	- Burnout and impact on personal health (Alison).
Challenging Interpersonal Relations	- Struggles with staff relations and conflicts (Eleanor, Paul).
	- Negative impact on overall wellbeing (Paul).
	- Unsupportive interactions with the BoM (Eleanor).
Desire for Family Time	- Prioritising family and work-life integration (Siobhan).
	- Wanting to avoid missing important family moments (Siobhan).
Concerns about Identity and Stigma	- Worries about how others perceive stepping down (Mairead).
	- Loss of status and identity (Eleanor).
	- Feeling humiliated by the process (Mairead).
Positive Outcomes and Satisfaction	- Contentment with the decision and positive impact on wellbeing (Eleanor, Paul).
	- Feeling reinvigorated and happier (Paul).
	- Regaining health and happiness (Mairead).
	- Relief and contentment after stepping down (Mairead, Áine).

Phase 5: Refining, defining, and naming themes

This is fine tuning the analysis and ensuring each theme is built around a core concept. Informative names are applied to each theme.

Phase 6: Writing up

It is advised to begin writing early in the reflexive thematic analysis stage. An initial draft of findings was presented to PhD supervisors in stage three of the process. Feedback received during

supervision meetings around issues of chapter flow and naming of themes contributed to the final write up of data.

3.14 Addressing subjectivity and bias

The researcher in this study occupies diverse roles within the study and within the primary education sector. Having transitioned from a classroom teacher to a teaching principal, I serve the role of an insider researcher studying the experiences of current principals. Uniquely, having stepped away from the role, I also serve as an insider researcher for former school leaders. This diverse background offers a unique vantage point, blending firsthand experience with an objective lens. As an insider, the researcher has intimate knowledge of the challenges of the principalship role and used this to foster rapport and trust with participants. The position of the researcher was important in accessing former school leaders, with empathy and trust nurtured.

Transparency and reflexivity are paramount, with the researcher openly acknowledging their roles and potential biases, thus safeguarding the integrity of the study. Methodological choices and robust data analysis procedures are transparently reported. The researcher aims to offer valuable insights into school leadership and contribute to the ongoing discourse within the field of education. This design of the study, and the reflexive thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews aligns with, and adheres to, best practice outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). This best practice is achieved in the following ways:

- The introduction provides the context and rationale for the research and references relevant literature and theory.
- This methodology chapter includes ontological and epistemological assumptions. It also discusses reflexivity practices employed by the researcher.
- The findings are presented in the form of descriptive statistics, further supported by rich and distinct themes conveyed.
- Conclusions and implications arising from the themes are reflected upon in the final chapter and the limitations of the study are acknowledged.

3.15 Integration of datasets: Rationale for, and process of mixing data

The rationale for mixing data sets is primarily influenced by the nature of the research questions. Integration of data in mixed methods research must be purposeful and meaningful (Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017). The research questions in the current study are more comprehensively explored using both qualitative and quantitative data, and a fuller understanding is found by using such a mixing methods approach. This approach to answering the research questions is in keeping with the pragmatic stance of the researcher. As noted in the literature (Greene and Hall, 2010; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017; Mertens, 2019), mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches are compatible with a pragmatic stance. The intent of mixing the data using a pragmatic framework is therefore to answer the research questions in the most practical and appropriate manner.

To effectively address the research questions, a fixed methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017; Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017) is implemented as outlined in section 3.6. This design ensures that both the gathering, and subsequent integration, of quantitative and qualitative methods are predetermined and pre-planned, facilitating the convergence of data. Data gathering occurs in two interactive phases in the current study, beginning with concurrent qualitative and quantitative data being gathered using the online questionnaire. Qualitative interviews supplement this data collection measure, by ensuring a comprehensive examination of primary school principalship perspectives. Introducing the insights of former primary school leaders allows their unique views to be contrasted and compared with that of the wider population of Irish school leaders. The validity and reliability of the study's conclusions are thereby enhanced.

The thesis presents three distinct findings chapters, each one presenting a different type of data. Quantitative survey results are presented first to provide the overview and represent the findings of a large cohort of current school leaders. Qualitative survey findings gathered concurrently are then presented, as these open-ended questions were deliberately designed to probe and build on the quantitative findings. Finally, qualitative interview findings follow by enriching the data gathered from the surveys and providing context, depth, and personal insights into the motivations and

challenges of leading primary schools in Ireland. These also explore turnover in depth using former school principals.

This structured process of mixing the data comes in the form of the discussion chapter. This point of integration, as noted in the work of Schoonenboom and Johnson (2017), is fore fronted in section 7.1 of this thesis where the author has created a table to show the points of connection from the literature review through to the three distinct findings chapters. This discussion chapter serves as the point of integration in which to compare and contrast the data. By structuring the thesis in this manner, the research questions are fully addressed, and the findings and integration points are presented in a coherent and comprehensive manner. Pertinent literature is compared and contrasted with the evidence gathered in the field in the discussion chapter. By presenting the findings in this structured manner and explicitly linking them with key concepts from the literature review, a comprehensive evidence-based exploration of primary school principal retention and turnover occurs.

The approach to comparing and integrating results from the various datasets follows the steps outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) for convergent designs. The following steps are taken to merge data:

- Data sets are analysed and presented separately – the findings are presented in three different chapters as outlined previously.
- With results identified, look for common concepts

3.16 Conclusion

This chapter has methodically presented the chronology of this research study. The pragmatic paradigm and researcher stance was explained with research design and methodology linked. Sampling for the mixed methods study have been outlined. Methods were discussed in relation to piloting and collection of the data. Data analysis has been outlined for both the quantitative and qualitative gathered. The next chapters provide a full description of the findings of the study.

Chapter Four: Quantitative findings from questionnaires

4.1 Introduction

This chapter interrogates the data gathered from the quantitative survey, as completed by current primary school principals in the Republic of Ireland. The quantitative element of the study examines the school leadership experiences of primary school leaders. The data included items on school demographics, pathways to becoming a school leader, wellbeing as a school leader, and their views of the positive and challenging aspects of the role.

The responses from a final total of 467 completed questionnaires were collated and coded into a Microsoft Excel spread sheet. The data were then further transferred to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 28.0 for data analysis, as previously outlined in the methodology chapter.

The questionnaire was divided into four distinctive parts, as previously defined. They are summarised as follows:

Part One: Biographical information and background information about the school setting. Leadership preparation and factors influencing the decision to become a school principal.

Part Two: Data on wellbeing, specifically hours worked per week, feelings encountered in the previous week, attitudes regarding stepping down, levels of motivation, perceived levels of confidence, alongside physical and mental health impacts of the role.

Part Three: Attitudinal data regarding the positives and challenges of the role. Personal attitudes to supports available to principals.

Part Four: Option to take part in a qualitative interview

4.2 Data cleaning and entry

Having conducted and closed the questionnaire responses, the derived data needed to be prepared for entry into IBM SPSS using a codebook. Cleaning the data is the process of preparing the data for entry into IBM SPSS. This consisted of removing or modifying data that was incorrect, incomplete, duplicated, or improperly formatted. Missing responses were treated carefully by assigning a code of 999 to them methodically. This serves to minimise adverse effects at data analysis stage. Considerable PhD field training support was offered at this juncture through supervisory meetings, alongside the recommended SPSS Survival Manual readings (Pallant, 2016, 2020). Initially, all data was downloaded on to a Microsoft excel spreadsheet, which allowed for the creation of a codebook (through the allocation of specific variable codes administered to response options). For example, there were three codes for gender i.e., 1. male, 2. female and 3. prefer not to say. The principal position had two codes; 1. being teaching principal (TP), 2. being administrative principal (AP). For more complex responses such as perceived levels of stress, happiness, anxiety, or worry, five codes were applied. The value of 5 was applied to the most positive answer and the value of 1 was given to the least positive response option. For instance, when coding self-reported answers for happiness the values read as 1. almost never, 2. once in a while, 3. sometimes, 4. frequently and 5. almost always. For more negative terms such as anxiety or worry, codes and values were reversed so the following values were applied: 1. almost always, 2. frequently, 3. sometimes, 4. once in a while and 5. almost never. Appendix 3 shows the full breakdown of codes.

4.3 Whole cohort descriptives and frequencies using IBM SPSS

The cleaned Microsoft excel sheet was then imported to SPSS. The task of tidying all names, labels, and values, alongside applying the value of 999 to the missing values was completed. Five random responses across all variables were thoroughly checked to ensure that the importing from Microsoft excel to SPSS was successful.

The next step was to run descriptive and frequency data analysis across the entire sample. When choosing appropriate measures and scales to use, it is prudent to thoroughly review the literature

(Pallant, 2020). Studies had reported differences in occupational stress and measures of wellbeing when comparing APs with TPs (Darmody and Smyth, 2011, 2016; Riley, 2015). Differences had been found when evaluating overall levels of job satisfaction (Darmody and Smyth, 2011) leading to the viability of the role of TP being questioned.

It was considered necessary to robustly analyse the data and compare responses between both groups APs and TPs. An independent-samples t-test and a chi-square test for independence were employed to compare two groups.

An independent-samples t-test compares the mean scores on continuous variables for two different groups of participants, namely APs and TPs in this study (Pallant, 2020). For example, this test will tell if there is a significant difference in the mean stress or job satisfaction scores for APs and TPs. A chi-square test for independence compares the observed frequencies or proportions of cases involving two groups (Pallant, 2020). It is most appropriate to answer questions such as: Is there an association between teaching position and stress? Are APs more likely to be satisfied with the role than TPs?

With these considerations in mind, statistical measures like independent samples t-test, multiple comparisons Tukey Honesty Significant Difference (HSD) and chi square tests for independence were deployed to robustly analyse the data.

Stevenson (2006) asserts that a deeper investigation encompassing school principals' career trajectories will aid in better understanding recruitment and retention issues (Stevenson, 2006). Developing an awareness of career stage theory will also allow school leaders prepare themselves for the inevitable career issues that arise, such as challenges, crises, transitions, and succession into the principal's role (Oplatka, 2009). It was considered necessary to further investigate the data through the lens of career stage theory. When comparing the mean scores of more than two groups, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) should be used (Pallant, 2020). One-way between-groups ANOVA is used when you have one independent variable with three or more groups and one dependent variable (Pallant, 2020). In this instance, three career stages are being explored:

1) Early career stage (first or second year as school principal)
2) Middle career stage (three to eight years of service)
3) Late career stage (nine years or more of service as school principal)

The ANOVA will tell if there is a difference in stress scores, or levels of job satisfaction for early, middle, and late career stage school principals.

Following the different stages of analysis, several findings relevant to the research questions emerged. The research questions are outlined once more. Each of these questions with the exception of the final subsidiary question, can be answered fully or in part, by the data gathered in this quantitative section of the research. The questions are:

Main research question:

- What are the dominant factors that determine primary school principal retention and primary school principal turnover?

The subsidiary research questions guiding the thesis and data analysis are:

- What motivating factors lead to principals assuming leadership roles?
- What do current and former principals perceive as the positives associated with the role?
- What do current and former principals associate as the main challenges of primary school principalship?

Results are presented sequentially. Firstly, findings relating to the full cohort are offered. These are:

1. Motivating factors for assuming the role of school leader
2. School leaders' wellbeing and emotions
3. Administrative and policy related tasks
4. Areas of support

Secondly, findings are presented to compare administrative principal status with teaching principal status as follows:

1. Motivating factors for assuming the role of school leader
2. School leaders' wellbeing and emotions
3. Administrative and policy related tasks

Thirdly, findings are presented according to career stage and principal tenure:

1. School leaders' wellbeing and emotions
2. Administrative and policy related tasks

Finally, significant findings are presented to highlight the effect of preparation on school leaders' stress levels.

4.4 Descriptives on the full cohort

4.4.1 Motivating factors for assuming the role of school leader

The following figure (Figure 4.1) represents the collated responses of factors motivating principals to accept the role of school leader.

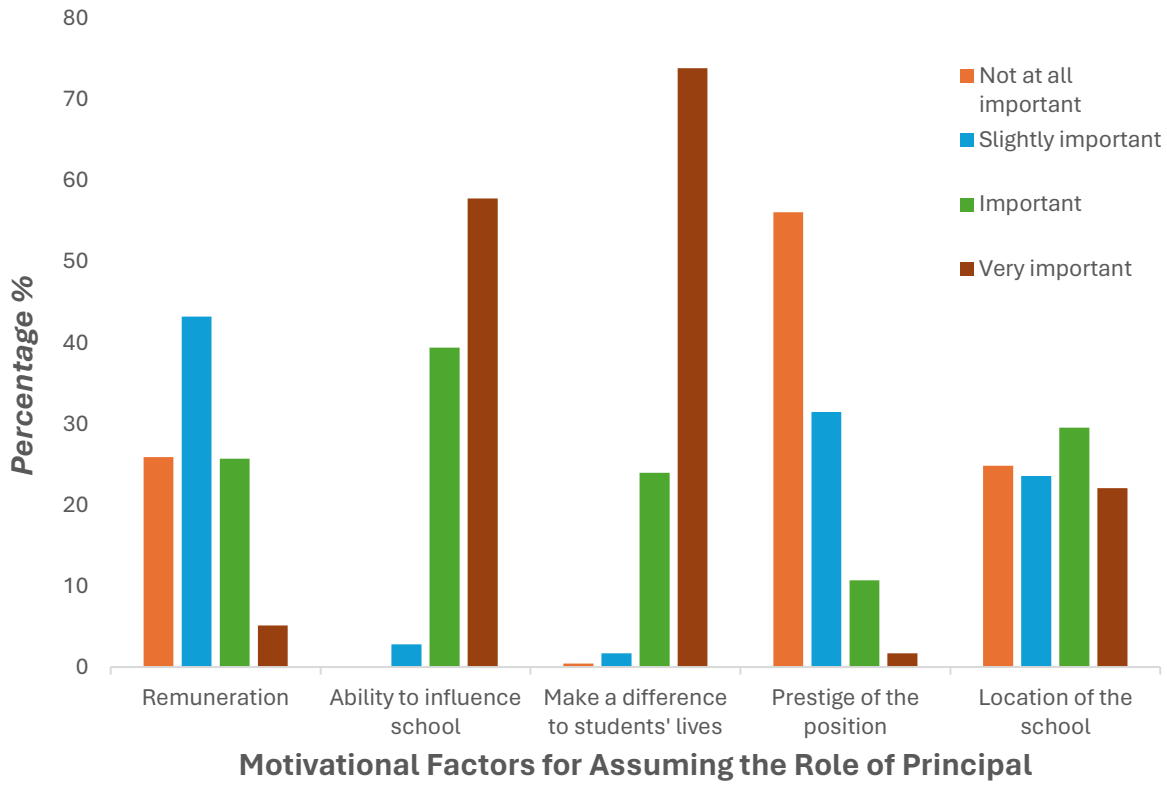


Figure 4.1: Motivational factors for those accepting the role of school leader

The importance of the ability to influence the direction of the school and the ability to make a difference in students' lives present as central motivators. In total, 98% of principals rate ability to make a difference to students' lives as important or very important. Similarly, 97% deem having the ability to influence the direction of the school as important or very important. Prestige attached to the position appears to be less important. Remuneration influences the decision to become a school leader for some, although results are mixed. Similarly, responses to the importance attached to the location of the school show a near even split across all four options.

4.4.2 School leaders' wellbeing and emotions

From the data gathered, the majority of current school leaders are experiencing stress in their professional lives.; 75% agree or strongly agree when asked if they feel stressed in the job. Alternatively, 11% disagree or strongly disagree as shown in Figure 4.2.

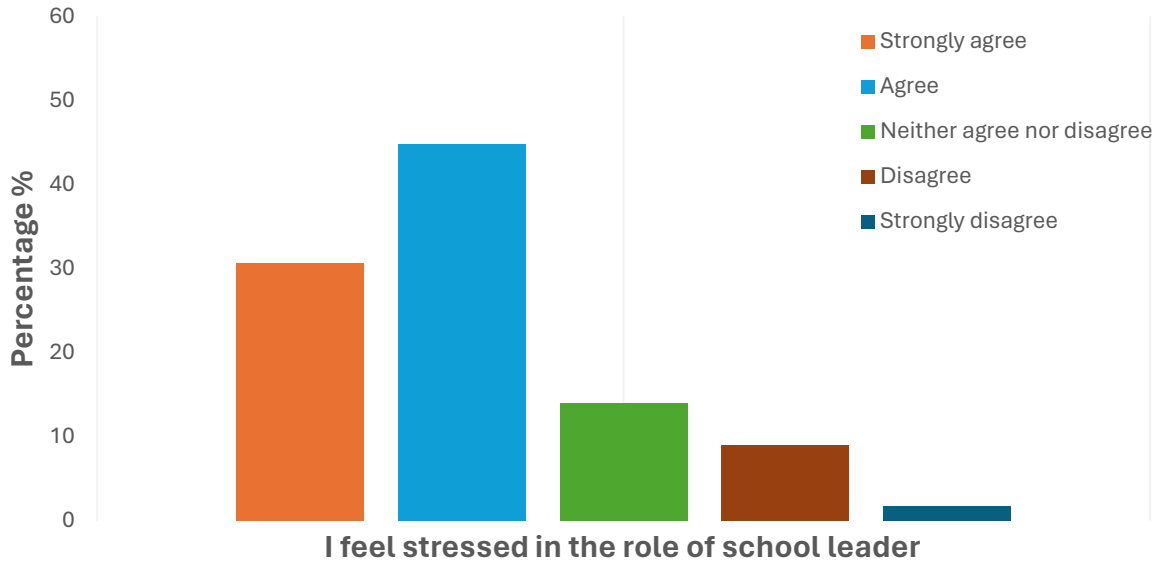


Figure 4.2: Stress levels as indicated by school leaders

The majority of Irish primary school leaders report moderate to high negative impacts on both their mental (68%) and physical health (63%) associated with the job (Figure 4.3).

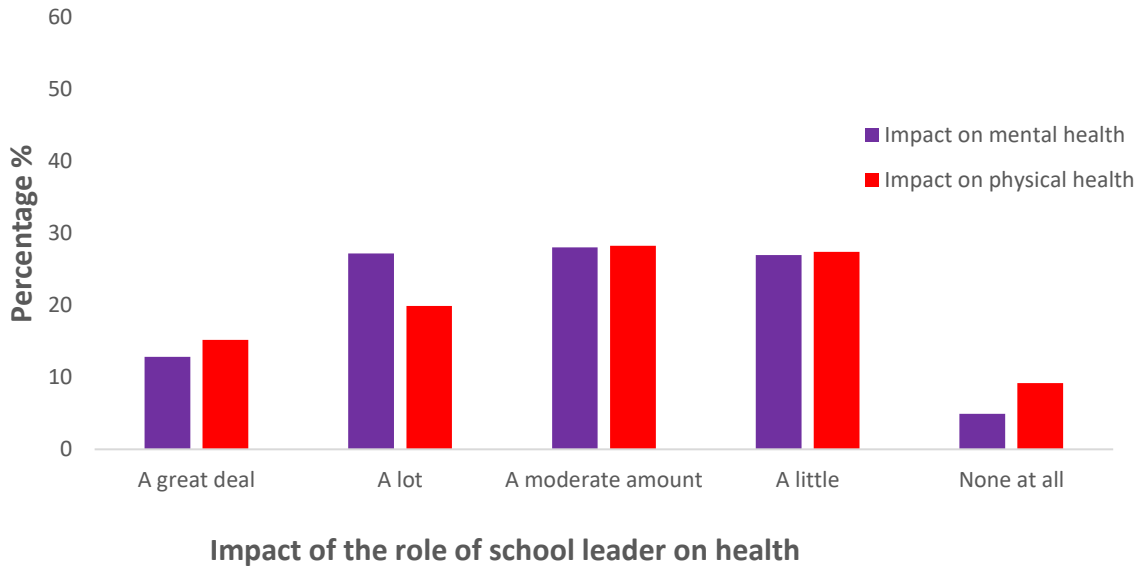


Figure 4.3: Impact of the role on mental and physical health of the school leader

Despite the findings shown in the two previous figures, job satisfaction results are similarly high, with 75% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing when asked if they are currently satisfied with their role (Figure 4.4).

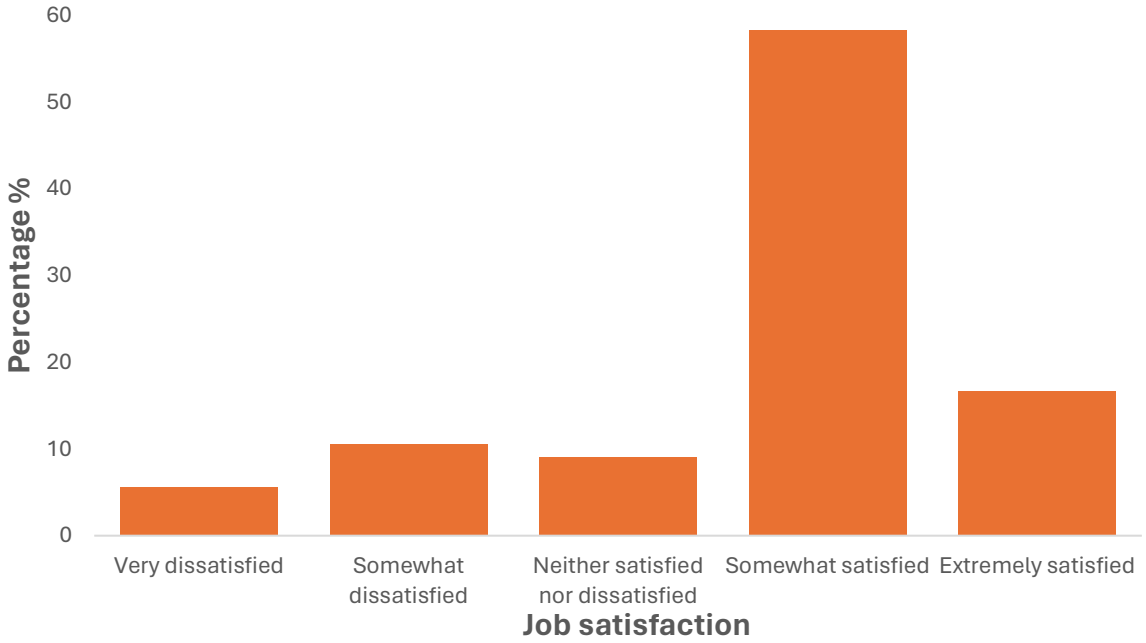


Figure 4.4: Job satisfaction as indicated by school leaders

Exploring this area further, in total 95% of principals care about their work quite a lot or a tremendous amount. Motivation levels are high; 81% report being motivated more often than not or

all of the time. Principals express confidence in their ability; 69% report being confident, whereas 5% are not confident presently in fulfilling the expectations of the role.

Results are mixed when principals are asked if they would recommend the role to others; 31% would recommend the role, 23% would not and 46% choosing *maybe* as their response. Similarly, mixed results appear when principals were asked if they had considered stepping down from the role. In total, 40% answered yes and 39% answered no.

In order to provide more data in this area, school leaders were asked for their perceptions of their own professional wellbeing through the use of a five-point Likert scale for frequency of emotions. The following figure (Figure 4.5) shows the mean values for each of the twelve variables across the sample (n=467). The results are presented in descending order.

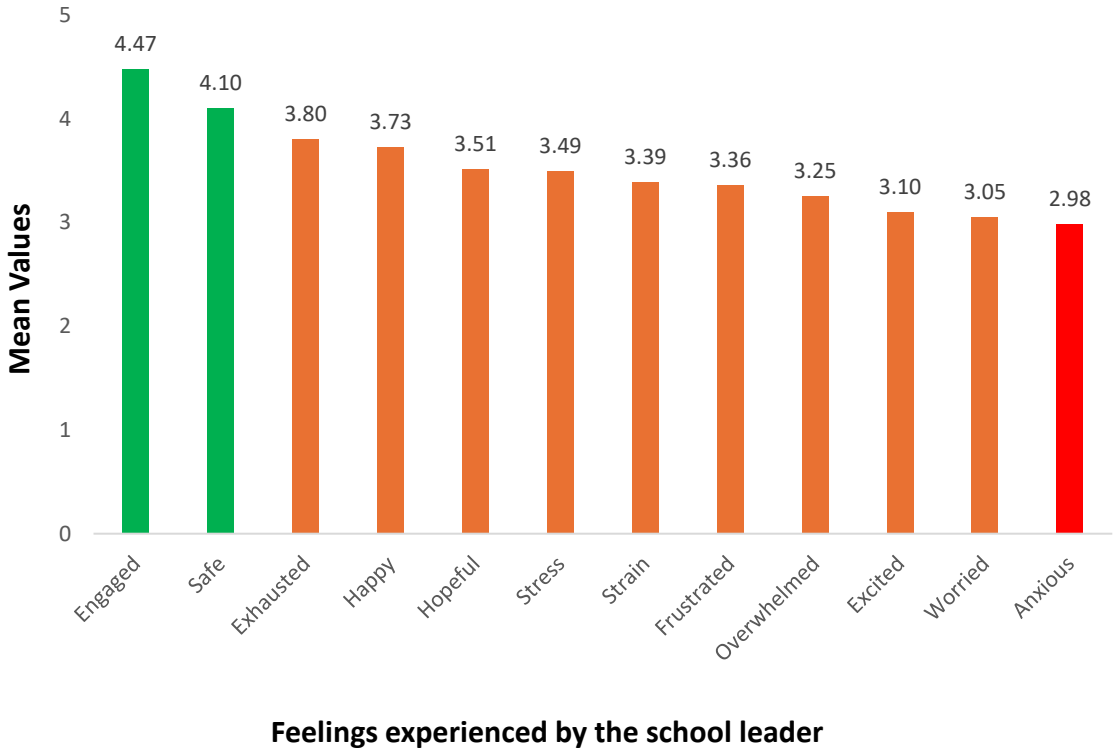


Figure 4.5: Feelings and emotions experienced by school leaders (max = 5)

Responses were most positive for engagement in the role (m=4.47); with the vast majority of school leaders frequently or always engaged (93%). Perceived levels of safety (m=4.10) are reported as

48% for always and 26% for frequently. Despite this, exhaustion levels are especially high for principals (m=3.80); 89% report being sometimes, frequently or almost always exhausted. Happiness levels are high (m=3.73); 93% of participants are sometimes, frequently or always happy. Levels of excitement are reported at the lower end of the scale (m=3.10), followed by worry (m=3.05) and anxiety (m=2.98).

4.4.3 Administrative and policy related tasks

One of the biggest challenges of being a primary school principal appears to be the long working hours. More than 45 hours of work on average per week were reported by 395 of the 467 principals surveyed, a large majority totalling 85%.

Figure 4.6 outlines levels of satisfaction with various aspects of school management and arrangements. As shown, workload dissatisfaction is high; 44% of principals (n=462) are very dissatisfied with this element of the role. A further 34% are somewhat dissatisfied with workload.

The current availability of substitutes emerged as a central issue of dissatisfaction. In total, 74% of principals are somewhat or very dissatisfied with current arrangements and availability. Satisfaction levels with Special Education (SEN) provision presents as somewhat mixed (n=463, m=2.87).

Principals are generally positive when asked about managing teaching staff; 72% are somewhat or very satisfied (n=464), and 15% express some dissatisfaction. Satisfaction levels with the role appear to decrease when another element of management is added to the role; 61% are somewhat or very satisfied with managing ancillary staff (n=463) and a minority (27%) are dissatisfied with this element of the role. The condition of the school building emerges as a positive for most principals; 61% are also somewhat or very satisfied (n=464). In contrast, a minority of almost one in three (32%) school principals are not satisfied with their current infrastructure. Mixed levels of satisfaction are found in responses to technology in schools; 54% express satisfaction and 34% are dissatisfied.

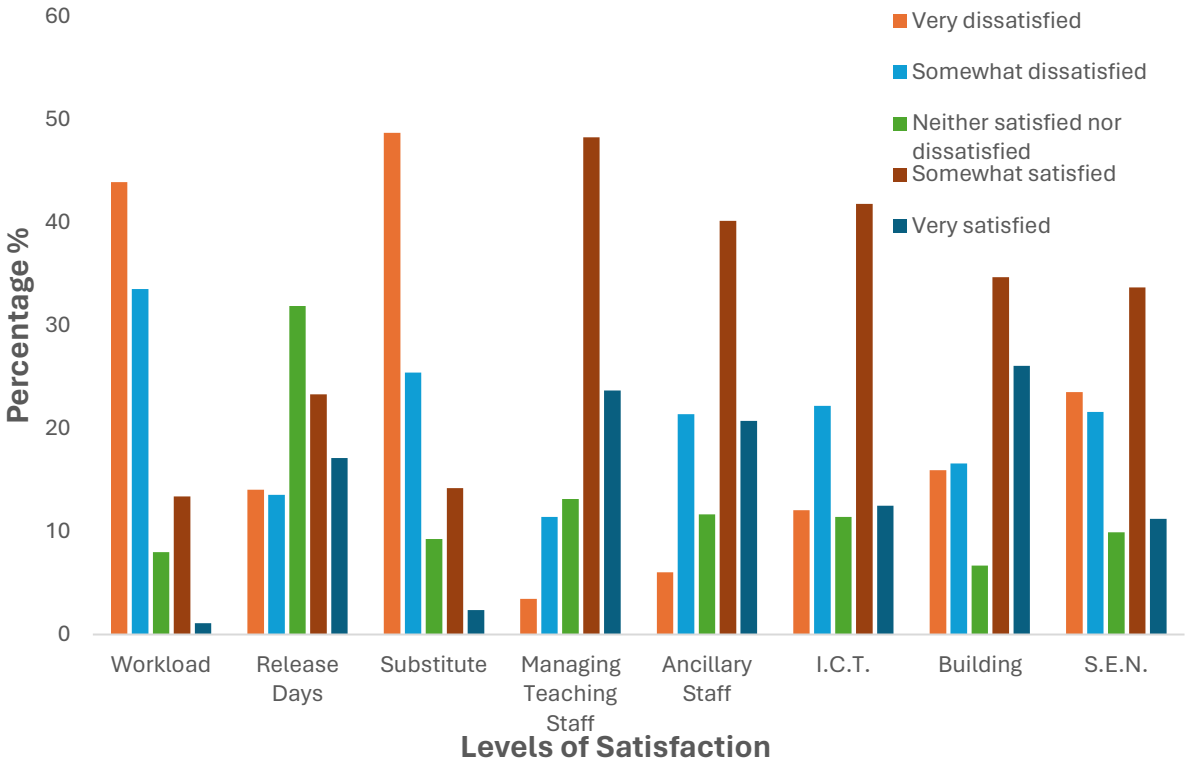


Figure 4.6: Satisfaction levels of school leaders with aspects of management

4.4.4 Areas of support

The following figure (Figure 4.7) shows the areas of support available to school leaders and the importance attached to each.

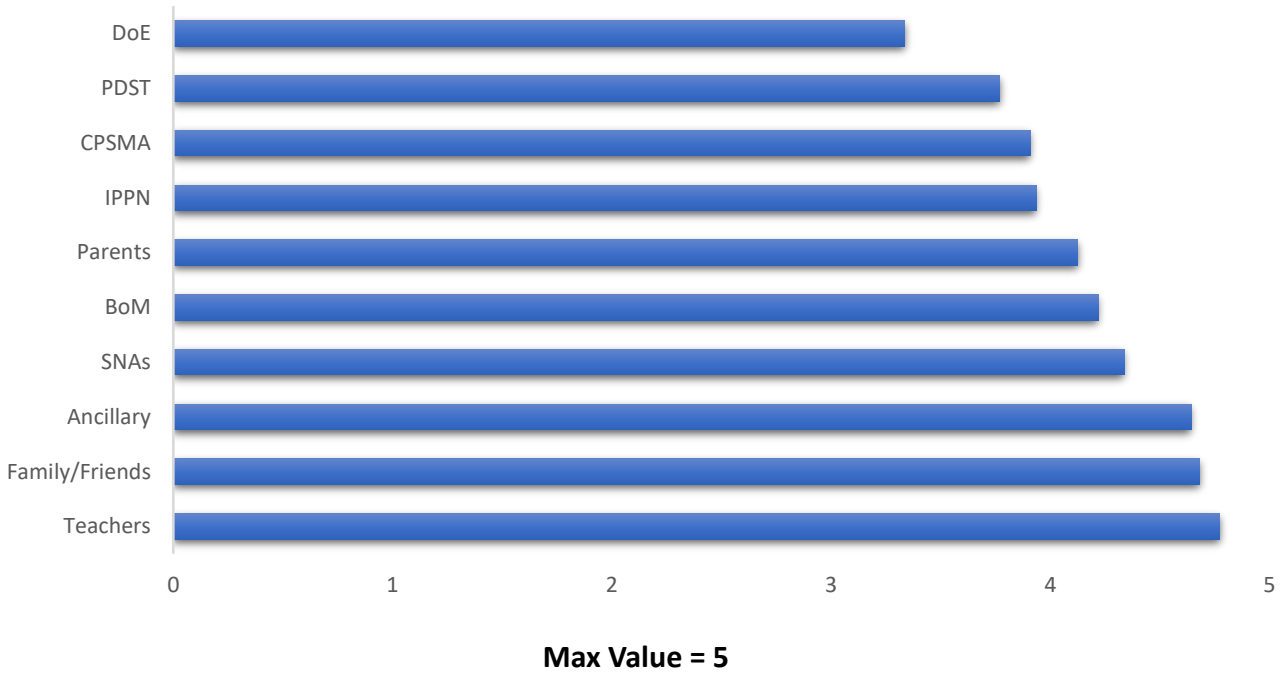


Figure 4.7: Importance of supports as perceived by school leaders

Teaching staff are considered to be the greatest area of support for school leaders. Results of the questionnaire show that 81% of principals (n=467, m=4.77) believe that their teaching staff are an extremely important source of support, with a further 16% deeming them to be important.

A strong support network of family and friends is also important for school leaders occupying the role (n=467, m=4.68). Of the 467 principals surveyed, 75% view family and friends as extremely important to supporting them in the role. The next highest scoring areas of support are all found internally. Ancillary staff (m=4.64), Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) (m= 4.34), Boards of Management (BoM) (m=4.22) and support from the Parent body (m=4.13) are identified as being important. Outside agencies are considered important but have lower mean scores than the previously mentioned support areas.

4.5 Further analysis

Having presented descriptives and frequencies performed using SPSS, deeper statistical analysis was undertaken. Statistical techniques, such as independent sample t-tests, chi square tests and one-

way between groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. Two central areas were assessed:

1. Administrative principals (APs) compared to teaching principals (TPs)
2. The effect of career stage on data

4.5.1 Teaching principal (TP) responses contrasted with administrative principals (AP)

The following section outlines statistically significant differences between teaching principals (TPs) and administrative principals (APs). Conducting Chi-Square Tests for Independence and also conducting Independent-Samples T-Tests allows the differences to come to the fore. These significant findings emerge in three areas:

1. Motivating factors for assuming the role of school leader
2. School leaders' wellbeing
3. Administrative and policy related tasks

Descriptives and frequencies of note are investigated to further show quantitative differences between the two groups as per principal position.

4.5.1.1 Motivating factors for assuming the role of school leader

There are statistically significant differences between the two groups when investigating motivating factors for accepting the role of school principal.

Firstly, a Chi-Square Test for Independence indicated a significant association between the ability to influence the direction of a school and principal status, X^2 (2, n = 467) = 6.540, p = .038, phi = .118. This variable was also statistically significant using an independent-samples t-test. Statistically significant differences were recorded in scores for administrative principals (M = 3.61, SD = .520) and teaching principals (M = 3.48, SD = .580; *t(465)* = 2.472, p = .014, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in means (mean difference = 0.126, 95% Cl (.026, .226)) was very small (eta squared = 0.005).

Secondly, a chi-square test for independence indicated significant association between location as a motivator for assuming the role and principal status X^2 (2, n = 467) = 20.226, p = ..001, phi =.208.

This, once more, was tested using an independent-samples t-test. Statistically significant differences were recorded in scores for administrative principals (M = 2.30, SD = 1.054) and teaching principals (M = 2.71, SD = 1.096; *t(465) = -4.110*, p = <.001 two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in means (mean difference = -0.411, 95% Cl (-.608, -)) was very small (eta squared = 0.008).

Thirdly, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores for importance of remuneration as a motivator for assuming the job of school leader for administrative principals and teaching principals. Statistically significant differences were recorded in scores for administrative principals (M = 2.18, SD = .841) and teaching principals (M = 2.01, SD = .841; *t(465)* = 2.116, p = .035, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in means (mean difference = 0.166, 95% Cl (.012, .319)) was small (eta squared = 0.2). Remuneration plays a statistically significant role in motivating APs to apply for principalship than for TPs.

4.5.1.2 School leaders' wellbeing and emotions

A chi-square test and an independent-samples t-test for independence both returned statistically significant differences between APs and TPs in the area of current confidence levels. Firstly, a Chi-Square Test for Independence indicated significant association between confidence levels and principal status X^2 (2, n = 467) = 15.925, p = <.001, phi = .185. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores for confidence levels for APs and TPs. Once more, statistically significant differences were recorded in scores for APs (M = 2.71, SD = .547) and TPs (M = 2.55, SD = .587; *t(462)* = 3.126, p = .002, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in means (mean difference = 0.164, 95% Cl (.061, .268)) was small (eta squared = 0.012).

As previously noted, stress in the job is high for all principals independent of principal status: 75% of APs feel stressed; 76% of TPs feel stressed. Mental health impacts are moderate to high for both cohorts of participants: 64% of APs report negative mental health impact and 72% of TPs express similar negative mental health impact sentiments.

Physical health impacts are also moderate to high for both cohorts of participants: 62% for APs and 65% for TPs. Satisfaction, however, in the job is also high for both cohorts of participants: 77% of APs report as satisfied and 72% of TPs express good job satisfaction.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores for levels of engagement for administrative principals and teaching principals. Statistically significant differences were recorded in scores for APs (M = 4.53, SD = .606) and TPs (M = 4.40, SD = .721; *t(465)* = 2.026, p = .043, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in means (mean difference = 0.124, 95% Cl (.004, .245)) was small (eta squared = 0.19).

4.5.1.3 Administrative and policy related tasks

Running descriptives for TPs shows workload presenting as a central source of dissatisfaction. A total of 77% of TPs are dissatisfied (n=206) with workload. Satisfaction levels with Special Education (SEN) provision presents as somewhat mixed (n=463, m=2.87). The current levels of release for TPs to attend to administrative duties are more favourable; 62% of TPs are very or somewhat satisfied presently (n=209) with release day entitlements. A minority of 30% of the participants, however, express some level of dissatisfaction with release day arrangements.

Significant differences emerge between APs and TPs regarding managerial tasks. Firstly, the area of workload sees a statistically significant difference between the two groups. A Chi-Square Test for Independence indicated significant association between satisfaction levels with workload and principal status, X^2 (4, n = 462) = 19.202, p = <.001, phi = .204. TPs are significantly more dissatisfied with levels of workloads.

An independent-samples t-test to compare the scores for satisfaction levels with managing ancillary staff for APs and TPs showed statistically significant differences. Scores recorded for APs (M = 3.37, SD = 1.200) and TPs (M = 3.62, SD = 1.205; *t(461)* = 2.241, p = .026, two-tailed) were statistically significant. The magnitude of the differences in means (mean difference = 0.251, 95% Cl (.472, .031)) was very small (eta squared = 0.02). APs report as significantly more dissatisfied compared to TPs.

Furthermore, statistically significant differences were recorded in scores for APs (M = 1.83, SD = 1.103) and TPs (M = 2.12, SD = 1.226; *t(462)* = 2.665, p = .008, two-tailed) having investigated satisfaction levels with substitute availability through the use of an independent-samples t-test. The magnitude of the differences in means (mean difference = 0.288, 95% Cl (.501, .076)) was small (eta squared = 0.24). APs therefore report as significantly less satisfied with the present availability of substitute teachers as compared to TPs.

A Chi-Square Test for Independence indicated a significant association between the likelihood to recommend the role to others and principal status, X^2 (2, n = 467) = 12.884, p = .002, phi = .002. The finding that TPs are significantly less likely to recommend the role than APs was further reinforced through the use of an independent-samples t-test. Statistically significant differences were recorded in scores for APs (M = 2.17, SD = .749) and TPs (M = 1.97, SD = .691; *t(465)* = 2.909, p = .004, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in means (mean difference = 0.196, 95% Cl .064, .328)) was very small (eta squared = 0.006).

4.6 The effect of career stage on data

Three career stage categories were assigned to principals according to literature discussed in Chapter 2 and described in the methodology chapter (Day and Bakioglu, 1996; Oplatka, 2002, 2004, 2009, 2010, 2012; Oplatka and Lapidot, 2018; Dor-Haim and Oplatka, 2020). The categories assigned were as follows:

1. Early career stage (first or second year as school principal)
2. Middle career stage (three to eight years of service)
3. Late career stage (nine years or more of service as school principal)

Exploring the questionnaire data using a one-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) allowed statistically significant findings to become apparent when viewed through career stage. These significant findings emerge in two areas:

1. School leaders' wellbeing and emotions
2. Administrative and policy related tasks

4.6.1 School leaders' wellbeing and emotions

A one-way between groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of career stage on frequency of stress experienced. There was a statistically significant difference at $p < .05$ in frequency of stress across the three career stages: $F (2, 464) = 3.777$, $p = .024$. Despite reaching statistical significance, the actual difference in mean scores between the groups was small. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .02. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for category 1, early career stage, ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.094$) was significantly different from that of category 2, middle career stage, ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.013$). Category 3, late career stage, ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.063$) did not differ significantly from other categories.

An ANOVA to explore mental health impacts across career stage returned statistically significant differences. There was a statistically significant difference at $p < .05$ in mental health impacts across the three career stages: $F (2, 464) = 5.207$, $p = .006$. Despite reaching statistical significance, the actual difference in mean scores between the groups was small. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .02. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for category 1 ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.061$) was significantly different from that of category 2 ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.083$). Category 3 ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.130$) did not differ significantly from other categories.

There was a statistically significant difference at $p < .05$ in levels of strain across the three career stages: $F (2, 464) = 4.819$, $p = .008$ through the use of an ANOVA. Despite reaching statistical significance, the actual difference in mean scores between the groups was small. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .02. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for category 1 ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.169$) was significantly different from that of category 2 ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.075$). Category 3 ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.141$) did not differ significantly from other categories.

Exhaustion levels are statistically significantly difference at $p < .05$ across the three career stages: $F (2, 464) = 9.333$, $p = .001$ following an ANOVA. Despite reaching statistical significance, the actual difference in mean scores between the groups was small to medium. The effect size, calculated using

eta squared, was .04. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for category 1 (M = 2.41, SD = 0.989) was significantly different from that of category 2 (M = 1.94, SD = 0.858). Category 3 (M = 2.30, SD = 1.057) did not differ significantly from other categories.

A one-way between groups analysis of variance was to explore the impact of career stage on levels of frustration similarly returned a significant finding. This difference occurred at $p < .05$ across the three career stages: $F (2, 464) = 4.072$, $p = .018$. Despite reaching statistical significance, the actual difference in mean scores between the groups was small. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .02. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for category 1 (M = 2.79, SD = 0.871) was significantly different from that of category 2 (M = 2.48, SD = 0.841). Category 3 (M = 2.69, SD = 0.991) did not differ significantly from other categories.

An ANOVA to explore the impact of career stage on levels of confidence found statistically significant difference at $p < .05$: $F (2, 464) = 11.213$, $p = .001$. Having reached statistical significance, the actual difference in mean scores between the groups was small to medium. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .05. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for category 1 (M = 2.41, SD = 0.635) was significantly different from that of category 2 (M = 2.67, SD = 0.578). Furthermore, category 1 (M = 2.41, SD = 0.635) was also significantly different from that of category 3 (M = 2.73, SD = 0.499). Category 2 and category 3 did not differ significantly from each other.

A one-way between groups analysis of variance was also conducted to explore the impact of career stage on levels of job satisfaction. There was a statistically significant difference at $p < .05$ in levels of job satisfaction across the three career stages: $F (2, 464) = 4.382$, $p = .013$. Despite reaching statistical significance, the actual difference in mean scores between the groups was small. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .02. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for category 1 (M = 3.89, SD = 0.889) was significantly different from that of category 2 (M = 3.52, SD = 1.130). Category 3 (M = 3.75, SD = 1.027) did not differ significantly from other categories.

4.6.2 Administrative and policy related tasks

The variable of satisfaction with workload was explored through the use of ANOVA. There was a statistically significant difference at $p < .05$ on workload satisfaction across the three career stages: $F(2, 464) = 3.148$, $p = .044$. Despite reaching statistical significance, the actual difference in mean scores between the groups was small. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .01. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for category 1 ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.144$) was significantly different from that of category 2 ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 1.006$). Category 3 ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 1.079$) did not differ significantly from other categories.

4.7 The effect of formal principal preparation

Analysing the full cohort of school leaders, the majority of the 467 respondents felt somewhat or very prepared for the role of primary school principal upon accepting the position. In total 56% felt some degree of positive preparedness. However, a minority of 27% felt either very or somewhat unprepared for the role.

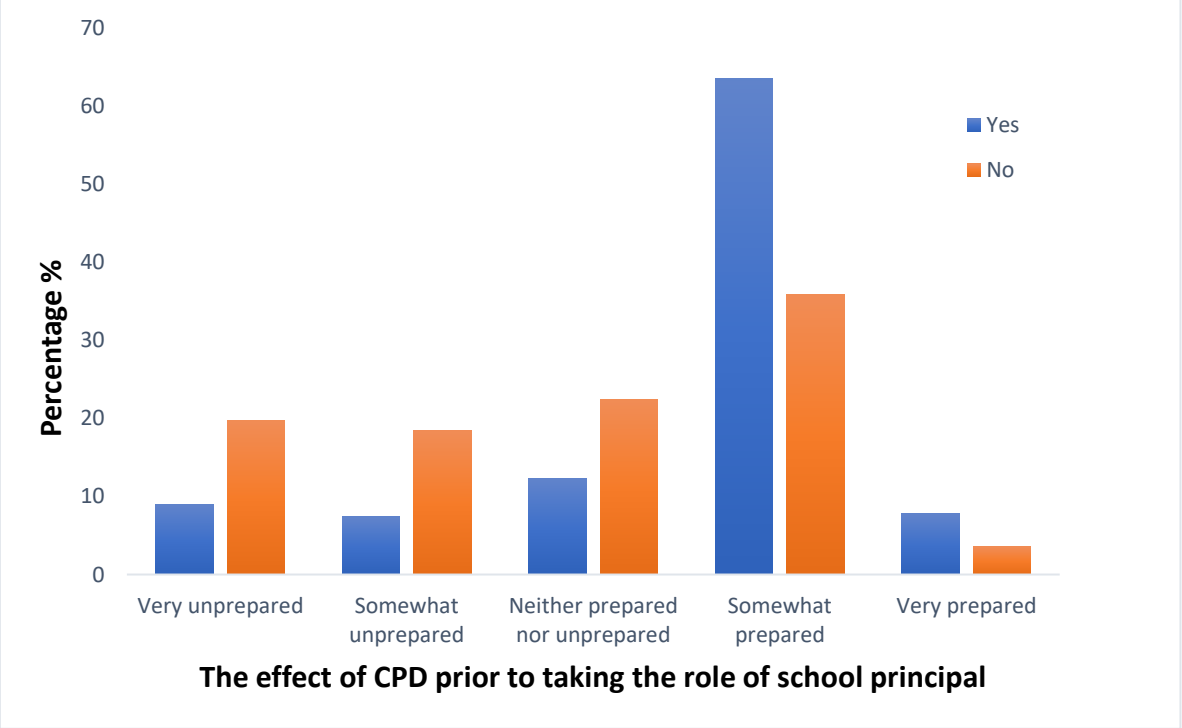


Figure 4.8: Level of preparedness for the role as indicated by school leaders

In order to analyse the effect of professional development on other data variables, two groups were assigned – those who had professional development undertaken, and those who had not. The above table (figure 4.8) shows that those who undertook professional development before becoming a school leader felt better prepared for the role than those who did not.

Delving deeper, significant association was found. A Chi-Square Test for Independence indicated significant association between stress in the role and professional development prior to taking the job X^2 (4, n = 467) = 11.084, p = .026, phi =.154.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of the quantitative data collected from 467 current Irish primary school principals. The process of cleaning and processing the data was outlined, with a clear overview and rationale offered for methods of measuring and analyzing the data guided by literature. The findings link to the main and subsidiary research questions. The data offers insights into the motivating factors, wellbeing and emotions of school leaders, their experiences with administrative and policy-related tasks, and the areas of support they rely upon. Analysis of the data reveals that the ability to make a difference in students' lives and to influence the school's direction are the primary motivations for individuals becoming school leaders. Prestige and remuneration play a less significant in career choice. Presently, school leaders experience high levels of stress, with 75% of respondents reporting feeling stressed in their roles. Despite this, job satisfaction remains high. Positive emotions such as engagement and happiness are present alongside negative emotions such as exhaustion and anxiety. Workload dissatisfaction emerges as a challenge, with a majority expressing discontent. Substitute availability also poses a problem. Mixed responses regarding recommending the role to others and considering stepping down from the role emerge. School leaders who underwent professional development before assuming their roles report feeling better prepared and more satisfied with their positions. School leaders rely heavily on their teaching staff, family, and friends as primary sources of support. Internal sources of support, such as ancillary staff, SNAs, and BoM also emerge as important sources of support.

The rigorous analysis undertaken with the data has yielded significant findings. Through robust comparisons of Administrative Principals (APs) and Teaching Principals (TPs), several key differences emerged. The study highlights statistical differences between APs and TPs regarding motivating factors. The ability to influence the school's direction is more significant for APs, while the location of the school holds greater importance for TPs. Additionally, remuneration plays a more influential role in motivating APs to pursue principalship compared to TPs. APs display significantly higher levels of confidence in their ability to perform the role. Furthermore, APs also report higher levels of engagement with their leadership role. In contrast, TPs express notable dissatisfaction with their workload and TPs are less likely to recommend the school leader role to others. While TPs face challenges in workload, APs report significant dissatisfaction in managing ancillary staff and substitute availability.

An in-depth examination of career stages revealed significant findings. Early career stage principals report significantly higher levels of stress compared to their mid-career counterparts. Early career stage principals recorded significantly higher levels of strain, frustration, and exhaustion compared to their mid-career peers. Early career stage principals also returner lower confidence levels in their abilities compared to both mid-career and late career stage principals. Despite this, early career stage principals report higher levels of job satisfaction compared to those in the mid-career stage (three to eight years of service). Finally, there is a significant positive association between stress and formal leadership preparation prior to taking the role of school principal.

Chapter Five: Qualitative findings from questionnaires

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from an analysis of principals' responses to the open-ended questions in the online questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised four key areas of inquiry aimed at furthering understanding into the school leadership role, including its positives, challenges, recommendations, and considerations for change. The four questions of this nature included in the questionnaire were:

1. What are the most positive aspects of being a school leader?
2. Would you recommend the role of school leader?
3. Have you ever considered stepping down from your role? Please elaborate further.
4. If you could change three things about the role, what would you change?

The analysis was guided using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases of thematic analysis previously outlined in Chapter 3. The identified themes revolve around motivating factors for assuming leadership roles, the positive aspects, challenges encountered, and the support mechanisms utilised by current school principals. Three overarching themes emerged:

1. Managing relationships
2. Managing the organisation
3. Managing oneself

The chapter is therefore structured to provide a comprehensive account of the current role of Irish primary school leadership according to a large cohort of current principals. By beginning with an

emphasis on relationships, the chapter can explore this crucial element of context and focus school leaders' efforts to create a positive learning and working environment. The various stakeholders in the school are included and relationships between educational leaders, pupils, staff, and the broader school community all feature. The chapter then explore the organisational aspects and external contexts that impact on the role through findings on autonomy, workload, the impact of the dual role, and remuneration. Finally, the chapter concludes by focusing on the individual school leader by examining self-management, highlighting the importance of health, wellbeing, loneliness, and work-life balance linked to retention. The structure of this chapter duly ensures a logical progression, starting with key elements of relationship-building, moving through the challenges of management, and culminating in strategies for personal wellbeing essential for successful school leadership.

Quotations throughout this chapter are assigned codes. This maintains anonymity while providing contextual information about the nature of the role and length of service. Each principal is assigned a number in chronological order ranging from 1-467. The first principal to provide data to the online questionnaire was assigned number 1, the second principal number 2, and so on. This process of assigning codes is previously outlined in the methodology chapter. A completed example of a code assigned is (246, TP, 5 years). This coding system aids in organising and analysing the data effectively.

5.2 Managing relationships

Managing relationships and the interpersonal nature of the role emerges strongly in the responses gathered from the current cohort of school leaders. The position as principal involves relationships across three key areas:

1. Relationships with pupils
2. Relationships with staff
3. Relationships with the school community

5.2.1 Relationships with pupils

> ***"I love working with children - I get an enormous sense of satisfaction in making their days in school happy and productive" (123, AP, 4 years)***

A dominant theme emerging from responses gathered is the relationships school leaders enjoy with pupils and the importance attached to these. Over one hundred principals referenced "pupils" or "children" as the most positive and rewarding aspect of the role. A current school leader claims that "when children are doing well and learning in a lovely environment, it feels like I am making a difference" (322, AP, 4 years). This sense of pride and self-fulfilment is reflected in many other responses. When professing a love for the job, a TP stated that, "on the whole, I love my job and the children I teach" (450, TP, 13 years). The nature of the everyday interactions with pupils are highlighted. These include "having a chat with them while on the corridor" for an AP (304, AP, 10 years), and the ritual of "greeting the children in the morning" is viewed as the highlight of the day for another AP (252, AP, 4 years). An AP believes the leadership role "offers a birds eye view" of learning across the school and allows for "interaction with children across all levels" (457, AP, 5 years). This is considered, by this principal, to be unique to the role of school leader.

The significant impact that leaders can have on pupils' learning and holistic development is forwarded by several principals. Principals seek to allow pupils to fulfil their potential as "they are the most important part" (333, AP, 7 years) of the job. A TP believes the role allows a major "influence on teaching and learning" (60, TP, 2 years), with leaders in the advantageous position of implementing "initiatives to benefit pupils" according to this same principal (60, TP, 2 years). This is echoed by many more respondents, with one AP succinctly outlining the positives as "the children" and "leading and improving teaching and learning in the school" (237, AP, 15 years). Wellbeing is at the forefront of principals' thinking, with many school leaders expressing a desire to positively impact the wellbeing of the pupils in their schools. Being the "one good adult for some children" is considered to be of great importance (330, TP, 7 years). A TP described the joy from

"watching the children grow emotionally and educationally" (465, TP, 12 years), and a stated aim for an AP is "to ensure the children are happy, safe, and respected" (466, AP, 19 years).

From the responses, it is evident that both APs and TPs value and appreciate the relationships with pupils they share with pupils and are aware of the impact they have on their development. Both groups express a deep sense of fulfilment derived from their interactions with students.

Furthermore, both APs and TPs emphasise the importance of positively impacting students' wellbeing. Both cohorts of leaders illustrate the shared goal of fostering a supportive and nurturing environment for students. While TPs may have a more direct involvement in teaching, responses from both APs and TPs suggest both groups are dedicated to the wellbeing and academic success of pupils in their schools. Their shared emphasis on the importance of positive interactions with pupils and their desire to help students reach their potential is evident.

5.2.2 Relationships with staff

> ***"My staff have been so supportive" (423, TP, 2 years)***

Another interpersonal area highlighted was relationships with staff. A tension emerges in the data with many contrasting views outlining positives and many more highlighting negative relationships and the impact these can have.

For many principals staff are viewed as a positively affective force. Various school leaders mentioned that they can have "a laugh" with their staff (330, TP, 7 years), share the "golden times" with staff (218, AP, 7 years), and enjoy "invaluable support" from them (19, AP, 4 years). Similarly, an AP has "a great staff, with whom I love working" (213, AP, 15 years). Another AP describes staff as "fantastic" and feels that "they really contribute to the overall atmosphere and effectiveness of our school" (322, AP, 4 years). This is echoed by an AP positively describing a "very supportive staff" and "a great relationship with them" (123, AP, 4 years).

School leaders view themselves as a positive influence on staff and principals aim to "have a big impact on the health and wellbeing of staff" (61, AP, 3 years). Several principals spoke warmly about guiding and leading teachers, espousing the virtues of being able to share their experiences and life skills with staff. Motivating staff and "leading a dedicated team" allow a shared vision to be created and fostered (28, TP, 2 years). Affording leadership opportunities to staff, and building their leadership capacity, featured with a current AP believing that this allows everyone to "share in the feeling of accomplishment in seeing ideas come to fruition" (86, AP, 26 years).

Relations with staff can also put a strain on principals and impact them in the role. An AP believes that the most stressful aspect of the role is dealing with staff (379, AP, 14 years). This mirrors many responses with negative staff relations described. Relations among staff have been described as "irreparable" with a "split staff" attempting to co-exist by an AP (314, AP, 11 years). Echoing this response in detailing a particularly difficult situation with involved mediation, another AP, detailed how they "nearly resigned over that due to stress" when referring to staff relations (230, AP, 15 years). This principal lamented a "clique" among the staff making managing them challenging. Staff relations are cited by many more principals in their responses as the primary reasons for considering stepping down from the role. One claims to have considered stepping down due to "difficult staff interactions" (300, AP, 2 years). A previous working environment was said to be plagued by poor staff relations and described as "a hostile work situation" by a current AP (336, AP, 10 years). This situation resolved after six years due to retirements. Again "a series of incidents" with staff led to contemplation of resigning from the role for a different AP (362, AP, 14 years). An AP attests to being "bullied" currently by their deputy principal, the chairperson of the board of management and a parent nominee (202, AP, 3 years). The present working environment is described as "horrendous" by this AP. Negative staff relations similarly featured in responses from two separate TPs based in two-teacher school settings. The unique, rural small setting means that both TPs actively avoid conflict. One states that "falling out is not an option when there are only two staff members" (274, TP, 5 years). Another TP in a two-teacher school describes staff relations in these settings as "challenging", arguing that the principal "has to maintain a positive working relationship" to the

point that workload is increased for the TP (390, TP, 6 years). This TP believes that their "workload is generally heavier as second teacher may not always be amenable to taking on some administrative tasks". The complex nature of managing human resources (HR) is made more difficult when staff have "unrealistic" expectations of what a principal may be able to achieve (32, AP, 2 years). These expectations were considered as "pressure" with the school leader contemplating stepping down due to "stress or anxiety" caused.

Dissatisfaction is expressed with elements of in-school management. A capable and competent deputy is important to support the work of the principal according to an AP, who believes that this is lacking in their school setting (34, AP, 3 years). This TP feels that "I'm doing two jobs with no option of demoting the deputy and promoting a more competent staff member"/ Issues arise in this regard for some more respondents. A lack of "understanding of shared leadership" is bemoaned, more accountability is sought for those in in-school leadership positions (37, TP, 10 years). It is claimed that one deputy is simply "not interested" and that this is "soul destroying" by an experienced TP (177, TP, 15 years). An AP laments the inheritance of "traditions which may not serve the school or its pupils well" (274, TP, 5 years).

When examining the perspectives of Administrative Principals (APs) and Teacher Principals (TPs) on relationships with staff, similarities and differences emerge. Positive interactions with staff are highlighted by both APs and TPs with friendship and support evident. Both groups demonstrate an awareness of their role as school leader in fostering and influencing staff wellbeing and motivation. Current school principals are eager to provide opportunities for professional growth and development for their staff, regardless of principal status.

However, there were some differences evident in the challenges faced by APs and TPs regarding staff relations. The responses gathered from APs outline more distinct difficulties, with respondents linking stress and turnover intentions explicitly to negative and difficult staff relations. On the other hand, TPs tend to have to deal with issues related to in-school management. TPs outlined their dissatisfaction with deputy support and concerns were evident with middle management and shared

leadership linked to accountability in smaller school settings. Some TPs express frustration and link this to traditions and routines inherited by them in these small school settings. They discuss staff mobility and bemoan the limited options available within current school contexts for demoting incompetent deputies and promoting more competent staff members.

In summary, both APs and TPs value positive staff relationships and have an awareness of their impact and influence in building and maintaining these. Differences emerged in the nature of challenges facing leaders managing larger staff numbers and those managing staff in smaller settings.

5.2.3 Relationships with the school community

> ***"I love when all the school community work together for the betterment of the school" (83, TP, 16 years)***

Many principals express enjoyment from working in and with the community also. Being in a position to positively influence the community is evident across the questionnaire responses. Different principals spoke of a desire to "afford new opportunities to families in the community" (4, TP, 9 years), and of being in a privileged position to "listen to the concerns and suggestions of all in the school community" leading to "real change" (380, AP, 6 years). Similarly, "the fact that I can reassure parents and help them" is a major positive of the role professed by an AP (126, AP, 23 years).

Alternatively, some principals have noted difficulties arising from dealing with "difficult" and "demanding" parents (342, AP, 1 year). A TP for over ten years bemoans the "attitude of some parents" (8, TP, 11 years). For another TP, certain encounters with parents have been described as "difficult" (16, TP, 6 years). Parental expectations are viewed as "unrealistic" on other occasions (32, AP, 2 years). One principal points out that principals "are human, we do get sick, we need time to recover, and we do have private lives" when documenting difficulties arising with parents in the role (267, TP, 3 years).

Both Administrative Principals (APs) and Teacher Principals (TPs) express a shared enjoyment of positively impacting their communities and working closely with families. They acknowledge the privilege of listening to community concerns and suggestions with the aim of implementing meaningful change. Similar challenges arise for both groups when dealing with difficult or demanding parents and managing unrealistic expectations. Likewise, both APs and TPs face similar struggles in negotiating relationships with the wider school community.

5.3 Managing the organisation

The second theme found in the qualitative responses in the questionnaire is managing the organisation. Within the responses, there is a tension arising with the current role of the school leader.

Various subthemes are identified under the umbrella of managing the organisation. A discussion of the nature of the role finds a tension between an enjoyment of the autonomous nature of the role and the perceived need for a clearer job description. The duties of principals are explored further with dissatisfaction expressed in the area of managing the infrastructure and dealing with finances. Debate emerges around the role of principalship with the area of teaching principalship outlined and critiqued by participants. A further aspect of the role which provokes a tension for school principals is the present remuneration for the role. Tension also appears regarding current workload levels in relation to teaching and learning. This is evident when principals' wellbeing is examined.

5.3.1 The autonomous nature of the role

> ***"Every day is different. There is good autonomy in the role." (82, AP, 13 years)***

Many principals speak warmly and openly about the autonomous nature of the role. This is evident in the many positive comments about the school leaders having an ability to positively influence the direction of the school. Most principals note that the most positive aspect of the job is the ability to introduce positive change and oversee the direction of the school. For example, an AP with seven

years' service in the role states that the most rewarding part of their work comes from "being able to make decisions that matter, the sense that you can influence the culture of a school" (54, AP, 7 years). Moving from teacher to principal allows the leader to now access learning across the entire school. This affords school leaders the opportunity to gain "an overview of the wonderful work happening in the school" (292, AP, 3 years). This, allied to the ability to "select programmes and schemes to suit the school" (279, TP, 1 year), feature in many of the open-ended responses. The potential and ability to directly influence learning of all pupils is a marked positive for many principals.

The idea of social justice and fighting for resources for pupils is also rewarding. One principal's description of being "an advocate for pupils with SEN" and striving for meaningful inclusion recurs across many other responses (191, AP, 1 year). Another principal is extremely proud of opening special classes for children with autism (445, AP, 16 years), while supporting pupils at risk of educational disadvantage is a high priority for another principal (84, AP, 5 years).

Many principals feel that the diverse nature of the role is a positive for them. Comments vary from "never a dull moment" (19, AP, 4 years) to "the variety of work is a real positive for me" (5, AP, 12 years). Expanding further on the variety found in the job, one AP (9, AP, 2 years) outlined their week as such

> Monday writing a DEIS[2] plan, Tuesday fixing a broken toilet, Wednesday doing Power Hour with Senior Infants, Thursday insulating a leaky window, Friday going for a picnic with sixth class. Never the same day twice.

Satisfaction also comes from a project or initiative getting "over the line" for one principal (65, AP, 2 years), while another principal is satisfied with "problem solving, relationship building, team building, surmounting challenges" (400, AP, 14 years). These projects also include the school building. A major plus for one principal is the improved condition of the school building and grounds having "put a lot of energy into them" (134, TP, 18 years).

[2] DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

One principal (99, AP, 8 years) summed up the influence of the role, and the job satisfaction that comes from it neatly as follows:

> While being all things to all people can be exhausting, it is also a very valuable reminder that being a school leader is just that. The whole school community looks to our principal to be the guiding light. Being able to give other members of the same community capacity to lead is what makes this doable and worthwhile. That could be a junior infant getting the job of being a litter warden, a child in 6th class the role of student council chair and an NQT[3] a role in policy development, or a peripheral parent a place on a committee. In my experience, this tide often lifts all boats.

Despite the many positive comments about the ability of principals to positively lead change and the satisfaction derived from autonomy in the role, school leaders clearly feel that a job description is lacking. Several principals spoke about the need for a clear job description to be put in place. A sample of these many comments include a desire to "have a job description" (232, TP, 11 years), a wish for "an actual job description" (214, AP, 11 years), a complaint about having "no clear job description" (175, AP, 12 years), and another TP who "would welcome a job description with clear parameters" (262, TP, 13 years). An AP, with two years' experience as a TP, claims to be a "lackey" as there is "no job description" currently for school leaders (356, AP, 9 years).

The two principal groups, APs and TPs, warmly reflect on the autonomous nature of their roles, where they can positively influence their schools and lead meaningful change. Irish school leaders derive satisfaction from the diverse nature of their work. However, a clear difference emerged between both groups with TPs openly expressing a strong desire for clear job descriptions, seeking defined parameters and clarity in their roles. It is noted that both APs and TPs share a commitment to driving positive change for their schools.

5.3.2 Workload

> ***"If the workload doesn't change in the next 12 months, I'll be changing career. This is taking too much out of me" (305, AP, 5 years)***

[3] NQT = Newly Qualified Teacher

The “overwhelming amount of work” (5, TP, 8 years) attached to the role of school principal dominates responses throughout the questionnaire. The word “workload” was specifically mentioned by one hundred and ten principals. The idea that “admin has become very onerous” (29, AP, 4 years) and that the job is “too demanding for one person” (37, TP, 10 years) appeared in numerous comments. The position of school leader in its present guise is described as “untenable" (53, AP, 12 years) and the workload “impossible” (4, TP, 9 years; 14, TP, 16 years; 41, AP, 16 years) by more than one school leader.

Principals are reticent to recommend a role with such a heavy workload.

> Would you recommend a job where you are contactable 365 days a year, works 60 hours a week, are the point of contact for 40 staff and 700 parents, and constantly have more and more added to your workload with no consultation? (307, AP, 5 years)

Workload is described as “just plain unfair” due to “more and more landing on our desks, there is no limit” (64, AP, 5 years). Another principal claims that the workload is “ridiculous” (259, TP, 2 years).

One principal (307, AP, 5 years) offered the following snapshot into their working day:

> I work from 8:00 AM to 4:00 AM, return home to my young children 4:30 to 7:30 and then turn my laptop back on at 8:00 PM until 11 PM or midnight, five days a week. I still have more to do at the weekends. The workload is unforgivable, indefensible.

The notion is forwarded that “principalship is not based on education at the moment” (157, AP, 5 years). The analogy of firefighting occurred in some responses. It is claimed that school leaders are “constantly firefighting, with no clear job description” (173, AP, 12 years). This was echoed by others arguing that principals are “constantly firefighting” (97, AP, 8 years), and another AP wrote about “fire brigading” in their description of the role (248, AP, 18 years). The description that “it feels like all I do is fight fires” (382, AP, 21 years) once more linked principalship to fire fighting.

Intrinsically linked to the metaphor of firefighting is the idea of time management. A clear tension exists between the managing of the school and the leading of teaching and learning. This is reflected in fifteen responses that directly referenced “focus” and “teaching and learning”. Principals would like a reduction in “the paperwork that we are drowning in” (86, AP, 26 years), preferring more time

to concentrate on leading teaching and learning. Another desires “more academic focus, less focus on day-to-day maintenance of grounds” (84, AP, 5 years). Principals derive job satisfaction from “working with children” and wish that “my job allowed me to focus on that” (123, AP, 4 years). An AP echoes the same sentiment, desiring “more time to focus on teaching and learning in the school and not on paperwork for policies and procedures” (302, AP, 3 years), with a TP similarly stating a need for “more time to focus on education and less needed for administration” (369, TP, 10 years).

One administrative task that recurred as an area of dissatisfaction is the management of the school building. Dissent is expressed by many principals with the time and energy needed for this aspect of their leadership role. Principals’ wish list to improve their working conditions include having “a decent building” (22, AP, 5 years), to having “less responsibility for trying to manage the upkeep of a very old school building” (296, TP, 7 years). This eats into school holidays with a TP claiming to having “worked all last summer” on building issues (12, TP, 6 years). More support for dealing with building works and engagement with contractors is sought and a change to the tendering and procurement process is also requested. One principal goes as far as looking “to remove the school building and new buildings from the role of the principal”. This is echoed by another seeking to “remove responsibility for the building” completely also (408, AP, 4 years). School building projects and maintenance of the building eats into planning and teaching time, a situation described as “ridiculous” by a disgruntled TP (259, TP, 2 years).

A second administrative task noted by principals is the management of school finances. In total, twenty-seven principals spoke about finances. An AP admits to a “constant worry about finances” (149, AP, 10 years), another wishes to no longer have to deal with the financial aspect of school management. This is expressed by a TP who again wants to “not be responsible for school finances” (313, TP, 2 years), with another bluntly stating that “handling finances should not be a principal’s task” (409, AP, 3 years). Finally, a TP simply requests “additional support in the area of finances” to support school leaders (413, TP, 3 years).

School principals, teaching and administrative, are heavily burdened by workload attached to their roles. Respondents express dissatisfaction and principals are considering career changes due to these demands. TPs and APs face similar challenges, such as being contactable year-round and working long hours. Similarly, both APs and TPs are faced with a multitude of administrative tasks, including paperwork, managing school buildings, and handling finances. TPs specifically note their frustration over the time and energy they are required to put in to managing the building. Notwithstanding the noticeable grievances with workload, both groups highlight the importance of prioritising teaching and learning over administrative tasks. Both groups advocate for their role to place a greater emphasis on education and less on non-teaching related tasks.

5.3.3 The dual role of teaching principal

> ***"The teaching principal role is not viable anymore, it's 24/7" (90, TP, 30 years)***

A subdivision to workload is the workload of the teaching principal. A tension emerges with workload exacerbated for those holding the dual role. The dual role of those in the role of TP emerges in many aspects of responses gathered. Firstly, a sense of guilt and frustration is spoken about in relation to teaching pupils. Some principals yearn to return to days when they had "the ability to focus solely on my class" (301, TP, 5 years). A perception of "guilt" is documented due to the need to focus on administrative tasks to the detriment of class teaching (362, TP, 3 years). Principals attest to feeling "torn at times" when striving to balance teaching with administrative duties (463, TP, 3 years). The balancing act is described in another response as being "unfair" to both principals and pupils (469, TP, 2 years).

Principals compare and contrast the role of the TP to an administrative role in many of the responses. One principal states from experience that being a TP is "unsustainable" having served in the role for two years before becoming an AP (79, AP, 7 years). The argument is forwarded by another respondent who believes that while there are challenges to being in an administrative position, "at least it's not a dual role" (154, TP, 14 years). This respondent continues, stating that the "admin and

prep/planning for class and day to day running of the school is stressful, challenging and exhausting". Someone else states that they are "exhausted doing two jobs" (421, TP, 18 years), while another principal believes both teaching and being a principal require forty hours each to complete adequately each week (465, TP, 12 years). A NAP already admits to seeking an administrative role on the basis that it would lead to "better work life balance" (137, TP, 1 year). The viability of the role is questioned by many. Several TPs use terms such as "unsustainable" and "impossible" on several occasions throughout the open-ended responses to the questionnaire.

Many TPs desire extra release time in order to adequately tackle the administrative side of the job and to further teaching and learning in the school. Principals seek "two days a week in the office" (57, TP, 29 years), while others believe their schools would benefit from "release time to get involved in other classrooms and lead learning in a more meaningful way" (25, TP, 6 years). Another suggested "time in lieu" for meetings attended in the evening time as there "needs to be something more attractive for all the time spent away from family in the evenings" (198, TP, 6 years).

TPs outline supports that they believe are hampering their ability to enact the role to the best of their ability. Internally, "a well-functioning in school management team" would help a principal who bemoans the lack of one (60, TP, 2 years). This is echoed by another teaching principal complaining of "limited middle management" leading to the role being the "toughest" faced thus far (189, TP, 6 years). The Board of Management feature in responses from principals. One teaching principal believes that their board "leave everything to me" (360, TP, 10 years), leading to extra workload upon them.

5.3.4 Remuneration

> ***"Remuneration was never the reason I went into my leadership role; it is an insult to the job we are doing at this point" (246, AP, 6 years)***

Remuneration for principals appears as a source of discontent arising from the thematic analysis of the online questionnaires. Principals state that "the pay in no way matches the amount of work

involved" (123, AP, 4 years) and argue that "the pay scale needs to improve" (117, AP, 8 years). Furthermore, words such as "pitiful" (127, AP, 7 years) and "insulting" (81, TP, 8 years) appear as descriptors when commenting in this area. The lack of a tangible difference in wages earned by the principal of a two-teacher school and the other staff member has also been noted. This leads to the principal commenting, "Why would you want to do this thankless job that takes over your life for €20 extra in your principals' allowance?" (36, TP, 6 years).

One principal (79, AP, 7 years) compares his pay to that of their spouse. They comment that,

> the difference in both our pay every fortnight is miniscule given the amount of work I do and the responsibilities that come with the role. I have one more year teaching experience than my wife, so our salaries are comparable.

Principals would like to see the principals' allowance reflect the total number of staff they manage, "not just teaching staff" (92, AP, 3 years). This recurs in many responses. A school leader wants to be "paid for the 20 people I manage instead of just the two teachers" (389, AP, 7 years). Another is hoping for "recognition of the entirety of school staff in remuneration - 80 staff, 36 are recognised" (182, AP, 4 years). Principals posit for "an allowance that more accurately reflects the challenge and responsibility of the job. for example, you might be paid an allowance based on a staff of 10 teachers but actually have a total of 20 staff" (132, AP, 21 years).

Finally, an alternative way of earning a principal's wage is proposed by a current school leader who quips that, "I would be better off driving a tractor for local farmer in my spare time and leaving school at 3:00 PM each day and not taking on the responsibility" (358, TP, 3 years).

When examining the responses on a group-by-group basis, it becomes clear that both APs and TPs are dissatisfied with the remuneration they receive for their roles. Principals across both cohorts documented a grievance with their pay and the amount of work and responsibility involved. Both groups advocate for improvements to the pay scale and call for the current salary to better reflect the number of staff they manage. However, some TPs may feel a stronger sense of injustice in linked to the dual nature of the role as evidenced in one TP questioning the incentive for taking on the role given the minimal increase that results.

5.3.5 Job satisfaction paradox

> ***"There is great personal satisfaction in this job, but it can be so frustrating" (366, TP, 10 years)***

There appears to be a paradox between job satisfaction and stress. Many principals speak about stress, while also referencing job satisfaction. For example, an AP wrote that "stress and exhaustion is difficult to cope with, but job satisfaction is high" (399, AP, 19 years). This is supported with a similar claim that the job "can be exhausting, stressful, frustrating, but also so rewarding" (222, AP, 6 years). The challenges of the role are acknowledged by an AP who then claims that "I love my job and all it entails. While sometimes it is challenging, it is always satisfying" (144, AP, 12 years)

Neatly encapsulating the paradoxical nature felt by many in the role, a TP (161, TP, 10 years) stated:

> I am an absolute contradiction in terms regarding how I feel about the job! I love it but it is very difficult, overworked, under resourced but it is great to be able to steer an entire school community in a positive direction.

Other principals believe that "stress and overload are part and parcel of managerial positions" (177, AP, 5 years). An AP believes that although the job can be "absolutely completely overwhelming most of the time", job satisfaction is high. This AP admits that "I enjoy it so much, I never get a minute of calm in the whole day BUT I do love it" (292, AP, 3 years).

5.4 Managing oneself

School leaders have candidly expressed strong emotions experienced in the role. Subthemes identified in this theme are:

1. Health and wellbeing
2. Loneliness and isolation
3. Work-life balance (WLB)
4. Career aspirations

5.4.1 Health and wellbeing

> ***"I have already been warned by my GP that I need to mind my health. it is never ending with no downtime and no breaks" (337, AP, 14 years)***

The impact of workload can be seen in school leaders' wellbeing. Many principals vividly outline health issues. One principal (59, TP, 9 years) commented:

> My physical health has suffered due to work overload and burnout. Shingles, miscarriage, and autoimmune stress disorder.

Other responses gathered further the suggestion that principals' health is impacted in the role:

> being a teacher and a principal is too much. My family life suffers as I cannot switch off. I have put on two stone as I don't have the energy or time to cook (33, TP, 3 years)

Without elaborating, another principal states that "there have been health consequences as a result of stress" (434, AP, 16 years). Another comment describes the job as "a huge life adjustment" (73, TP, 5 years), and yet another school principal finds that the "challenges are becoming insurmountable, not conducive to a healthy and happy work life balance" (85, TP, 16 years).

Many respondents mentioned the word stress when elaborating on their experiences of the role of school leader. A TP states that, "overall I find the position overwhelming and frequently suffer from overload" (183, TP, 8 years). This is echoed throughout responses such as, "I think it is too stressful a career path" (70, AP, 9 years), "stress is unsustainable" (323, AP, 8 years), "physical and mental health stress far outweighs the enjoyment" (284, TP, 8 years), and "no life, it fills your head with no break" (337, AP, 14 years).

References to tiredness and sleep appeared in some responses. A TP describes themselves as feeling "very tired, exhausted, lost my mojo a bit" (276, TP, 13 years). An AP who has served as principal for seventeen years claims that the role "takes over your waking and sleeping hours" (166, AP, 17 years). This is mirrored in the response of a similarly experienced AP who confessed to "losing a few night's sleep" (324, AP, 14 years) during various difficult times. A TP in their first year in the role also admits that they have "lost sleep over" varying aspects of the role (217, TP, 1 year).

Worryingly, an experienced TP feels “like I'm going to have a breakdown” due to the pressures of being a school leader (283, TP, 20 years).

The impact of workload on health and wellbeing is evident among both Teacher Principals (TPs) and Administrative Principals (APs). School leaders across both groups report experiencing physical and mental health issues as a result of the stress and demands of their roles. Stress is a common theme among both groups, with many claiming to be overwhelmed, exhausted, and unable to switch off. Responses from both TPs and APs suggest that Irish principals are currently facing significant challenges to their general health and wellbeing.

5.4.2 Loneliness and isolation

> ***“The job is very different to what I was expecting. It’s a lonely place to be” (381, AP, 5 years)***

One emotion that came to the fore in many of the responses was loneliness. The term “lonely” was referenced in responses on a number of occasions, with the term “isolation” or “isolated” featuring a further four times. Three principals in the first year of school principalship deem the position to be a lonely role. Their comments were:

“At times it can be a very lonely position, despite all those around you, much of the responsibility rests with you” (280, AP, 1 year),

“It’s early days but sometimes when I’m overwhelmed, I regret the move because it’s lonely and I’m new to the school” (420, AP, 1 year), and

“I’d like to feel less isolated” (279, TP, 1 year).

The setting can impact on loneliness according to an experienced TP. They find that “in a small school setting it can be lonely” (350, TP, 17 years). Job satisfaction and loneliness co-exist for an AP. This principal expresses to “love my job”, while also nothing that “it can be very stressful and isolating” (222, AP, 6 years).

Loneliness emerges as a significant theme among both Administrative Principals (APs) and Teacher Principals (TPs) in their reflections on their roles. Several principals express feelings of isolation and loneliness despite being surrounded by others. APs and TPs alike describe the position as a solitary one, where much of the responsibility rests on their shoulders. Some new principals in their first year of leadership particularly highlight the loneliness they experience. Additionally, the setting of the school can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, with experienced TPs noting that small school settings can contribute to a sense of isolation.

5.4.3 Work life balance (WLB)

> ***"Life sucking and soul destroying" (445, AP, 16 years)***

Work life balance appears as a particularly strong theme running through the qualitative data gathered through the use of the online questionnaire. School leadership entails "a lot of compromises in your personal life" (32, AP, 2 years). The profound impact on of the role on one's personal life is considered a "scary thing" (250, TP, 4 years). A principal believes the job "is not only affecting my health but also the time and energy I have left to devote to my family" (79, AP, 7 years). This principal worries in regard to the compatibility of the position owing to the fact that "I have a young daughter (almost 3)".

Juggling work-life balance appears problematic. A NAP (403, AP, 1 year) admits to struggling, claiming that "I find it hard to not worry or stress about things whilst away from work. I find that I am always on alert for issues with the school". A more experienced school leaders echoes this, admitting that "Being a teaching principal takes up all my time in my headspace. I feel overwhelmed" (112, TP, 14 years).

Principalship is considered "hard to do with a young family" (63, AP, 2 years). This is furthered in a comment that "workload while having young family is challenging" (234, TP, 15 years). One leader feels that they are giving "all to my job" but "that it takes away from my family" (210, AP, 3

years). Another principal (194, AP, 2 years) will “often question whether the job is worth missing out” on family life. A school leader recollects being at “my son's hospital bed and I received a message that the parents were complaining while I was off” (114, TP, 24 years). This same principal also noted that while on another maternity leave “parents were complaining”. Principals feel that one would be best “to wait a while” before becoming a school leader if their family are young (381, AP, 5 years). Another leader admits that they would be “reticent to recommend the role to people with young children” (16, TP, 6 years).

Being principal appears to impact on holidays to such an extent that one principal “never looks forward to holidays like I did as a mainstream teacher” (126, AP, 23 years). Another leader is “concerned about the needs to sustain the current high level of commitment throughout the year, holidays are just dates on a calendar and don't always materialise” (432, AP, 6 years). Telephone calls, texts and emails during holidays and weekends are “most frustrating” (182, AP, 17 years).

One principal says that their son, a teacher, “Has told me he won't ever apply for a leadership role as we saw how it affected our family life negatively over the years” (295, TP, 29 years). School leaders claim, “total exhaustion at times” (399, AP, 19 years. The job is detailed in another response (64, AP, 5 years) regarding the possibility of stepping down:

> I'm exhausted. I enjoy what the role involves but the hours have me worn out. I have kids. I have little time for them, and no time for myself. I haven't watched TV for at least the last two weeks. I work from 8 to 4 and again 8 to 11 when the kids go to bed. I can't keep it up. Shame because I love the role, staff, kids, community. I'm considering stepping down, this isn't living.

Irish primary school principals, both administrative and teaching, struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Both APs and TPs alike acknowledge the difficulties they encounter in balancing their personal lives with their school leadership duties. Both groups express concerns about the impact of the role on their health, family time, and overall wellbeing. However, TPs may face additional challenges due to the dual role of teaching and administrative duties, which can lead to heightened feelings of frustration and exhaustion. In contrast, APs may face unique struggles related to the scale and complexity of their administrative responsibilities in larger settings with more staff to manage, while TPs may find consolation and comfort in their teaching interactions with students.

Despite these differences, it appears that a significant emotional toll is currently being experienced by both APs and TPs.

5.4.4 Career aspirations

> ***"Stress and impact on family life has me considering stepping down" (284, TP, 8 years)***

A large number of responses speak about future aspirations with principals seeking a change of career or contemplation retirement. Principalship is now "a short-term position" (78, TP, 10 years), and one that requires "an exit plan" in the mind of a current leader (157, AP, 5 years). For some, this exit plans consists of early retirement. Quite a few responses were received from principals who, rather than contemplating stepping down from the role, are considering retirement instead. The notion that "retirement is not far away" appears as a positive for one principal (415, AP, 22 years). Workload is the primary reason for another "taking early retirement in at the end of August" (14, TP, 16 years). Principals' dissatisfaction with workload has led to principals "weighing up in my head at what age I may retire" (449, TP, 20 years). One leader aimed to complete five years in the role but now plans to retire instead, another "decided to retire after years with no holidays" (197, AP, 17 years). Retirement is considered "more and more attractive with all the paperwork, rules and regulations which have come into play" (185, AP, 15 years).

Some principals are considering a change of role. A school leader admits that to be "actively engaged in professional development with a view to trying something different" (408, AP, 4 years), and another principal is currently "looking at other career opportunities" (157, AP, 5 years).

The notion of a step-down facility appears to garner favour with many principals. A step-down facility "that respects your previous role and experience" (29, AP, 4 years), that allows seniority to be maintained is highly popular. Essentially, those who are struggling as school leaders would be most grateful for having "a dignified step-down process" (321, TP, 12 years) put in place. The lack of such a facility emboldens one principal to declare that "I will not step down, but I will leave" (22,

AP, 5 years). Many school leaders bemoan a lack of mobility in the role currently. Drawbacks to stepping down and perceived anomalies within the system are noted. One such area is the loss of pension by stepping down. One principal claims that by stepping down, "19 years of stress would not be counted for pension purposes" (149, AP, 10 years). Echoing this, a school leader wants to "benefit from my slave labour in my retirement pension and lump sum" (111, TP, 16 years). The "anomaly" that a deputy principal acting up in the role for five years can retain the allowance is highlighted in one response (216, AP, 22 years). The ability to step-down would "facilitate new blood in the role" (123, AP, 4 years).

Principals feel that issues of recruitment and retention could be solved by placing a fixed term on the role. It is argued that "our profession would attract more suitable candidates if they knew that it had a life span" (308, TP, 3 years). It should no longer be "a job for life" and for those taking on the job of school principal "too early in life" will lead to "suffering burnout before they would be normally due to retire" according to this same school leader (308, TP, 3 years). Seven years is mooted by some principals. One would like to "do a seven-year term and be able to step aside" (138, TP, 7 years). Similarly, another feels that the optimal length of service would be to "stay seven years only before moving to another role" (185, AP, 15 years). The idea of swapping and rotating the position of school leader was proposed. The failure to have "a system whereby there could be a facility to rotate the leadership" means that "exceptional school leaders" are being lost (314, AP, 11 years).

Principals in the study express significant concerns about the impact of their roles on their personal lives and both APs and TPs discuss future career plans. As outlined in previous sections, stress, dissatisfaction with workload, and the impact of the role on health and wellbeing are pertinent issues for the two groups. Many contemplate stepping down or retiring early due to these challenges. However, specific concerns and aspirations differ for both. APs reference the overwhelming administrative burden and TP responses suggest a grievance due to the differences in salaries between principals of small and large schools. Additionally, TPs speak to the challenges of

managing a school with limited resources and staff, while APs tend to focus more on the challenges that present when lead a large school and managing more staff. Despite these differences, both groups seek changes to workload, suggest methods of enhancing career mobility, and advocate for support structures to ensure the sustainability of their school leadership roles.

5.5 Conclusion

Analysis of the qualitative responses gathered through the use of online questionnaires found three strong themes emerging. These were discussed as

1. Managing relationships,
2. Managing the organisation, and
3. Managing oneself.

Subthemes were identified and explored in each area. Managing relationships for respondents consisted of their relationships with pupils, staff, and the wider school community. The second theme uncovered a tension between the autonomous nature of the role, and the lack of a clear job description. Workload dissatisfaction, in particular for those in the role of TP, also featured. Dissatisfaction was found with remuneration for the role within this theme. The paradoxical relationship between stress, workload, and job satisfaction was evidenced in responses. The final theme, managing oneself, speaks to principals' health and wellbeing, documents loneliness and isolation, alongside a continued struggle to find a work-life balance for school leaders.

The following table (5.1) is a summary of the main findings from the qualitative aspects of the online questionnaire outlined under each theme and subtheme:

Table 5.1 Summary of Qualitative Findings from Online Questionnaire

Theme	Subtheme	Findings
Managing Relationships	Relationships with pupils	• Principals attach importance in positively impacting students' lives and note positive relationships • Principals enjoy everyday interactions with students and aim for a supportive learning environment.
	Relationships with staff	• School leaders value positive relationships • Challenges include managing difficult staff interactions
	Relationships with the school community	• Principal satisfaction from positively impacting the school community and working with families • Challenges include managing difficult parents and unrealistic expectations.
Managing the Organisation	The autonomous nature of the role	• Principals influence school direction positively and appreciate autonomy • Many express the need for clearer job descriptions
	Workload	• Principals are overwhelmed by workload and stress, desiring more time for teaching and learning
	The dual role of teaching principal	• Teaching Principals find the dual role unsustainable and desire extra release time and internal support.
	Remuneration	• Principals express dissatisfaction with pay, feeling it does not match workload and responsibilities • They desire an improved pay scale and recognition of total staff managed.
Managing Oneself	Health and wellbeing	• Principals' health is impacted by workload, leading to various physical and mental health issues • Stress is common, with many feeling overwhelmed and unable to switch off.
	Loneliness and isolation	• Principals often feel lonely and isolated despite being surrounded by others • Particularly challenging for new principals.
	Work-life balance (WLB)	• School leadership negatively affects work-life balance, leading to compromises in personal life and family time • Juggling work-life balance appears problematic, especially for those with young families.
	Career aspirations	• Many principals contemplate stepping down or retiring early due to stress and dissatisfaction with workload • Some consider changing careers or seeking alternative roles

		• Issues of mobility and recruitment are also raised, with suggestions for fixed-term positions and step-down facilities.

Chapter Six: Qualitative interview findings

6.1 Introduction

The first phase of this research was the quantitative survey which resulted in 467 valid responses from current primary school principals in the Republic of Ireland. This data, along with the qualitative elements embedded within, allows an awareness of current challenges and positives aspects of the role to come to the fore. The next stage the data gathering process comprised of the need to interrogate further these findings and gain a deeper insight into central themes emerging. The inclusion of former school principals in the interview process is a key feature of this study, providing a more complete picture of the dominant factors influencing retention. In total, thirteen interviews were conducted. Sampling of interviewees and the interview process has been outlined in Chapter 3. All interviews were conducted online and recorded. These were uploaded to Otter.ai to aid in transcription. Each interview was fully transcribed. Thematic analysis was carried out to ensure that accurate themes are reported, with researcher bias accounted for. This method of analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021) resulted in five main themes emerging. Various subthemes have been identified within these.

This chapter is organised and structured in a clear effort to document the journey of school leaders from first assuming school leadership to eventually exiting the role in the case of former principals interviewed in this study. The theme of managing relationships with various stakeholders namely pupils, staff, the school community, and boards of management serve to highlight the importance of effective communication, collaboration and supportive relationships in school leader effectiveness and school leader retention. Transitioning to the organisational aspects, the discussion on managing workload, the unique role of the teaching principalship, and the shock and awe associated with adjusting to the role highlights the challenges currently facing primary school principals. A deliberate focus on the profound and negative impact the role can have on health, wellbeing, work-life balance, loneliness, and isolation serves to highlight the necessity for self-management and resilience in sustaining leadership. Findings on coping mechanisms and supports employed by

school leaders to sustain and cope with the challenges of their roles explores both personal and professional supports. The themes and subthemes, derived from thematic analysis, are outlined in this manner to shed light on the reality of the daily challenges faced by school leaders. Valuable insights are gleaned into factors determining retention and turnover from current and former Irish school leaders.

6.2 Motivating factors for assuming principalship

> ***"I made a decision, a split decision which had a serious effect on my life going forward" (Paul, former TP, 17 years)***

Three key determining factors influenced interviewees decision to apply for a principal position. Firstly, assuming the position of school principal in the school where they were already teaching featured in many responses. Secondly, a desire to work in their locality was a very apparent motivation. Thirdly, and for a smaller number of respondents, a motivating factor was a long-held, inherent desire to lead an organisation. This desire led them to actively apply for the post of principal.

For the majority of interviewees, the position of school principal came up in their own school. Sarah is a teaching principal based in Connacht, appointed two years ago. For her, "that feeling of someone coming in from outside … didn't sit well". Sarah is firm in her insistence that she knew the needs of the school more than an external candidate. A "sense of ownership" allied to "a vision for what I thought the school could become" motivated her decision. Similar to Sarah, Carol was appointed from within her school in Munster to the teaching principal's post twelve years ago. As a successful internal candidate, she claims to be "ambitious to a point", but mainly motivated by opportunity. She felt that if she "didn't go for it when the opportunity landed that the opportunity would be gone". Denise, a teaching principal for two years in Munster, says that "I dedicated my life to that school, to my school, and my own kids go to that school". Denise was duly appointed as principal to the school she was already working in. Elizabeth was a teaching principal for ten years but has

subsequently vacated the post to take up an administrative principal post in Leinster. Her initial motivations for her first principal position were also borne out of a sense of duty to her school. She says that "it was out of genuine interest in my own school." She admits to being "disappointed with the conduct in the school" and feeling that she needed either to "move on from this school or I've got to step up and do something". Choosing the former option saw her appointed TP of the school where she had previously been a pupil. Áine, who stepped down from the position of TP after seven years, felt "a certain pressure to take on the role" coming from being local. She reflects that "it was more out of service really for the community … my own children were in the school" as the primary motivating factor. She furthers this claiming that principalship "wasn't something I would have sought out anywhere else to be honest".

Paul, a former school principal for 17 years, "applied for a good scatter of jobs going around the locality", seeking to relocate from Leinster to his home parish in Munster. Paul applied mainly for teaching posts and one principal's post. Having been called to interview, Paul likens this to "a practice match in the GAA". He recalled how he "rocked on down to the interview", being relaxed and later being offered the job. Siobhan was a teaching principal in Leinster for three and a half years before stepping away from the post. She recounts a similar story detailing how the principal's post came up in her local school, ten minutes from where she was working at that time. Siobhan admits to having "always wanted to work in the local community", crediting location as the main motivating factor. Paul calls teachers who take principal positions in order to relocate "geographical principals". Paul also adds a cautionary note to this motivation for leadership, and states that "you'd better make sure that you're ready for a very difficult job, a rewarding job to many extents when it goes right, but a very, very, very difficult job".

Thirdly, three interviewees actively sought, and successfully gained principal positions. Eleanor, a former Connacht based teaching principal for 12 years, states that "from very early on in my career, it was something I always wanted to be". She desired the "ability to make a meaningful impact in the school, to be the motivator". Alison served as a teaching principal for four years in Munster. As

a teaching principal in a start-up school, her story is unique. She was motivated by a desire "to start the teaching you wanted, start all the initiatives that you knew were good, and grow a staff". She was enticed by a position that "sounded wonderful… sounded really interesting … an amazing opportunity at the time". Harry is now in his third year as a teaching principal in Munster. His desire to lead shone through and he actively pursued his current role

> I felt that I could put my own stamp on a school. I just felt that I had the ability to lead an organisation and put my own value set or my own interpretation on a school. I felt a moral obligation to use that in a leadership role rather than just as a classroom teacher.

Three key reasons for aspiring to the role of school principal have therefore been found. The importance of the location is of paramount importance with principals seeking the role in order to relocate. The attachment to a setting is at the forefront of principals' thinking also. Attaining the post as an internal candidate was documented across a variety of interviews. For other interviewees, a strong desire to become a school principal was expressed. These interviewees had a personal ambition and aspired to school leadership.

In examining the motivating factors for assuming principalship among current and former school leaders, notable differences emerge between the two groups. Current principals, commonly cited intrinsic motivations such as a desire to lead, make a positive impact on students' lives, and contribute to the school community. On the other hand, former school leaders like Mairead, Denise, Harry, and Áine highlighted external factors such as the availability of a principal vacancy in their school or geographic considerations as influencing their decision to assume leadership roles. Eventual dissatisfaction and departure from the position resulted for some when faced with the realities of the role. The motivations of current principals appear to be more intrinsically driven than those of former principals.

6.3 Managing relationships

The managing of relationships came to the fore in interviews. Relationships with staff, pupils, and the wider school community are central to the work of school leaders. The importance of establishing positive working relationships with BoM members and a significance attached to maintaining these relationships is included.

6.3.1 Relationships with pupils

> *"The kids would motivate you. I love working with kids" (Carol)*

Job satisfaction is indelibly linked to working with pupils for the principals interviewed. Carol jokes that children "would drive you mad" but follows this with the assertion that "everything we do, we do because we feel it's in their best interest". Carol admits to "get a kick out of" working with pupils in her role as TP and would be slow to consider becoming an AP. She feels that her desire to prioritise teaching over the administrative aspect of the role makes her "not the best principal, because I prefer to spend my time with the kids." For Denise, the "best part of my day" is time she allocates to teaching. As an AP, she claims to "miss teaching, a lot". Kylie would never envisage working as an AP as "I'd miss the kids I think". She adds that teaching time "keeps me sane". The warm, positive relationships principals enjoy with pupils in their schools shone through. Carol is prioritising beating "the 6th class in the tug of war and basketball for sports day", and Sarah is organising "yoga and mindfulness" events to "bend some fun into the day".

Harry is sustained by "the little wins in the role". For him, this involves "some little junior infant coming down to you with a small bit of cake because it's their birthday and they thought of you" or getting "to look after some child with SEN". He believes that "those kinds of wins sustain you" and that the reason for taking on the role is to "do something positive for other people". Laura is effusive in professing her love of the role and links this to her relationships with the children in her care. Laura states that "I love teaching, I love being a principal, I love being in school". For Laura, every decision is taken with the children in mind. Laura believes that "at the heart of every decision, it's the children and that they have to be the main the main focus". Deirdre mirrors this, believing that "you just keep the good of the kids at the centre" of your work as a school leader. Sarah equally affirms that her desire for each school year is to "make it to the finish line with everybody happy and in a better place". Sarah is "throwing everything at" furthering the educational experiences of the pupils in her school.

This principal-pupil relationship emerges as a central source of job satisfaction for both current and former school leaders. Current principals like Carol, Denise, Kylie, and Laura express a deep sense of fulfilment directly related to their daily interactions with students. Carol, for instance, emphasises that everything she does is motivated by what she believes is best for the children. Similarly, Denise and Kylie express a strong attachment to teaching and working directly with students, suggesting that it brings them joy and a sense of purpose in their roles.

Former principals who have stepped away from their roles similarly reflect positively on their experiences teaching and working with students. Alison recalls the teaching aspect of her role as particularly rewarding, indicating that it was the part she loved the most. Similarly, Paul describes his happiest moments occurring when teaching in front of a class. He found that "in front of a class of 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th, that was when I was happy, relaxed, quite calm."

Despite their decision to step down from leadership positions, both Alison and Paul highlight the significance of their interactions with students in contributing to their job satisfaction.

Overall, the shared emphasis on teaching and working directly with students suggests that regardless of their current or former status, principals derive considerable fulfilment from their relationships with pupils.

6.3.2 Relationships with staff

> ***"My ethos was always to have the dialogue, have the conversation and get buy-in. So even with that ethos, when the chips were down, I was alone" (Eleanor, former TP, 12 years)***

Contrasting views are found in the effectiveness of, and relationships enjoyed with, staff. For Carol a "supportive" environment exists, and the interview highlights a close working relationship with the deputy principal. Carol believes the staff in the school to be "all very effective" enabling progression of teaching and learning to occur. Kylie also notes the presence of a "really supportive deputy", and Harry acknowledges being "exceptionally lucky with the staff I've inherited". Laura views her deputy as "the most important support" available to her.

Problematic staff relations can have a detrimental impact on a school leader. For Denise, “the interpersonal nature of the job is the biggest stressor”. Denise then recalls an unpleasant episode with a staff member regarding promotion in the school. She described “a baptism of fire” due a post of responsibility that had become vacant in the school. With only one vacancy available, Denise admitted that “the fallout from that was massive” for an unsuccessful staff member. Denise recollected being confronted in the school office and “the aggrieved candidate dressed me down”. Calling this “very hard pill to swallow”, the impact of this continues to resonate in the school. Denise has now taken a more withdrawn stance on social occasions.

> We would have gone on nights out and dinners, but you go for the social side, to be seen to be going. You don't stay anymore because when you're there the little niggles and the nags come out the longer you're there. They come out. There are some decisions that as a teacher I wouldn't have made but now as a principal I have to make for the good of the school. It's very hard for those not in the principal's position or management position to see the rationale in that.

For Sarah, meeting “a little bit of resistance” when delegating tasks to her in-school management (ISM) team initially proved challenging. She views distributing leadership tasks as “a hard thing” on the basis that many of the tasks “are outside working hours”.

Mairead references “drama” arising from decisions made and acknowledges that the interpersonal element of the role impacts sleep.

> Sometimes you beat yourself up about a judgement call. At the time you knew it was the right one to make because you use your gut feeling but because of a decision that might be made, someone might be unhappy. Drama might come around because of that. You start thinking about it at night.

Paul was in a very difficult situation as a TP in a two-teacher school. Managing staff relations leaned heavily on him. Paul recalls encountering “some exceptionally difficult and onerous situations” which “impacted greatly on how you could operate as a teacher even as a person”. The only other teacher and source of support for Paul “had some issues”. The role then “became massively stressful for me”. Paul admits to having to deal “with illness in the staff and issues with staff”. For Paul, his position as TP “ultimately became a phenomenally stressful job” due to staff relations.

Eleanor recalls a “few incidents where middle management and my deputy would have let me down with a bang”. These were around “high, high intense situations where a decision had to be made” and resulted in her feeling isolated in the position. Siobhan’s sleep was affected when handling

staffing issues and she recalls “waking back up in the middle of the night”. Áine outlined how she inherited a very difficult situation with none of the other members of staff willing to take on the role of deputy principal. Admitting that “courses didn’t prepare me for a lot of the interpersonal issues”, Áine recounts inheriting a school where “there had been a lot of conflict and trouble in the school that wasn’t connected to me but had gone on”. Worrying staff relations “made the job very difficult” for Áine who had to deal with “a lot of residual resentments and hurt from before”. Áine believes that she was “naïve when taking on the role” and reiterated the impact that relationships with and among staff can have for school leaders.

When exploring the effectiveness of staff relationships through the lens of current and formers school principals, contrasting experiences are noted between current and former school leaders. Current principals like Carol, Kylie, Harry, and Laura express satisfaction with their staff dynamics, citing supportive environments and effective teamwork. Carol and Kylie specifically highlight the importance of their deputy principals as crucial supports in their roles. For Carol, the staff's effectiveness enables progress in teaching and learning, reflecting a positive working relationship.

However, former school recount challenges and stressful experiences with staff relations. Paul faced exceptionally difficult situations managing staff relations in a two-teacher school, leading to significant stress and challenges in operating as a teacher and as a colleague. Eleanor and Siobhan also describe feeling isolated and experiencing sleep disturbances due to intense staff-related situations. For Eleanor, a lack of full staff buy-in and support in the midst of a difficult relationship with the Chairperson of the Board of Management is cited in the interview. Áine inherited a school with unresolved conflicts among staff, leading to difficulty in navigating interpersonal issues as a new “naïve “principal.

Overall, while many current principals express satisfaction with staff relationships and effective teamwork, some former school leaders recount challenging experiences with staff dynamics, including conflicts, stress, and feelings of isolation. All of the interviewees speak to the demands of managing staff relations for those in school leadership roles.

6.3.3 Relationships with the school community

"I love that element of being part of the community" (Laura)

In identifying this subtheme, positives and negatives were found in the relationships school leaders shared with the wider school community.

For Laura, an enjoyable aspect of the role is building good relationships with the wider community. Laura professes to "love that element of being part of the community", actively developing and strengthening the relationship. Laura stresses that the school is at the heart of a community and that "it means a lot to people". Kylie views herself as "lucky" to enjoy a positive relationship with parents and the school community. The downside of a deterioration in home school relations were referenced in interviews. Elizabeth experienced difficulty with parents that left her considering her future.

> I did consider stepping down at one stage because I was involved in a very, very serious incident with parents in my school. The husband was a friend of my brothers, and it got very personal and very nasty. I considered giving up the job completely. I was going to look at maybe teaching elsewhere and stepping down.

Laura also has had incidents with parents that have led her "to question myself".

A school leader's presence in the community can be both positive and negative according to interviewees. Eleanor "used to be part of my own community" but believes it to be "more beneficial" to a healthy work life balance to no longer be school principal in the local school. Eleanor felt that she "had to put up a barrier" with people in her teaching principal role. Deirdre echoes this and finds it "very hard to keep up friendships especially when you live in the community that you teach in". Sarah currently faces a "constant" battle to promote the school and maintain enrolment figures. Admitting to not expecting "PR to be such a big part of the role", Sarah finds herself "constantly advocating" and championing the school's reputation among the wider community. Paul found his school struggling to maintain enrolments and eventually the school closed. The close relationship the school shared with the local community was evident throughout the interview. Arriving at the decision to, and then closing the school, impacted Paul immensely. Paul recalls being at a meeting

discussing numbers and being told that only five children had been baptised in the last three years in the parish. This “meant you were unsustainable” as a school. Paul recounts reaching the decision to close

> I came to my own conclusion then if this is going to finish, then I want to be the one that finishes it, I want to be the one that that, I used to use the phrase, I want to be the one I need to be the one to close the door. It's this concept of closure. So that's what happened... it, it wound itself down in a very, you know, nice and very natural in a very, you know, homely kind of a way

The relationships that school leaders maintain with the wider school community present positive and negative experiences for both current and former leaders. Current principals like Laura and Kylie express enjoyment in building strong relationships with the broader community, recognising the significance of the school's role within it. Laura emphasises the importance of being part of the community and actively works to strengthen these connections. Similarly, Kylie considers herself fortunate to have positive relations with parents and the community.

However, former school leaders such as Eleanor, and Paul recount negative experiences and challenges in their interactions with the wider school community. Eleanor found it necessary to establish barriers with people in her community to maintain a healthy work-life balance, ultimately leading her to step away from her position as school principal. Deirdre shares similar sentiments, finding it challenging to maintain friendships while teaching in the same community.

Elizabeth, a former TP who is now an AP, faced a serious incident involving parents that led her to consider stepping down from her role due to the personal and nasty nature of the conflict. Elizabeth has since left the school and the locality to move to the role of AP.

The battle to maintain school status and to advocate and promote the school in the local community features. Current principal Sarah faces ongoing challenges in promoting the school and maintaining enrolment figures. Former TP Paul's experience demonstrates the profound impact of the relationship between the school and the local community. He was faced with the difficult decision to close the school due to declining enrolments.

Overall, while current school leaders may enjoy positive relationships and opportunities to engage with the wider community, former leaders highlight the challenges and stresses associated with maintaining these relationships, including conflicts and the impact on personal boundaries and work-life balance.

6.3.4 Relationships with boards of management

"Kind, kind ill-equipped people" (Áine)

The importance of an effective working relationship with the school BoM shone in many of the interviews. The supportive nature of many boards was highlighted. Laura describes her board as "brilliant, very supportive" and feels supported in areas such as finances and building works. She praises the "very good deliberations and discussions" that take place at meetings. Carol feels her board are "supportive" too and finds questioning and promptings from the board to be "great for me personally".

Despite the positives a majority of interviewees questioned the actual concrete support received. Carol feels unable to truly delegate tasks and jobs to the members.

> My secretary does most of the stuff. If they were actually to take on all this stuff, there's no way you'd do it on a voluntary basis. You'd want your head examined, wouldn't you really? Seriously like, you know. It's crazy.

Elizabeth has never met her board and classes this as "her biggest bone of contention" when exploring leadership and management in schools. Denise echoes previous comments. Denise finds meetings frustrating and bemoans members' lack of understanding.

> They do what I tell them to do, but to be proactive, they're not. In rural areas they're picked from people who will actually do it. It's tiring when you have to explain panels and numbers constantly

Mairead remembers her BoM as being "very supportive" but commented that "really it was three of us that were making the decisions". Áine is less positive and describes members as "well-meaning parishioners … afraid of the issues" in sensitive situations. She further adds that "because everyone

knew each other in a small community school, the Board was very unwilling to act where it was needed". The managing of the school "came down to me, which is the case with all principals I think" according to Siobhan. Sarah furthers this and speaks to the voluntary nature of boards. The contention from Sarah is that one should not "lean too heavily on them because it's very hard to fill those roles".

Relationships with BoM members is linked to principal turnover as evidence by Eleanor. Eleanor left her role as teaching principal, actively seeking, and attaining a teaching position in another school. She describes her relationship with the chairperson of the BoM as "caustic" in the lead-up to relinquishing the post, and details work-related bullying.

> I was being bullied by the chairperson of the Board of Management. He was making a point of basically picking on me from the end of September that year because I went against his decision for an appointment. He wanted a local person. Because I went against him, he made a point of belittling me, bullying me, demeaning me. He did everything and anything to make my life miserable. We had been sanctioned to open up a unit for children with autism. I said to the department, can I step back for the year, relinquish my principalship for the year to open up this unit, and then take it back when it's established. They said there's no precedence for that. The minute I said I can step down; it was like a lightbulb moment -that's what you need to do. I knew that was the only way I was going to get out of that situation with any shred of wellbeing.

Eleanor furthers her step-down story and claims to have looked for help from the diocesan board, pleading to be put on a supply panel. Failure to do so would have had "devastating consequences" for her personally. Eleanor was placed on a supplementary panel rather than the main panel, meaning that she would have to interview for jobs that summer. Two unsuccessful interviews were described as "another kick in the gut". She was appointed to a new post two days before term started and "between the Tuesday and the Friday evening I cleared 18 years into my car and drove away". She furthers this by adding, "I've never looked back. Well, I have looked back and been very resentful and very bitter. I'm very hurt".

The dynamics of school leaders' relationships with boards of management (BoM) vary between current and former principals, showcasing both positive and negative experiences.

Current principals like Deirdre and Kylie express gratitude for the support and collaboration they receive from their BoM. Deirdre acknowledges the BoM's role in providing valuable guidance and assistance, particularly in decision-making processes. Kylie similarly highlights the positive

working relationship she shares with her BoM. The importance of effective communication and cooperation emerges.

However, former teaching principals such as Elizabeth and Eleanor recount challenging interactions with their BoMs, which contributed to their decision to either "move" or "leave" the role of teaching principal. Elizabeth, a "mover" from TP to AP, faced difficult situations involving the BoM in her former role as TP. This led her to consider leaving her position and she ultimately moved to the role of AP. Eleanor also experienced instances where the BoM fell short in providing adequate support and understanding, which added to her feelings of isolation and ultimately influenced her decision to step down. Eleanor can, for the purposes of this study, be categorised as a "leaver" as she is no longer teaching or leading a school. A deep sense of hurt and regret are evident over the course of the interviewee indelibly linked to an unsupportive and extremely difficult relationship with the chairperson of the BoM. This experience once more highlights the importance attached to relationships with school stakeholders. While some current principals benefit from supportive and collaborative BoMs, others, particularly former principals, face challenges and conflicts within this relationship, which can contribute to their decision to leave their roles.

6.4 Managing the organisation

6.4.1 Workload

> ***"There's just no breathing space, it's one thing after another" (Elizabeth)***

Principals, both current and former, universally agree that workload issues abound for principals. Each current principal is dealing with their own priority areas, but a feeling of being overwhelmed presents. Carol is in the process of undertaking emergency works to resolve issues with the school building and admits that "at the moment so my priority is to nail down engineers". She is also faced with "recruitment for the summer". Kylie will also be making a teacher appointment having been granted a fourth classroom teacher. The school will have to build that new classroom too. Laura is

working “on the English plan”, endeavouring to focus on teaching and learning. Faced with building issues, Laura is finding managing this “tough” as “sometimes there’s a bit that’s beyond my remit”. Sarah points to sacraments, matches and outings returning post-Covid. For her, “it’s really hard to fit it all back in”. As a teaching principal in a small school, delegating such tasks is difficult – “I am communion and I am football, you’re all of it”. For Denise, constantly “firefighting” is a major issue.

> It's very hard when you’re firefighting the whole time. Firefighting to get subs, firefighting to keep subs. Firefighting to make sure your policies are up to date. Then you have circulars coming from the Department to try and keep up to date with … To get to education, to leading of learning is near impossible

Sarah offers a similar metaphor to Denise and references firefighting. Sarah believes that the job is “really kind of a firefighting job” She argues that a school leader will “just move from one problem to the next”.

Elizabeth feels that there is “no breathing space, it’s one thing after another”. Both Denise and Elizabeth are critical of the DES for providing circulars and updates to schools on Friday evenings. Elizabeth describes it as “a form of bullying”. She is adamant something needs to be done to alleviate principals’ workload, stating that “demand after demand after demand is too much, too much”.

Former principals speak to workload issues also.

> I see now what is involved in principalship. I see the level of duress and the level of consistent pressure that’s being placed on principals. I see the expectations they have to deal with (Paul)

Paul also believes that there has been “an exponential increase in demands” and calls this “unsustainable and untenable”. Eleanor talks about workload as “overwhelming” and found herself “in school, working away for the summer when everyone else was gone on holidays”. Áine found herself “so stretched trying to do everything”.

Current principals such as Carol, Kylie, Laura, Sarah, and Denise are all grappling with a multitude of tasks and responsibilities, ranging from emergency building works to recruitment and curriculum planning. Carol is focused on resolving structural issues with the school building, while Kylie is navigating teacher appointments and building works. Laura also emphasises the challenge of managing building issues while prioritising teaching and learning initiatives. Sarah highlights the difficulty of managing various school activities post-Covid, particularly as a TP with limited

support. Denise describes the constant firefighting required to address staffing, policy, and administrative challenges, making it difficult to focus on educational leadership. Similarly, former principals like Paul, Eleanor, and Áine recount their experiences of feeling overwhelmed by the workload demands of the role. Paul observes a significant increase in demands over time, while Eleanor and Áine express feeling stretched thin trying to manage all aspects of school administration. Elizabeth and Denise are critical of late circulars being issued to principals outside of working hours. The heavy workload burden on school principals, both current and former, is clearly evident.

6.4.2 Teaching principalship

> ***"I just don't understand how they do it. I think they're saints" (Laura)***

Workload is exacerbated by the dual role of teaching and leading a school. Sarah calls the role "multifaceted" and elaborates on different scenarios that she may have to attend to:

> You're teaching three classes, you're trying to find money for buses, there might be a bullying issue going on, there could be someone on staff having issues, it's just that there are so many things going on at the same time

Sarah then describes her teaching as "definitely negatively impacted" since assuming her role as school principal. She is adamant that "teaching definitely pays the price". Laura sympathises greatly with teaching principals. She has experienced difficulties attaining substitute teachers, resulting in her taking on a teaching role for the day. On those days she finds "there's a list of stuff waiting to be done at three o'clock". She furthers this by saying "that's me only covering for a class, I'm not planning for that group". Carol echoes these sentiments;

> It's impossible to be a teaching principal because you're doing neither job properly. You can't really teach your class properly because no matter what you do there will be occasions where you won't be available. It's actually impossible really.

Elizabeth "went to bed every night guilty" when she was a teaching principal. She has the voices of "these wee ones saying are you taking me today or are you on your principal's day?" The "constant battle with my heart and head" was very difficult in her role as special education teacher and school

principal. Having now become an administrative principal, the biggest change she has noticed is "less guilt".

Former principals too are unequivocal in their condemnation of the workload attached to the role of teaching principal. Mairead described the role as "very intense", Paul suggested that his principalship had become a "hugely stressful, seriously onerous task". Eleanor similarly calls the role "overwhelming" as "you are literally everything to everybody". She found being taken away from teaching to attend to issues challenging. She claimed that "there are certain things that have to be done and you can't turn around and say, well I'm teaching now. There are certain things you have to stop teaching for". Áine found herself "less open to ideas", attributing this to "being so stretched" in her teaching principalship.

6.4.3 Adjusting to the role

"Everything changed" (Alison)

A strong feature of the interview process is that school leaders recall difficulties adapting to their new role as school leader. Two prominent factors surfaced, the first relates to adapting personally as a community leader in the role and the second is a professional and organisational adjustment intertwined and linked to workload.

For Mairead, a former teaching principal in Leinster for six years, a combination of personal and organisational factors made her settle in process arduous. Within a month of getting the post, Mairead found herself "under pressure straightaway". She was pregnant, the school had received notice for a Whole School Evaluation (WSE), and a major extension to the school had been sanctioned. She felt "really thrown in" to the role, endeavouring to establish a rapport with staff and parents in the school. Mairead admits that personally and professionally the job was initially "all-encompassing".

The transition from teacher to school leader brings with it an inherent expectation to lead and be a positive presence in the community according to principals interviewed. Paul divulges that he

"didn't adapt at all" to that side of the role. Having been sent off in a local football match, Paul remembers "naively being shocked" that people were commenting on a school principal behaving in such a manner. Siobhan was "barely able to eat Christmas dinner" due to worrying about beginning as a principal in January. The motivation to be a positive presence in the community is reflected in Laura initially fearing speaking "in front of the whole church at the carol service". Carol feels that parents and the school community wanted to "see what she's made of". She professed to finding that aspect of the role "very, very stressful to begin with". She labelled her transition into the role as "a shell shock to put it mildly". She further admits to taking "everything on board" and taking "everything quite personally when things went wrong".

Many of the difficulties in the early stages of principalship stem from a dawning realisation of the sheer volume of work attached to the role. Sarah states that "there's always something on the horizon" from "accounts to bullying". The workload and sense of responsibility attached to the role was "very hard to adjust to". Laura is currently in her fourth year as acting administrative principal in Leinster. She remembers "meandering through" her first year in the job, grappling with workload. Elizabeth feels that she was "just paddling" in her first year, not having "a clue". The responsibility of the role weighed heavily in Alison, and she remembers "keeping an eye on stupid weather alerts … you were the only person having to make decisions around things like that". Alison claimed that "everything changed" for her once she became a school principal.

Current and former principals alike have grappled with the process of adjusting to the multifaceted role of school leadership, albeit with differing perspectives shaped by their experiences. Current principals such as Carol, Kylie, and Laura acknowledge the ongoing nature of the adjustment process. Carol highlights the challenges of balancing teaching and administrative duties, expressing a desire to prioritise teaching while managing administrative tasks. Kylie stresses the need for adaptability and resilience in adjusting to new roles and responsibilities while discussing the importance of continuing professional development. Laura echoes these sentiments, noting the administrative challenges while remaining focused on teaching and learning. Former principals like Paul and Eleanor reflect on their experiences of adjusting to the role with a sense of hindsight and

perspective. Paul recalls the steep learning curve and the stress of managing various aspects of school leadership, including staff relations and the challenges of managing the organisation. Eleanor acknowledges the overwhelming nature of the role, particularly during "intense" decision-making moments. The interviews forefront the intense adjustment to the role of principal evidenced by current and former school principals.

6.5 Managing oneself

6.5.1 Health and wellbeing

> ***"The rats used to run around in my head, and they'd keep running" (Paul)***

Health, wellbeing, and stress are referred to in many of the interviews. Sarah believes that the role is "relentless" and claims that "it's never over". This leads to her describing it as "stressful". Laura details a colleague of hers who "used to wake in the night and stuff would pop into their head. They used to just write it down in a notebook and try and get it out of their head". Laura has encountered some difficulties in her stewardship. She believes that there have been "one or two Sunday nights where I could have done with being off on Monday. I wasn't 100 per cent going into school". Currently in the role of acting principal, she wonders how she can sustain herself physically and mentally in the role on a full-time basis, "I've another twenty years odd years to do. I don't know if I could sustain it for twenty years". Alison claims that "I didn't have time to be sick" while in the role of school principal. Alison's general health deteriorated, and she attributes this directly to the role. Alison confesses that "it began to affect me; I suppose physically by year three. I was finding my blood pressure was going up, putting on weight, things like that".

Denise referred to a recent wellbeing questionnaire she completed – "I'd say there was a beacon, a flashing light going that I was very, very stressed and it said I should seek professional advice". She describes a weight from "having everything on your shoulders" to the point that she can't afford to be sick and miss work. Elizabeth calls principalship "highly stressful" and worries for a teaching principal in her locality who is "at the point of being sick, exhausted". Elizabeth believes that the

impact on health is “too much”. Laura acknowledges that “a certain amount of stress can be healthy” because “it keeps you on your toes”. The point at which this becomes unhealthy is likened to a car revving by Harry. He described strain as such:

> In your car when you hit off the red line on your rev counter, and she’s bouncing off the red line and you feel that you don’t have capacity for anymore. Then then phone rings and there’s another huge crisis and you have to take that one on as well. Then Mrs Murphy comes in the door, and she wants you to look a child who’s got a bullying thing going on. After a period of operating at high stress or a heightened sense of alert, and making quick decisions, strain comes in. Because you’re stressed your decision making suffers.

Kylie also suggests that “a little bit of stress is OK but when it’s coming from different directions and angles consistently, there’s definitely a problem”. Carol would find “it very hard to keep going” when under strain.

The role affected health and wellbeing for some of the interviewees who ultimately decided to leave their job. Paul is very candid in his recollection of suffering a breakdown caused by stress in the role. He admits that “I suffered; I suppose you'd call it a breakdown. The phrase I used to use was that the rats used to run around in my head, and they'd keep running”. Paul attributes this breakdown to stress in the role. As a principal in a two-teacher school, the other member of staff had “been quite unwell with stuff and unable to cope”. Paul bore the brunt of parents’ frustrations with lack of substitutes and consistency for their children. On a personal level he was not “trying to add to the troubles someone else had”, to the detriment of his own health and wellbeing. Paul vividly recalls reaching the breaking point.

> And the rats would run around and run around in my head. I eventually ended up one day walking around the front of, I forgot this actually, I suppose you can forget these things, you know, walking around the front yard talking to myself, having rang my wife to come and collect me because I wanted to go home, not realising that I forgot or was forgetting the fact that I had a car outside. Totally, I was that swirly.

Paul ended up out of work “for a couple of weeks” and admits that this time was “fairly scary”. He came to the realisation that “I have to deal with this”.

Paul ended up receiving counselling and finding a way to deal with his mental health issues.

> I developed a strategy which I called knock on the door. No matter what I was dealing with about school, I would deal with it in school. If you rang me at home on a Saturday about school, and I wanted to deal with it about you, I'd say hold on now, I'll ring you in 20 minutes. I get into the car to drive down, knock on the door of the school. I go in, I deal with you inside, we could be 20 minutes, we could be two hours. I'd finish and I go out. I close the door of the school and I knock on the door

> of the school, and I'd say – "good luck school I'll see you now tomorrow" or "I'll see you Monday" or whatever.

Being a father to young children, Paul claims that they "didn't need me to be anywhere else." He states that although his coping mechanism "might sound crazy … it worked".

Eleanor also admits that "the mental health side definitely did suffer" in her role. She says that "I couldn't keep going the way things were". Áine spoke about leadership as feeling "like a privilege" and acknowledged the "many wonderful things about the job". She was quick to add that "stress comes top of the list" when describing the role.

Both current and former principals have encountered health and wellbeing difficulties, although their experiences and perspectives on this matter differ. Current principals, including Carol, Kylie, and Laura, highlight the importance of maintaining a balance between their professional responsibilities and personal health. Carol emphasises the need for self-care practices to manage stress and prevent burnout, while Kylie underscores the importance of setting boundaries and prioritising mental and physical health. Laura acknowledges the challenges of maintaining wellbeing amidst the demands of school leadership but emphasises the importance of seeking support and prioritising self-care.

In contrast, former principals such as Paul and Eleanor reflect on their experiences of struggling with health and wellbeing during their tenure as school leaders. Paul, a mover, recalls the extreme toll that stress, staff relations, and workload took on his health, citing mental health difficulties. Eleanor, a leaver, similarly acknowledges the impact of stress and workload on her health, recalling moments of exhaustion and burnout during her time as a principal. Both former principals express a sense of relief upon stepping away from the role, citing improved health and wellbeing as a result. Overall, current principals strive to prioritise their health and wellbeing amidst the demands of school leadership while former principals candidly reflect on the challenge associated with maintaining their health during their tenure.

6.5.2 Work-life balance

> ***"I don't have one. I go to work; I work and then work some more. I come home, I try to rear my kids badly and you just do work again" (Denise)***

Central to interviews was the area of work-life balance. For some current principals, "work-life balance is probably ok" (Kylie, teaching principal in Leinster for over two years).

For others, a healthy work life balance is proving difficult to achieve. Denise believes that "the job affects a lot of aspects of your life outside school". She sees it affecting friendships with parents, "especially when you live in the community". Sarah is a firm believer in setting an alarm to signal the time to leave school and leaving all work behind. This was working to a degree. She previously tried not to bring her school laptop home but is now "failing miserably" in that regard. As a mother of young children, Sarah is currently finding balancing work and home "very tough". She "can see it impacting home life". She furthers this adding,

> Your mind is always on school and things like that. There are times when it bleeds in, and it feels like you're on that hamster wheel. There's no space for family or kids in that. That's obviously not healthy. It's not good.

However, she hopes that as her children get older, things will become easier, "maybe I'm being delusional, but you have to be optimistic". She has experienced difficulties with parents making contact through social media outlets. "I have had people find me on Facebook, parents. I think that's nuts. The boundary isn't there". Kylie also engages in a no-laptop at home strategy but instead finds herself "thinking about school stuff". She claims, "I probably think about it (school) too much". Carol also carries the worries of school home with her. This is usually related to "something actually amiss with a child" as opposed to paperwork. Linking emails to her phone was "bad, a bad news story" according to Denise.

Those who have stepped away from the role highlight work-life difficulties as central to their decision. Mairead "had young, very young children" when she vacated her position. She felt that she "lost the balance", collecting children from the creche at six o'clock, putting them to bed, before returning to her laptop until ten o'clock some nights. She described work issues affecting her ability

to read her children a bedtime story. During this she suggests that she "actually wasn't there at all, my head was back in the school". Eleanor experienced similar issues, putting back on "my principal hat when the kids were in bed". One of her children remarked that "people in college don't spend as much time in school as we do", owing to their late departure due to Eleanor's late working hours. A striking memory of taking her children to the local garage to ensure they were fed highlights what she describes as "a huge work creep". Áine also felt that her home life "was constantly suffering". She was "not able to switch off", adding that "it's just the nature of the job". Áine started to "resent" that school overtook her life, being local presenting difficulties.

> You were called if there was a problem with the parish hall next door to the school, if people couldn't get in. I had a kid in the school myself, somebody had a problem in the yard and they're ringing me, a child stole sugar from the café and they're ringing me. It just felt never-ending.

Siobhan echoes many of the above sentiments. For her, "the biggest change was that it infiltrated my whole life. I felt it took over a lot rather than just being a job". Alison recalls that "pretty much every waking thought was something to do with the school".

The concept of work-life balance is a central concern for both current and former principals, although their experiences vary. Current principals, such as Carol, Kylie, and Laura, grapple with the challenge of juggling their professional responsibilities with personal commitments. Carol acknowledges the difficulty of striking a healthy work-life balance, owing to the demanding nature of school leadership. Similarly, Kylie emphasises the importance of finding time for family and leisure activities. Laura echoes these sentiments, noting the challenges of managing work commitments while also attending to personal needs and relationships.

Former principals like Paul and Eleanor reflect on their struggles to achieve work-life balance during their tenure as school leaders. Paul recounts the sacrifices he made in terms of personal time and leisure activities in order to carry out the role. He acknowledges the toll this took on his overall wellbeing. Eleanor similarly recalls the challenges of balancing work-life commitments. Former principals express a sense of relief upon stepping away from the role, citing the opportunity to reclaim personal time and prioritise their own wellbeing.

6.5.3 Loneliness and isolation

> ***"I'd have to say lonely was the word that I would have stamped across all of the first year, it was such a lonely job" (Sarah)***

The position of school leader appears to bring a personal and professional loneliness to it according to interviewees. Moving to the position of school leader involves a "change in that dynamic" from colleague and fellow teacher to school leader. For Eleanor, this was "biggest thing" that changed. Denise professes that she "wasn't expecting the loneliness". The hierarchical nature of school leadership in Ireland means that "the classic line is that it's all on your shoulders". Denise feels that it not due to any deliberate "lack of support" and describes the position as "very, very lonely". Harry affirms this and has "found the job a bit lonely at times". He has "had to learn to cope with that". Sarah believes that she has developed "a tougher skin" in the role, and Harry echoes this stating "you have to toughen up a little bit" as school principal. Sarah would "have to say lonely was the word that I would have stamped across all of that first year" and claims that principalship "was such a lonely job".

The lonely nature of the role is linked to decision making. Some decisions are not universally popular but "as a principal I had to make for the good of the school" according to Denise. She admits that "some decisions as a teacher, I wouldn't have made", but as a school leader "I know now that I can't please everyone". She hopes that "in time, people, not even will come around or agree to it, but will do the job they're paid for". Denise believes that one cannot "underestimate how isolating it can be". Alison's loneliness and isolation was unique as principal of a starter school. She was literally on her own, the only teaching staff member. She found that "it was lonely" and was previously "used to working in large schools". Alison attributed her decision to step down in some degree to loneliness. She muses that "maybe it was the start up school thing that made it harder".

Loneliness and isolation are challenges faced by both current and former principals in their roles, with varying degrees of intensity and impact. Current principals, such as Deirdre and Laura, acknowledge the feelings of isolation that can accompany school leadership, particularly when

confronted with difficult decisions or interpersonal conflicts. Deirdre reflects on the isolating nature of the role, noting the difficulty of maintaining friendships and social connections owing to the demands of and her position as school leader. Similarly, Laura speaks to the sense of loneliness that can arise from shouldering the responsibilities of leadership, highlighting the lack of peer support, and understanding within the school community.

Former principals, including Mairead and Paul, also recount experiences of loneliness and isolation during their tenure as school leaders. Mairead reflects on the sense of isolation she felt in her role and Paul echoes these sentiments. Both evidence loneliness in small school settings where peer support was limited. Eleanor describes an intense loneliness and hierarchical loneliness experienced in her role and a regret at this situation arising. As a leaver, the tension between her collaborative practice and the sense of isolation at being isolated "when the chips were down" appears to weigh heavy.

6.5.4 Coping mechanisms and supports

"A positive attitude goes a long way" (Carol)

Ways of coping with the pressures and the job, and the most valuable supports available to principals were described in interviews. Coping mechanisms and support systems are essential for principals to navigate the challenges of their roles, whether they are currently serving or have transitioned out of leadership positions. Both current and former principals rely on various strategies and sources of support to manage the demands and stresses inherent in school leadership.

Principals spoke about self-care and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Carol copes by taking "a walk with the dog". Self-care is again evident in the interview with Laura. She has recently joined a gym and finds it important to ensure that "I get to see something on the television that I want to see". Áine found going away for the weekend helpful in her time as TP. She confesses that "we'd try and get right out of there on a Friday. So, you wouldn't have to think, so I wouldn't have to deal with" any school related issues.

For principals, a solid support base of family and friends proves vital. Carol needs “somebody, a confidant” to whom she will “give out yards and rant and rave” Sarah also admits to “lots of ranting and raving at home, letting off a bit of steam”. Harry finds support from his wife, “a primary school teacher” and from a wide circle of friends. He believes “lots of different outlets” help him to cope with the pressure of being a school principal.

Allied to personal support, peer support is mentioned across interviews. Carol spoke of forming “our own network around here of principals”. This group will “meet up and we have a WhatsApp group and if there’s any issues, we bounce them off each other”. This “makes a huge difference” to Carol. Elizabeth has formed a peer support group with other local principals, and they try to meet up regularly to support each one another. Laura is happy that “you can ring other principals for advice”. Sarah concurs and finds that “principals are very supportive of each other”. Denise has two former school principals as sources of support too. Denise, Kylie, Laura, and Sarah all mentioned finding support from ringing the INTO, the IPPN and the CPSMA. Sarah believes that these “have been fantastic” and offer a reassurance that “you’re not the first principal to face” the issues school leaders contend with.

Both current and former principals stress the importance of seeking support when needed. Whether through informal peer networks, professional development opportunities, or personal wellness practices, supports can sustain school leaders in the role.

Teaching principals in this study appear to rely heavily on informal networks within their school communities for support. Paul mentions the importance of collaboration with fellow teachers and evidences the negative impact when this support is missing. Sarah stresses the value of peer support among teaching staff as this teaching principal aims to balancing administrative responsibilities with teaching and learning.

In contrast, administrative principals like Eileen and Laura speak to accessing more formalised support structures. Eileen discusses the benefits of mentorship programs and professional

development opportunities. Laura highlights the role of external support services in providing her with guidance on administrative tasks such as managing finances.

6.6 Stepping down

> ***"A lot of people said to me, you're so brave, but I wasn't. It's not brave, I was doing it for myself. So, what are you brave about?" (Mairead)***

Current principals discussed stepping down with Sarah stating that she has not entertained this thought. Denise is "too stubborn" to step-down but qualifies by saying she would not apply for the role if she could revisit the decision. She "would feel like a failure" for stepping away.

For each of the six principals who stepped away from the role, six unique stories emerge. Many of the issues such as workload, the role of teaching principal, work-life balance and health and wellbeing play a part in a multi-layered picture. Áine rails against the use of the term step-down. She would prefer a kinder term such as "step aside or step-back, something", adding that "it feels like there's a stigma attached to it for sure".

Alison cited work-life balance and health issues as her primary reasons. The job "overtook my life … I began to resent that, and I could feel that getting worse". Alison had "no desire to stay in the role for it to break me altogether". She added that "I made a plan to get out because I could see it beginning to affect me".

Mairead points to workload, work-life balance, and health issues as her reasons for stepping away. She was "neglecting" herself with a lack of exercise, tending to a sick parent and raising a young family. Ultimately, she was successful in interviewing and attaining a teaching post in another school.

> My health had started to go in the last year. Burning out is a real thing. I took a bit of parental leave, and I used that time to reflect and ask myself is this what I want. The best thing for me was to say I'm going to step down, hand it in. That wasn't the quality of life I wanted. I had two smallies not sleeping, a toddler awake at night. My bucket was beginning to empty. When you've nothing in the bucket, it's very hard to give.

Áine's decision was influenced by a desire to achieve a healthier work-life balance. She deemed it "very difficult to balance" home and work. The local element to her principalship took a toll also; "the parish expects so much of you". Áine stepped down and continues to work at the same school.

Siobhan points to family as her main factor for stepping down. She stepped down and is still teaching in the school she served as principal.

> It was definitely family, that was my number one thing. One of my friends was at a retirement function where her principal apologised to her children for never being there for the first day of anything in their lives, said she was really sorry that she hadn't given them the time. When my friend told me that, it nearly broke my heart. I don't want to be that person that doesn't get to see their kids grow properly because your head is somewhere else. The opportunity to step back wasn't going to happen again for say 10 or 15 years when another permanent member would be going. That was a big influence that there was this chance. I had two smallies under two and I wanted to be there with them.

Paul's school closed due to decreasing pupil enrolment. He described this as the "natural solution" to "an unsustainable dynamic". Paul discussed the decision to close the school with his counsellor.

> I came to my own conclusion then if this is going to finish, then I want to be the one that finishes it. I want to be the one that, I used to use the phrase, I want to be the one, I need to be the one to close the door. It's this concept of closure. It wound itself down in a very nice and very natural, homely kind of way. But also running in the background, because of an ongoing staff issue, it winds down in a very difficult, sad, tough way. We had a BBQ and locked the door of the school; I haven't set foot inside it since. I pass it going to training every day.

The issue of identity and stigma relating to stepping away from school leadership features throughout the decision-making process. Mairead admits to being worried about what schools thought of her when she applied for vacancies – "You kind of think, is there a stigma across this principal's head or are other principals nervous hiring you because of what has happened". She claims that her "dignity was gone" after going through a "humiliating" step down process away. Mairead was left hurt and "sobbing". She recounts a sense of relief and emotion at finally securing a permanent job. After being unsuccessful at previous interviews, Mairead was called for an interview

> I was delighted, and I honestly didn't think, and this is crazy that after all my years of experience, and after my experience in leadership, and my experience in the other interviews, that I had that I actually didn't think I got it. I didn't think they would employ me.

Eleanor recalled interpersonal relations with the BoM chairperson as her reason for stepping down. She experienced a sense of loss after making this decision.

> I didn't step away with dignity. I felt I lost my status. I lost, I felt I lost my identity because it had been so much part of me for 12 years. When I stepped away, I felt I had lost a huge part of who I was and what I had spent 18 years working towards. At that stage I was 23 years in education, so I felt I had lost a huge amount.

She bemoans the lack of support available to her following this decision.

> I happened to land on my feet with the school I went into. I was fortunate and I know that. For principals who might be in a similar position, they might not be so fortunate. There was no counselling. There was no nurturing.

Paul used the term dignity in his interview, asserting that he "went with as much dignity as you can". Alison feels that it "took a leap of faith" for her current principal to employ her, admitting to being worried about being perceived as "burnt out" from principalship.

Despite initial difficulties and uncertainty in making the decision to step-down, the six former school leaders are happy with their course of action. Paul describes the decision as the "best thing ever professionally" and something that has "reinvigorated me". Mairead has "no regrets" and is "healthier and happier". Áine took her decision "quite suddenly" and once more expresses a contentment arising from this. Siobhan is "delighted" that a staff member took the newly vacated principal's position. Alison believes that she has "landed on her feet" and sees her new job "as a lovely opportunity to keep going with the bits that I love and let go of the bits that I don't really like". Eleanor describes her decision as "transformational" and again has "no regrets". She furthers this with advice for principals Balancing work and life: Principals struggled to manage their professional duties alongside personal commitments like family care.

> I would advocate for anybody who finds themselves wondering should they? I would be jumping from the rooftop saying do it. if you're in any doubt at all get out and do it because it was transformational… that is the only way I can describe it.

The six former school principal interviewees speak to key reasons for stepping down. Stress and burnout made some principals prioritise their own wellbeing and vacate the role. Wanting more time with family and children influenced decisions to step down. Strained relationships led to some principals leaving. In one unique instance, declining enrolment led to a school closure for a principal who noted stress and mental health difficulties in the role.

6.7 Conclusion

Five themes emerged from interviewing current and former primary school principals. The first theme was in relation to motivations for becoming a principal in the first instance. A principal vacancy becoming available in the school served as a factor, while others sought the job due to its geographical location. An inherent desire to lead, and actively pursue the role emerges also. The importance of developing relationships was another theme throughout the course of the interviews. Principals were positive about their relationships with the pupils in their schools, striving to improve the learning conditions. The importance of a healthy staff dynamic and fostering positive staff relations features, with a tension evident in some interviews. This tension was again evident in relations with the wider school community and with boards of management. Dissatisfaction with workload is a central component of the interviews. There is unanimity amongst all interviewees regarding the volume of workload currently associated with the role, particularly for teaching principals. An initial period of struggle and adjustment to the role was wholly acknowledged. Principals are again candid in documenting the impact the role can or has had on their wellbeing and health. Loneliness and isolation is prevalent for interviewees. Unique stories emerged regarding stepping down from the role, a multitude of factors at play. The impact of this decision, both positive and negative, presents issues of identity and a sense of relief for some.

Chapter Seven: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present a wider discussion of the findings and to draw conclusions from the study as a whole. The data was reported in three distinct stages, namely:

1. Data gathered quantitatively from the national online questionnaire.
2. Qualitative data from the open-ended responses to the online questionnaire
3. The additional data gathered qualitatively through in-depth interviews with current and former school leaders.

This discussion chapter is presented under a series of carefully considered headings that link directly to the numerical data and the key themes from the previous chapters. These align with the original research questions. Beginning with a discourse on the significance of leadership within a specific context helps to contextualise and anchor the study's findings. The most pertinent challenges from all stages of data collection are interrogated in the literature review. The retention of school leaders is discussed through the lens of pathways, succession planning and principal pipelines. Dominant push factors are revealed in the discussion for former school leaders, and they are critiqued in relation to literature. The affective implications of school leadership emerge and the emotional demands of leading a school are evident.

The following table demonstrates the connection and alignment between the headings for this chapter, the literature review, alongside the quantitative and qualitative data.

Table 7.1 Alignment of Findings with Literature Review and Data

Discussion	Link to Literature Review	Quantitative Data	Qualitative Data
Leadership in Context	Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) - four interconnected categories of context: 'situated contexts,' 'professional contexts,' 'material contexts,' and 'external contexts.' These contexts influence school leadership experiences and challenges.	Quantitative findings show that the desire to impact students' lives and influence the school's direction are central motivations for assuming the role of school leader. Despite stress and impacts on mental and physical health, high levels of job satisfaction and motivation persist among principals.	The importance of positive relationships with students and community impact for both APs and TPs - external contexts. Challenges arise from difficult parents and unrealistic expectations - professional contexts. The significance of having a committed deputy - professional and material contexts.
Challenges for Principals	Literature review in Chapter 2 provides context on contextual factors influencing school leadership and the challenges faced by principals.	High workload and stress levels among principals as indicated by quantitative findings in Chapter 4.	Qualitative insights from Chapters 5 and 6 highlight challenges such as managing relationships, emotional demands, and administrative tasks.
Stress, Wellbeing, and Occupational Balance	Literature review discusses previous research on stress and wellbeing in educational leadership.	Quantitative analysis in Chapter 4 reveals the prevalence of stress and its impact on principals' wellbeing.	Chapter 5 and 6 delve into qualitative aspects of stress management, wellbeing, and maintaining work-life balance for principals.
Workload, Working Hours, and Work-life Balance	Literature review outlines of workload issues and explores current debates on work-life balance in school leadership.	Chapter 4 provides numerical data on principals' workload and working hours, indicating potential challenges in achieving work-life balance.	Chapters 5 and 6 explore qualitative aspects of managing workload, working hours, and interpersonal relations affecting work-life balance.

Interpersonal relations, isolation, and loneliness	Collegial support crucial for leader wellbeing. - Principals often lonely; may quit. - Novice principals unprepared for isolation. - power conflicts, workload contribute to loneliness. - Interpersonal conflicts, role ambiguities stress leaders. - Organisational support crucial.	Positive relationships with teaching staff considered crucial - Family and friends provide important support. - Internal support from ancillary staff, SNAs, BoM, and parent body essential. - Outside agencies also contribute to support.	Feelings of loneliness and isolation prevalent among both new and experienced school leaders. - The hierarchical nature of leadership adds to feelings of isolation. - Decision-making and small school settings contribute to loneliness.
Emotional demands	Literature review exploring existing literature on emotional labour and its impact on school leaders' mental health.	Numerical data from Chapter 4 highlighting stress (mental and physical) among principals.	Qualitative insights from Chapters 5 and 6 provide narratives on the emotional toll of leadership roles, such as feelings of burnout and emotional exhaustion.
Supports for Principals	Literature review discusses the types and effectiveness of supports available to school leaders.	Chapter 4 reveals support accessed by principals.	Chapters 5 and 6 highlight the importance of various supports in enhancing principal effectiveness and links to retention.
Retention Issues	Literature review explores the causes and consequences of principal turnover and retention challenges in the educational context.	Chapter 4 data identify factors contributing to turnover	Chapters 5 and 6 delve into qualitative insights on retention and turnover with the addition of former school leaders for chapter 6.
Motivating Factors for Recruitment	Literature review discusses the motivating factors for individuals to enter and remain in school leadership positions.	Chapter 4 explores the main motivating factors and highlights significant differences between APs and TPs	Chapters 5 and 6 explore qualitative aspects of what motivates individuals to pursue their school leadership roles.
Principal Preparation	Literature review discusses the leadership preparation and their	Quantitative data from Chapter 4 indicates the	Chapters 5 and 6 explore the significance of

	impact on principals' readiness for their roles.	effectiveness of formal preparation programmes in addressing stress	principal preparation in relation to turnover
Career Stages	Literature review outlines the career stage theory	Chapter 4 data shows significant differences in variables across career stages.	Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the evolution of challenges and demands as principals progress through different career stages with the focus on adjusting to the role.
Lessons from former principals	Former school leaders' voices are rarely considered in studies on school leadership issues (Heffernan, Courtney and Doherty, 2023). - Turnover defined as leaving the profession before retirement age. Push factors identified as reasons for leaving. Lack of systemic and individual support, increased accountability, and reduced autonomy noted as push factors.		Former school leaders cite various reasons for stepping down, including stress, burnout, family commitments, strained relationships, and declining enrolment leading to school closure.

In arriving at the discussion headings for this current chapter, a deliberate approach was taken where the author sought to ensure clarity and coherence. The literature review, alongside the quantitative data from Chapter 4, and the key themes from Chapters 5 and 6 are clearly linked to the discussion chapter, as referenced in the above table. Each selected heading was carefully examined to establish a direct connection to the literature review and these links are reinforced in this chapter. Linking to well-grounded literature enabled a seamless transition from the empirical evidence to the quantitative data explored in Chapter 4.

Furthermore, the key themes drawn from the qualitative insights in Chapters 5 and 6 were closely integrated into the discussion headings as a means of providing a more comprehensive

understanding of the challenges, supports, and motivating factors experienced by current and former school principals.

7.2 Leadership in Context

The work of Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) explored four different, yet connected, categories of context to be considered when exploring school leadership. These four categories are "the 'situated contexts,' the 'professional contexts,' the 'material contexts,' and the 'external contexts'" (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017, p. 168). The significance of context can be found across all stages of data collection in the current study.

The situated context discussed by Clarke and O'Donoghue is considered within the quantitative findings from the large cohort of school principals who participated in the questionnaire. The participants evidence the motivating reasons for assuming the role of school principal in Irish primary schools. As outlined in the quantitative findings in chapter 4, the two central motivations for principals to seek the role of a school leader are the desire to impact students' lives and the ability to influence the direction of the school. School leaders value the situated context of their school setting and strive to uphold or improve the values which they inherit in their context. Despite encountering stress (75%) and significant impacts on mental (68%) and physical health (63%), high levels of job satisfaction (75%) and motivation (81%) are noted, evidencing a commitment to professional values and the "professional contexts" forwarded by Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017). Material contexts consist of staffing allocations, budget, buildings, ICT provision, and infrastructure (Braun *et al.*, 2011; Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017). These material contexts are evident in the quantitative findings, where the school leaders express dissatisfaction with substitute availability (74%) and mixed satisfaction with Special Education provision. External contexts consist of pressures and expectations placed on school leaders, arising from policies (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017). These external contexts are clearly referenced in the long working hours that school leaders regularly undertake in the role. As reported by 85% of principals, their weekly working hours exceed

45 hours per week. Dissatisfaction with workload (44%) once more speaks to the external contexts within which school leaders operate.

The quantitative findings also uncovered significant differences between administrative principals (APs) and teaching principals (TPs). These varied contextual differences were found regarding their motivation for the role. Context as discussed by Braun *et al.* (2011) and Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) is evidenced through the finding that APs prioritise influencing the school's direction which speaks to the professional context, whereas TPs prioritise location, highlighting the influence of situated contexts. Differences in confidence, stress, and job satisfaction were evidenced and illustrate the material and external contexts in which the role of a school leader is undertaken in Irish primary schools. TPs also express higher dissatisfaction with workload emphasising the unique challenges of their dual role and the context within which they work. These quantitative findings support Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch's (2002) assertion that leadership cannot be separated from its contextual environment.

In examining context through the qualitative data from the questionnaires, relationships within the school context suggests that both APs and TPs value the importance of positive relationships with students. They seek to develop these by chatting with students in the corridors or greeting them in the mornings. Additionally, both TPs and APs similarly express enjoyment from positively impacting their communities, showing their willingness to engage with the external contexts, as described in literature (Braun *et al.*, 2011; Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017). A tension and a duality, however, became evident in the external context domain, as challenges were reported in the data from dealing with difficult or demanding parents, and managing unrealistic expectations. Both APs and TPs value positive interactions with committed staff, highlighting the professional context. Tensions were also highlighted by participants, with negative staff relations putting a strain on principals and impacting their effectiveness in the role. This is an indication of the challenges that emerge within these professional contexts. Professional and material contexts are further referenced

when principals describe the importance of having a fully committed and competent deputy supporting them in their role.

The qualitative interviews allowed for uniquely individual insights to be gathered that directly speak to the importance of context in leadership. Declining enrolment which led directly to the closure of Paul's school reflects the viability of rural schools in very real terms. The situated context of this school, allied to the external demands exerted, appears to have negatively impacted the viability of this case study school. This chimes with Clarke and O'Donoghue's (2017) assertion that school leaders operate within a variety of contexts and notable variations can be seen in their roles and requirements. Paul's sense of responsibility and connection to the community exemplify the personal dimensions of leadership. Meanwhile, Denise, Sarah, Paul, and Eleanor's accounts shed light on the professional and material contexts that shape staff relationships and workload pressures for school leaders. The challenges they face in managing external expectations, such as those related to the Department workload and School Self-Evaluation, highlight the influence of policy on educational leadership. Elizabeth and Denise expressed frustration with the workload stemming from circulars and updates from the Department. Alison's narrative further enriches the discussion of context in leadership by highlighting her personal leadership journey in a start-up school and the personal impact this setting can have. Such findings reinforce the need to consider individual backgrounds and contexts when examining leadership.

7.3 Challenges for Principals

The challenges facing school leaders mirror and align to those within the literature review. Stress, wellbeing, and occupational balance come to the fore. Workload, working hours, and work-life balance (WLB) feature as do interpersonal relations, loneliness, and isolation. Unique insights into the emotional demands experienced by those in school leadership positions are gleaned through interviews.

7.3.1 Stress, wellbeing and occupational balance

Internationally, those in leadership positions are consistently reporting stress (Denecker, 2019; Riley *et al.*, 2021), and this is supported in previous Irish studies (Darmody and Smyth, 2011, 2016; Riley, 2015; IPPN, 2022). The data gathered in the current PhD study extends and further validates the findings of previous studies. A large majority of principals are experiencing occupational stress in their current role, with 75% agreeing or strongly agreeing with stress-related factors of the post. School leaders report moderate negative impacts on both their mental (68%) and physical health (63%), as associated with their job. School leaders detail health warnings from GPs and attribute the role of the school leader to a deterioration in physical health. References to specific health issues such as shingles, miscarriage, and autoimmune stress disorder further emphasise the toll of occupational stress for current principals. Mental health challenges, including breakdowns, are vividly described by participants, further highlighting the severity of the issue.

7.3.2 Workload, working hours and work-life balance (WLB)

Principals in the quantitative phase of data gathering reported working long hours and expressed a dissatisfaction with workload. This finding aligns with existing literature, particularly the work of Mahfouz (2020) and Wang (2022), which highlight the work intensification and link this to heightening stress, experienced by school leaders. The struggle to balance administrative duties with other responsibilities also echoes findings from previous studies on the challenges faced by educational leaders (Burke and Dempsey, 2021). When comparing TPs with APs, significant differences emerge. TPs exhibit lower confidence in their ability to fulfil their role compared to their AP counterparts. Additionally, TPs express significantly higher levels of dissatisfaction with workload, with nearly four out of every five TPs expressing dissatisfaction with the dual role of teaching and principalship. A striking quantitative finding is that fewer than one in three participants would recommend the principal's role to others, with TPs significantly less likely to recommend the role compared to APs. This sentiment is echoed in the qualitative interviews, where principals candidly describe the teaching principal role as "intense" and "unsustainable". Darmody and Smyth

(2011) have previously questioned the viability of the teaching principal role, a sentiment echoed by participants in this study. This resonates with a recommendation from a PhD study calling for the role to be completely dissolved (McHugh, 2021).

The qualitative responses gathered through the use of online questionnaires highlight the negative impact an ever-increasing workload has on the school principal, specifically their ability to focus on key areas such as teaching and learning. This finding resonates with a recent study into educational leadership (IPPN, 2022). The challenges faced by principals, particularly TPs, highlight difficulties in managing the school building and adequately providing for special education needs. These challenges contribute to heightened work overload and stress, aligning with existing literature on the intense workload experienced by school leaders (Supovitz, D'Auria and Spillane, 2019). The overwhelming nature of workload is evident, with terms such as "overwhelming", "unsustainable", and "untenable" frequently used by principals to describe their workload, consistent with findings from Mahfouz (2020) and the Chief Inspector's Report (Hislop, 2022).

In qualitative interviews, former principals such as Áine and Mairead recalled feeling overwhelmed by administrative tasks and lacking adequate support. This is reflected in the literature exploring workload (Burke & Dempsey, 2021). Additionally, Paul reflected on the exponential increase in administrative demands over the course of his time as principal, as described in previous studies (Mahfouz, 2020).

This study provides rich qualitative insights into WFC for Irish primary school principals and establishes a link between WFC and principal turnover. Sarah bemoaned the impact the job is having on home-life. Denise questioned her parenting ability. Mairead stepped down from the role and directly linked this decision to work-life balance issues. Eleanor, Áine and Siobhan similarly spoke about the difficulties of having young children and being a primary school principal. The most influential factor in balancing work and life depends on family circumstances according to Abbasi, Yarigholi and Yarmohammadzadeh (2021). Qualitative findings in the questionnaire support this and principals directly questioned the viability of the job of being a school leader when one has a young family. This correlates with Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) who contend that WFC can be

heightened due to circumstances such as the birth of a child. This results in an individual having to invest more equally in the family role than before. Previous studies on WFC in school principals highlighted gender differences. It was reported that female principals needed to juggle work and family to a greater degree than their male counterparts (Buonomo *et al.*, 2020). However, in this study male principals consistently highlighted the impact of the role on their family life in both the questionnaires and at interview. One considered stepping down last year "due to stress and impact on family life". Another male principal admitted that the role now "regularly deprives me of family time" to the extent that stepping down has become a consideration. Paul's interview further references family life and he specifically mentions his two young children contributing to his departure from the role of school principal.

A Swedish study into school principals found that more than half of the principals worked overtime each week (Håkansson *et al.*, 2021) and concluded that this was associated with an increased likelihood of reporting no or negligible stress symptoms. They noted that principals in their study appeared to prioritise work over other activities. The authors believe that it is reasonable to assume that it will affect their occupational balance by reducing the time and energy the principals have for home and family activities as well as rest recovery and sleep. The long working hours reported by Irish primary school principals would appear at odds with the aforementioned definition of occupational balance. Principals speak of a heavy workload, with too much to do. Finding a balance between work and home was consistently mentioned in both stages of qualitative data gathering.

7.3.3 Interpersonal relations, isolation, and loneliness

Fostering relationships with staff and the school community is a key aspect of the work of school principals. This study highlighted some difficulties when managing parental and guardian expectations, by specifically referencing "difficult" and "demanding parents" as a stressor. Elizabeth considered stepping down in the middle of interpersonal difficulties with parents in her time as a teaching principal.

Difficulties with staff present another source of stress. "Hostile work situations" mentioned in the surveys are expanded upon in the qualitative interviews. Whittall *et al.*, (2002) and Boyland (2011)

assert that conflict compounds stress and workload for principals. One principal in the online questionnaire recounts a "horrendous" situation of being bullied by their deputy principal, the chairperson of the BoM and a parents' representative on the board. Workplace bullying was a key reason for Eleanor leaving her role as a teaching principal. This is in keeping with the principle of purposeful isolation, as described by Mannix-Mcnamara *et al.* (2021) in their study into the dark side of school culture. Reio and Reio (2018) detail the ideal conditions for uncivil behaviour to occur. The authors of this study believe that high stakes testing, and accountability contribute to stress existing in educational settings and ultimately creates these conditions of uncivil behaviour. Tolerance of this uncivil behaviour allows bullying behaviour to flourish (Mannix-Mcnamara *et al.*, 2021), which appears to have occurred in instances experienced by respondents.

Sarah's encounter with "a little bit of resistance" mirrors the Canadian study into teaching principals by Wallin and Newton in (2013). They similarly found that delegating tasks to those who are considered friends can be problematic for TPs. This study into teaching principalship found that the equal power relationship experienced by those who are both a teacher and a principal presented difficulties when dealing with difficult staff.

Organisational loneliness can be classified into two dimensions – social and emotional (Weiss, 1973 as cited in Hüsrevşahi and Şahan, 2021). Managers, including school leaders, experience organisational loneliness due to their position (Zumaeta, 2019). These experiences were gathered under two themes, hierarchical power conflict and execution of works (workload), in the Turkish study by Hüsrevşahi and Şahan, (2021). Hierarchical power conflict occurred as principals reported a sense of loneliness from carrying out leadership duties while attempting to establish close relationships in the workplace. A loneliness from maintaining professional boundaries resonated in the interview conducted with Denise. She deems the role to be "very lonely" and speaks of leaving staff outings earlier than the other members of staff in order to maintain this professional boundary. This sentiment was further expressed by respondents to the questionnaire. The role is said to be "a very lonely role, a very demanding role" by one principal, with another commenting that while the role is satisfying, it is also lonely. Researchers have argued that "school principals often struggle

with feelings of professional isolation and loneliness as they transition into a role that carries ultimate responsibility" (Spillane and Lee, 2014, p.3). One principal in the questionnaire remarked that "the job is very different to what I was expecting. It's a lonely place to be". This initial adaptation to the role presents as lonely. This tallies with the work of Hansen (2018). Professional isolation was found to factor into Canadian principals' decisions to leave the role in this qualitative study of rural teaching principals.

Hüsrevşahi and Şahan, (2021) reported school leaders experiencing loneliness due to workload. Eleanor can identify with loneliness under this theme, execution of work (Hüsrevşahi and Şahan, 2021). She mentioned that the other staff members did not perform the assigned tasks at a desired level and did not support her enough. She used a specific metaphor, feeling that she had been "hung out to dry", and can thus be considered to feel alone when carrying out administrative duties and making difficult decisions. This lack of support is psychologically wearing and can negatively affect wellbeing (Hüsrevşahi and Şahan, 2021). Employees' feelings of loneliness can affect their intention to quit (Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018), as was evidenced in Eleanor's interview and subsequent vacation of the school leadership role.

7.3.4 The emotional demands of school leadership

The emotional demands of school leadership, as outlined in the literature and echoed in the interviews shed light on the emotional challenges faced by school leaders. Áine's experience reflects the emotional toll of assuming a leadership role without adequate preparation, as she recounts feeling overwhelmed by administrative tasks and lacking support. This mirrors Maxwell and Riley's (2017) findings on the emotional burden placed on principals. Paul's interview resonates with the delicate balance school leaders must strike between caring for students' emotional needs and maintaining assertiveness, as he navigates challenging interactions with staff. Additionally, Eleanor's decision to leave the teaching profession altogether underscores the profound impact of emotional strain on educators' wellbeing as referenced in Brennan and MacRuairc (2017). These interviews further the insights from studies by Brennan and MacRuairc (2011, 2017) and Maxwell and Riley (2017).

7.4 Supports for principals

A study into stress and anxiety associated with school leadership during COVID-19 found that school leaders relied on various outlets and networks (colleagues and/or family members) in order to help manage stress and anxiety (Reid, 2022). Two themes emerged in this study, managing by suppressing and managing by sharing (Reid, 2022). The interview conducted with Harry resonates firmly with the notion of managing by suppression. Harry claimed that "you have to be at all times the one who's coping, you need to be seen to be because others are looking up to you to cope. They want to see you cope because you're the leader". Reid (2022) states that principals manage increased levels of stress and anxiety by suppressing these emotions in the presence of students, parents, and colleagues (Reid, 2022). Evidence of Reid's (2022) second theme, managing by sharing, also emerged. Having strong social support from peers, colleagues and the school community helps principals manage stress (Beausaert *et al.*, 2016). The importance of peer support was highlighted by Carol, Laura, and Sarah. The support of colleagues was the most positive form of support according to respondents to the survey. Carol claims to be "very lucky" to have such a supportive staff to work alongside, and Harry to be "exceptionally lucky" in this regard. Secretaries, "worth their weight in gold" according to Sarah, and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) were also highlighted.

Principals document the importance of family and friends in supporting their professional lives. They are seen as a crucial outlet in expressing stress and worry associated with the role. Sarah and Carol both confess to "ranting and raving" to some at home. Carol admits to needing "someone to rant at definitely", and for Sarah "ranting and raving" allows her to "let off a bit of steam". The reliance on family and friends not associated with the school building is supported by Reid (2022). Cerna (2014) discusses the importance of trust in organisations and argues that leaders have the responsibility to oversee that the work is being done in accordance with expectations. Carol agrees adding that "most of the stuff has to come through you anyway". This delegating of leadership and letting go of responsibility recurred in interviews with mixed findings. With distributed leadership having the potential to alleviate some principal stress and anxiety (Wells and Klocko, 2015; Harris,

2020), obstacles to this emerged. Sarah's reluctance to delegate came from her unwillingness to ask staff to work "outside of your working hours", whereas Denise's fractured working relationship with her deputy results in her taking on many more tasks. Smaller school settings invariably raise the issue of to whom can leaders distribute leadership. Hairon and Goh's (2014) discussion of distributed leadership included the concept of bounded empowerment. Leaders were documented delegating tasks while continually being kept informed due to ultimate responsibility and accountability remaining with them. This appeared to resonate throughout the qualitative aspect of this research.

According to research, principals who focus on their overall wellbeing, through taking breaks, or ensuring they partake in exercise and engage in forms of self-care are generally less stressed and better cope with the stresses associated with leading a school community (Ray, Pijanowski and Lasater, 2020). Carol believes that her "positive attitude" to the job is greatly helped by walking her dog. Laura uses the gym and actively switches off in the evening by watching "something on the telly that I want to see". For Áine, going away for the weekend was her way of attempting to alleviate stress when she was in the role of teaching principal.

Other significant sources of respite to school leaders come from networking with fellow principals, seeking advice from agencies such as the INTO, the IPPN and the CPSMA.

7.5 Retention issues

A total of 40% of the principals surveyed in the current study have considered stepping down from the role. This data serves as a further attestation of job dissatisfaction with workload and the role of the TP. Interviews conducted with six former school leaders brought fresh knowledge to the fore in respect of this issue. High degrees of workload appear to impact school leaders' work-life balance and negatively impact upon health and wellbeing. The reasons for stepping down were vividly recalled by participants.

Among the current research cohort, responses seeking changes to the role spoke about the need for a step-down measure to be put in place or a contract of a fixed duration to be given upon appointment. Principalship is now "a short-term position", one that requires "an exit plan" from the perspective of one current leader. A step-down facility "that respects your previous role and

experience", that allows seniority to be maintained is a highly popular viewpoint. Participants who are struggling as school leaders would be most grateful for having "a dignified step-down process" put in place. The lack of such a facility emboldens one principal to declare that "I will not step down, but I will leave". The issue of stepping down was the subject of an IPPN position paper (2015) with 1 in 4 teaching principals would urgently consider stepping back from their leadership role and returning to full time teaching (IPPN 2015) . Empirical evidence points to a looming shortage of people who want to take up the role (Wright, 2011; Riley *et al.*, 2021; Heffernan, MacDonald and Longmuir, 2022).

Principals feel that issues of recruitment and retention could be solved by placing a fixed term on the role. It is argued that "our profession would attract more suitable candidates if they knew that it had a life span". It should no longer be "a job for life" and for those taking on the job of school principal "too early in life" will lead to "suffering burnout before they would be normally due to retire". The issue of stress and burnout recurs consistently in literature. Higher levels of burnout and stress are reported when principals are compared with the wider population (Riley, 2015). Internationally, those in leadership positions are reporting as stressed (Denecker, 2019; Riley *et al.*, 2021).

These very high stress levels experienced by principals are a significant concern when one considers wider areas of retention and longevity of tenure (Levin and Bradley, 2019; Mahfouz and Richardson, 2020; Reid, 2022). Seven years is mooted by some principals in the qualitative section of the questionnaires. One would like to "do a seven-year term and be able to step aside". Similarly, another participant wishes to "stay seven years only before moving to another role". Quite a few of the participant responses were received from principals who, rather than contemplating stepping down from the role, are considering retirement instead. The notion that "retirement is not far away" appears as a positive endpoint for one principal. One leader aimed to complete five years in the role, but now plans to retire instead, with another participant deciding "to retire after years with no holidays". Retirement is considered "more and more attractive with all the paperwork, rules and regulations which have come into play".

For other principals, a change of role is being considered in order to rejuvenate themselves. One school leader admits being "actively engaged in professional development with a view to trying something different", while another is "looking at other career opportunities". Paul credited leaving his role as teaching principal with rejuvenating him, declaring that "it revitalised me, you know, at 43 years of age when it happened, it revitalised me, and gave me a whole new perspective, a whole new look on my teaching." Atton and Fidler (2004) noted that a change is needed to refresh and reinvigorate school leaders while advocating for fixed term contracts. Flintham (2003) believes that there is a "plateau effect" (p.4) for those in leadership that occurs from year seven to ten. Flintham's study comprised of principals who vacated their role early. These principals agreed that they had declined in effectiveness due to the plateau effect.

7.6 Motivating Factors for Recruitment

Questions around recruitment and the attractiveness of the position of principal as a whole have entered the narrative and discourse (IPPN, 2022). With evidence of 16% of principal advertisements being readvertised between September 2021 and August 2022 (IPPN, 2022), this current PhD study details aspects of the principal position that attracts current leaders and attracted former leaders.

A concise picture emerged from all stages of data collection which showed the key factors involved in choosing to apply for a school principalship. Quantitatively speaking, the data revealed that location was considered to be important or very important for just over half of the participants (51.7%). Upon further analysis, statistically significant differences emerged between teaching principals (TPs) and administrative principals (APs) in this respect. For TPs in this study, location is deemed to be significantly more important, when compared to APs. This data-related finding was further evident within the qualitative interviews. Specifically, applying for the role of school principal as a means to locate closer to home became apparent during the interview phase of data collection. This finding chimes with Murphy (2023) and provides evidence that candidates apply for principal positions to facilitate their relocation. Paul refers to these as "geographical principals" in the course of interviews. Furthermore, Áine revealed some staff had prompted her to apply for the vacant leadership role in her school. This is supported with the IPPN (2022) declaring that many

teacher leaders with potential for senior leadership are currently displaying a reluctance to take on principal positions and further echoed in the work of Anderson *et al.* (2011). The two most important factors in applying for the role of school leader identified in the quantitative findings of this PhD study are that leaders have a desire to influence school direction, and also to make a positive difference in the lives of the students in their schools. Eleanor spoke of the desire "to make a meaningful impact in the school" and Harry describes his "moral obligation" to influence the direction of school.

7.7 Principal preparation, pathways, and succession planning

Findings from this research showed that just over one out of every two principals (56%) felt some level of preparedness for the position of school leader. Worryingly, one in four felt very or somewhat unprepared for the role. Those who undertook targeted leadership preparation prior to assuming the role felt better prepared for the position, when compared to those who did not. Preparation also appears to alleviate stress according to the data. Significant association was discovered between stress in the role and professional development prior to taking on the role. Initiatives like the Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI) (Gates *et al.*, 2019) have demonstrated significant improvements in student achievement and principal retention rates through focused efforts on leadership standards, preparation, selective hiring, and on-the-job support. Furthermore, Cieminski's (2018) structured approach to succession planning, encompassing talent identification, development, selection, onboarding, support, evaluation, and future leader development, contrasts with the experiences shared by former principals. Their individual paths to leadership appear fragmented in comparison to this professional leadership preparation and support. Career pathways are uncovered. Alison mentions undertaking the PDSL course, whereas Paul acknowledges having no formal or informal training for the role of school leader. Two of the interviewees, Eleanor and Sinéad had been awarded a Master of Education, which did not include specific leadership modules. Bush's (2018) six-phase model for leadership preparation and induction emphasises ongoing professional learning and

mentoring. This appears absent based on the data collected, where leadership preparation is described as “limited” in the interview with current principal Carol.

The fragmented and disjointed nature of leadership preparation appears to result in difficulty transitioning into the role. The interviews highlight the challenges faced by school leaders initially adapting to leadership positions. This echoes findings from Murphy (2023), who emphasises the difficulties principals encounter in adapting both personally and professionally. Mairead's experience of feeling "thrown in" to the role and Paul's struggle to adapt to the expectation of being a positive presence in the community offers further insight into both the personal and professional transition to school leadership.

Similarly, Murphy’s (2023) exploration of career pathways refers to socialisation into the role and the effect of positive mentorship and coaching. This directly mirrors the sentiments expressed by Sarah and Carol who both speak to the importance of ongoing professional learning and support. Furthermore, the observation of biases in selection processes echoes the sentiments of Carol, Kylie, and Denise, who felt pressure to assume the leadership roles in their schools due to staff and community expectations.

7.8 Career stages

When analysing the quantitative questionnaire data, newly appointed principals (NAPs) as a group are found to be statistically significantly more dissatisfied with workload than their more experienced principals. NAPs in the early career stage were also found to be experiencing significantly more stress, frustration, exhaustion, and higher levels of mental health impacts. This appears in keeping with the phase of *Initiation: Idealism, Uncertainty and Adjustment* documented by Day and Bakioglu (1996) and *Induction* referenced by Earley and Weindling (2007). Day and Bakioglu (1996) outlined feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy presenting initially for school leaders. Qualitatively, interviews found difficulties transitioning to the role. Paul claimed that initially he “didn’t adjust at all”, Mairead to finding the job “all-encompassing” immediately, and Carol admitting that the early stages of the job were “very, very stressful”. Participants in Earley

and Weindling's (2007) longitudinal study similarly found the jump to principalship to be an "enormous" step (p.74) in one's career..

Statistically significantly higher levels of job satisfaction with their role were also found in contrast to their more experienced colleagues though. Building supports for school leaders in the early stage of their stewardship is of great importance. The recently commissioned CSL report (Forde, 2022) into the effects of mentoring for NAPs shows strong evidence on the focus of professional growth for the mentee. The support focuses on building their confidence and strengthening their self-care in the early stages of the role.

7.9 Lessons from former principals - push factors

The qualitative interviews conducted in this study deepen our understanding of the factors influencing school leadership turnover in Ireland. Many of the push factors resonate with the findings presented by Heffernan, Courtney, and Doherty (2023). The authors define turnover as departing from the profession before retirement age. The interviews in the first instance outline the motivations driving individuals to take on school leadership roles. Alison was initially motivated by the opportunity to make a positive impact and realise her vision for education. This reflects the Australian findings which identified pull factors such as an exciting new opportunity (Heffernan, Courtney and Doherty, 2023). The former principals interviewed, all of whom were teaching principals, spoke of their own individual push factors. Annmarie, for example, describes feeling overwhelmed by a lack of support and noted increasing accountability in her role as a school leader. A support was most acutely felt as principals attempted to manage their workload and address the needs of their school communities. All six former principals described feeling overwhelmed by administrative burdens and evidenced the strain it placed on their ability to fulfil their roles effectively. They describe the negative impact this workload placed on their ability to effectively lead teaching and learning. This supports the notion of push factors identified by Heffernan, Courtney and Doherty (2023), who found that inadequate support contributes to school leader turnover in their Australian study.

The qualitative interviews provided firsthand, candid, accounts of the detrimental effects of the school leadership role on the health and wellbeing of individuals. The interviewees discussed experiencing high levels of stress, burnout, and personal strain as a result of the demands placed on them as school leaders. This again resonates with the study by Heffernan, Courtney, and Doherty (2023), which also highlighted the negative impact the role had on the health and wellbeing of former school leaders.

As noted in earlier, it is important to acknowledge the unique contextual considerations presented in the interviews, such as the start-up school experience discussed by Alison and the pressures around declining enrolment and the closure of a school in the case of Paul. Áine discussed the pressures of her local context and community expectations as significant contributors to her decision to resign from the role of school leader, aligning with previous discussions on situational and external contexts (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017). Common factors such as burnout, work-life balance and work-family considerations were evident in the push factors identified in the literature (Heffernan, Courtney and Doherty, 2023) alongside the emergent themes from the qualitative interviews.

7.10 Conclusion

This chapter served to draw the data gathered across the three stages of findings together into a critical research-supported discussion. The quantitative findings, examined robustly and rigorously in chapter 4, qualitative findings from a large cohort of Irish primary school principals in chapter 5, and qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews with current and former primary school leaders in chapter 6 have been triangulated in this chapter. A clear rationale regarding the deliberate flow and structure of this chapter was outlined from the outset. This research supported discussion of all data sets now leads to evidence based and actionable recommendations that will be outlined in the next chapter. This triangulation of data also allows the researcher questions to be answered, with conclusions presented in chapter 8.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion and recommendations

8.1 Introduction

This final chapter serves as a comprehensive conclusion to the study. Key findings from all stages of data gathering are coherently presented, with a clear link to how these contribute to answering the main and subsidiary research questions. The overall aims of the study are revisited in light of findings. An outline of new knowledge generated, and potential future areas of research are included. Practical and pertinent recommendations are offered arising from research. These recommendations stem from the realities of daily school leadership as found in the data. A reflection on my personal journey through the PhD process and areas of personal and professional growth are noted. The chapter concludes by addressing the future dissemination of findings and once more outlines the significance of the study's contributions to the field of school leadership.

8.2 Aims of the study

The overarching aim of the study was to examine factors that sustain primary school principals in their roles while also investigating the factors that lead to changes in leadership positions. A key feature of this investigation was the unique perspective gained by including both current and former primary school principals. Including a cohort of former school leaders offers fresh insights into the issues surrounding Irish primary school leadership.

Through incorporating a mixed methods approach, the study achieved its aims. Patterns relating to retention and turnover determinants became apparent through the triangulation of three sets of data. Motivating factors for school leaders initially aspiring to leadership roles were outlined. The positives and challenges of the role are also included. The overlooked perspective of former school principals then significantly contributed to factors contributing to retention and turnover from a unique and previously overlooked angle.

8.3 Summary of findings

8.3.1 Quantitative findings

The first phase of data analysis from the quantitative aspect of the study explores the motivations, wellbeing, and challenges of current Irish primary school principals. The ability to impact students' lives and influence school direction emerged as key motivators for assuming the role. The data also showed the presence of stress, with 75% self-reporting that they are experiencing stress in the role. Negative impacts on mental (68%) and physical health (63%) are evident also. Interestingly, job satisfaction is high, at the same level of stress (75%). Teaching staff and family provide crucial support, with these two categories considered most important. Key challenges for Irish school leaders include long working hours and high workload dissatisfaction.

Differences between Teaching Principals (TPs) and Administrative Principals (APs) were then explored with significant findings between the two groups emerging. Chi-Square Tests and Independent-Samples T-Tests were used to robustly investigate the data. Differences were found between the two groups relating to motivating factors for seeking the role. It was found that APs place significantly more importance on their ability to influence school direction than TPs, and location of the school is more significant motivator for TPs than APs. Remuneration was found to be significantly more motivating for APs compared to TPs. Key differences were then found under the area of wellbeing. APs were found to be significantly more confident in their ability to perform the role than TPs. Both groups report high stress levels, and moderate to high negative impacts on mental and physical health. As with the full cohort, job satisfaction for both groups remain high with no significant differences found. Engagement levels varied and APs record significantly higher engagement levels than TPs. Exploring administrative tasks, TPs are significantly more dissatisfied with workload, whereas APs are significantly more dissatisfied with managing ancillary staff, and substitute availability than TPs. The final significant difference between the two groups found that TPs are less likely to recommend the role to others compared to APs.

The next stage of data analysis was to explore the effects of different career stages on primary school leaders. Three career stages were established from literature: Early Career Stage (1-2 years' service), Middle Career Stage (3-8 years' service), and Late Career Stage (9 years or more). Data was explored through the use of one-way ANOVAs, and significant differences were found. Early career stage school leaders were found to display higher stress levels than middle career stage principals. Differences between these two groups were also found in ANOVAs exploring mental health impacts, strain, exhaustion, frustration, and confidence. Similarly, the level of job satisfaction was found to be significant between early and middle career stages. In this finding, early career stage leaders are more satisfied in the role compared to middle career school leaders. Satisfaction with workload next emerged. Satisfaction level with workload was found to significantly differ between early and middle career stages, with early career stage leaders less dissatisfied.

The final significant finding came from investigating professional development prior to becoming a school leader. It was found that those who had professional development before becoming school leaders felt better prepared than those who didn't. Further analysis through the use of a Chi-Square test identified a significant association between stress levels in the role and prior professional development. This highlighted the positive impact of professional development on levels of stress.

8.3.2 Qualitative questionnaire findings

The second phase of the study investigated open-ended responses gathered from the 467 current Irish primary school principals taking part in the online questionnaire.

For these school leaders, interpersonal relationships emerged as a dominant theme. Positive relationships with pupils were found with many school leaders expressing their satisfaction in making a positive impact on children's lives and learning. Relationships with staff were somewhat mixed. Some principals highlighted the importance of, and presence of staff support. For others, difficult staff dynamics present as a challenge and an area of stress. Similarly, differences emerged regarding engagement with the school community. For many, this aspect of the role was viewed as an opportunity to foster meaningful positive change and promote collaboration, although some

school leaders noted difficulties in dealing with what they perceived as demanding parents and unrealistic expectations.

Several subthemes were next identified within the theme of Managing the Organisation. The autonomous nature of the role was highlighted, with many school leaders expressing satisfaction in their ability to influence positive change and oversee the direction of the school. However, there was a consistent call for a clearer job description to be put in place, as many principals felt that clarity was lacking for them in the role. Workload emerged as a significant concern, with many school leaders expressing feelings of being overwhelmed by administrative tasks, which often took away from their focus on teaching and learning. The metaphor of "firefighting" was commonly used to describe the constant challenges and demands they faced. The role of the teaching principal (TP) presented a unique challenge, as those in this dual role expressed frustration and guilt due to the balancing act between administrative tasks and classroom teaching. Remuneration was another issue of discontent, with school leaders feeling that their pay did not match the level of responsibility and workload they were dealing with.

Despite the challenges and stress expressed, a paradox between job satisfaction and stress emerged, with many principals acknowledging the difficulties of the role while also expressing overall satisfaction in the role.

Emerging within the theme of Managing Oneself were subthemes relation to the overall wellbeing of the school leader. Many principals reported experiencing negative health impacts due to the high levels of stress and workload associated with their roles. Health issues such as shingles, autoimmune stress disorder, and fatigue were mentioned, serving to highlight the impact that the demanding nature of the job takes on their physical wellbeing. The role of a school leader was often described as lonely and isolated. Some principals spoke of being new to the role and feeling isolated as they transitioned into the job and trying to overcome the initial challenges of leadership. Maintaining a healthy work-life balance was a significant concern for school leaders. Many expressed the difficulty of disconnecting from work even during personal time, and the impact on family life was evident.

Balancing the demands of the role with family commitments proved challenging for those with young children and led to feelings of guilt.

Finally, a considerable number of principals mentioned that they are currently considering a change in their careers, whether through retirement or seeking new opportunities. The role's stress, workload, and impact on personal life were cited as reasons for contemplating retirement or seeking alternative positions. Some principals expressed a desire for a formal step-down facility to allow for them to step away from the leadership role.

8.3.3. Qualitative interviews

The interviews conducted with current and former school principals resulted in five themes. Firstly, motivations for aspiring leaders to assume the role of a school principal were uncovered. A strong desire to positively impact the school community was highlighted. Some interviewees also chose to apply for the principal position within their current school due to a sense of loyalty or connection established. Others sought to work locally, while more held an inherent ambition to lead. The second emerging theme was relationship management. This theme included relationships with staff, students, the school community, and the Board of Management (BoM). Principals were largely positive in their dealings with students, whereas staff relationships once more highlighted tensions and varying responses. Some principals enjoyed positive staff dynamics while others experienced challenges and tension. The importance of building positive school community relationships emerged through the course of interviewing. The principal-BoM relationship once more showcased a tension. While many interviewees function with supportive boards, others discuss unsupportive boards considered ineffective due to their voluntary nature. A breakdown in relations between the school principal and the board was shown to impact turnover.

Managing the organisation emerged as a theme with the issue of teaching principalship once more presenting. School leaders, both teaching and administrative, document overwhelming workloads. This leads to a particular difficulty for TPs in striking a balance between teaching and administrative duties. The transition from teacher to leader was once more noted, with difficulties adjusting to the

role universally acknowledged. Stress and health issues were vividly recalled during the course of the interviews as the challenge of achieving work-life balance and maintaining relationships with staff affect both their personal and family life. Loneliness and isolation emerge as school leaders assume ultimate responsibility for decision-making. Coping strategies, include peer networks, family support, and engagement with professional organisations.

The decision to step down was found to be complex and personal to each of the six interviewees who have taken this step. Their decision was shaped by a range of factors although workload, work-life balance, health concerns, and the role of teaching principal all play a part in their decisions. The issue of identity and a perceived stigma related to stepping away was found. Overall, the former school leaders express contentment and relief with their decisions, describing them as transformational and ultimately leading to improved wellbeing and enhanced job satisfaction.

8.4 Addressing the research questions

When evaluating the study and assessing whether the main and subsidiary research questions have been effectively answered, the answer is yes. The study has been successful in identifying the dominant factors affecting principal retention and turnover, as well as highlighting the main challenges and positives of the role.

8.4.1 The main research question: dominant factors determining retention and turnover

The main research question centred on the dominant factors determining retention and turnover. Decisions to step down as referenced by former principals include areas such as workload, work-life balance, health issues, and family priorities. From all phases of data gathering dominant factors impacting turnover and the main challenges currently associated with the role of Irish primary school principal include:

- Workload: The overwhelming workload and constant demands of the role were significant contributors to turnover.

- Work-Life Balance: The struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance was a major factor in turnover. The intrusion of school-related concerns into personal time affected principals' overall wellbeing and quality of family life.
- Health and Wellbeing: The high levels of stress and pressure associated with the role led to health issues for some principals. Stress-related health problems, sleepless nights, and other health concerns emerged as outcomes of the demanding nature of the job.
- Isolation and Loneliness: The hierarchical nature of the principal's role contributed to feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- Teaching principalship: For teaching principals, role conflict namely the challenge of balancing teaching and administrative duties was a significant factor in turnover.
- Interpersonal Relationships: Insufficient support from staff or key areas of support such as Boards of Management presents as a key factor contributing to turnover.

8.4.2 Subsidiary question – positive aspects of the role

The positive aspects of the school principal role emerging from data are:

- Many principals enjoyed positive relationships with students, staff, and parents
- Principals gained satisfaction in leading the school community and positively influencing students' lives
- The opportunity to work within their local community or assume a leadership role in their own school served as a positive for many principals
- The role enabled principals to initiate positive changes and innovations within the school, shaping its culture and learning environment to align with their vision.
- Many principals found personal satisfaction in their role, arising from their relationships and their contributions to improving teaching and learning
- Principals used their position to advocate for the value of education, acting as advocates for students' needs and the importance of quality schooling.

8.4.3 Subsidiary question – main motivation for becoming a school principal

Data from both the quantitative and qualitative phases allow this question to be fully answered. The main reasons are:

- Familiarity with the School: Many respondents were motivated to become principals within the school where they were already teaching.
- Desire to Work Locally: Another common motivation was the desire to work within their local community.
- Inherent Leadership Ambition: Some participants expressed a long-standing aspiration to lead a primary school. They actively pursued the role of school principal due to a personal desire to have a meaningful impact on the school and its students.

8.5 Contribution to new knowledge

This research study advances the knowledge of educational leadership within the Irish context by including the experiences of former school principals who have relinquished their roles. Through conducting six in-depth interviews with these former leaders, the study offers a fresh and previously unexplored perspective into educational leadership. Notably, it addresses a particular population cohort that has been underrepresented in national literature to date, thereby filling a critical gap in knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, the timing of the study, conducted during a pivotal period after system and school-level leadership reforms in 2018, and amidst the challenges posed by the Covid-19 crisis, adds depth and relevance to its findings. By unravelling the intricacies of the experiences faced by current principals alongside these former principals, the research provides actionable insights that can inform strategic initiatives aimed at establishing sustainable leadership pathways within the primary education sector. The study sheds light on various factors influencing the decision of school principals to step down, including workload, work-life balance, health concerns, and the local context of their schools. It sheds light into the workload specific to the role of teaching principalship, an another under researched cohort in Irish school leadership. The study highlights the lack of credible options available to those who have chosen to vacate their role as

school principal. The insights gained from these interviews contribute to the recommendations offered in the chapter. Overall, this research contributes new knowledge that can impact current practice and policy relating to the area of school leadership.

8.6 Conclusions and Recommendations

This section introduces conclusions and recommendations drawn from the thesis as a whole. These are introduced and structured in a deliberate manner in order to firstly tackle the challenges encountered by school principals and secondly to propose systemic improvements that would benefit the wider Irish education system. These recommendations address the various aspects of school leadership, from initial training to ongoing support, wellbeing, and governance, in a logical and progressive manner. The initial recommendations, aimed at supporting school principals in their everyday work, stem from key issues arising from the findings such as workload, role clarity, and professional development. They aim to offer immediate solutions to ensure that school leaders are better prepared and supported in the role. The recommendations then move beyond the individual school leader and suggest systemic changes to improve school governance and support structures. The implications of each recommendation are also considered.

8.6.1 Mandatory Pre-Service Training for School Leaders to Enhance Educational Outcomes and Wellbeing

The study concludes with the recommendation that formal pre-service professional development opportunities for school leaders should be implemented as a strategy to reduce the stress levels among school leaders. This suggests the need to ensure that pre-service training is mandatory for all aspiring principals. With the majority of school leaders reporting stress in the role, this recommendation highlights the importance of formal preparation in mitigating against this stress. It also speaks to the need to enhance the readiness for those aspiring to school leadership roles in line with difficulties adjusting to the role emerging qualitatively in this study. With literature recognising the positive impact that school leaders have on learning outcomes, it is incumbent to make pre-service training mandatory. Enhancing school leaders' readiness to lead a school has the potential to

improve the educational outcomes for pupils in primary school settings. Devising tailored training programmes that are evidence-based is required. With interpersonal relations evident in the findings of this study, this mandatory, formal preparation should include, but not be limited to, modules on time management, effective communication, and conflict resolution. Implementing evidence-based training programs could provide crucial support for individuals entering school leadership.

8.6.2 Enhancing Support for Newly Appointed Principals

Quantitative data from this study finds that newly appointed principals express higher levels of frustration, stress, exhaustion, and are less confident than more experienced counterparts. Qualitative data enriches these significant findings by confirming that school leaders do have difficulty adjusting to the role. Therefore, it is imperative to provide tangible supports to those taking on the role for the first time. Building on, and supplementing the earlier recommended mandatory pre-service training, it is now intended to introduce a structured training and support year uniquely tailored to addressing the needs of NAPs. Crucially, this support year would include on-site training to align with evidence from successful principal pipelines and succession planning initiatives. This approach would ensure NAPs are supported within their own school setting, resulting in a smoother transition to the role. This localised component would be further supported by regional days such as those currently offered by Misneach. By offering such a comprehensive support structure to principals', rates of retention in the role could be enhanced. This also has implications beyond the role of the school principal. Teacher and pupils stand to benefit from more effective leadership and a smoother transition for new principals. Parents and the wider school community may also experience increased confidence in the leadership of the school. This could result in greater engagement and support for all aspects of school life, most notably supporting new educational initiatives being proposed.

8.6.3 Introduction of fixed-term contract

The introduction of fixed-term contracts emerges as a viable strategy to further build on the previous recommendations and further address the issues of retention with school leaders. Interviewees noted that they left the role prematurely due to factors such as workload, stress, and a lack of work-life

balance. With enhanced pre-service training and improved support for NAPs, fixed-term contracts, otherwise reluctant teacher leaders can be enticed to take on the role of school principal. The introduction of fixed-term contracts could offer aspiring leaders a newfound flexibility, enabling them to commit to leadership roles fully aware that their tenure is limited to a specified period. The introduction of fixed term contracts finds support from principal support groups and in literature (Atton and Fidler, 2004; IPPN, 2015). With the belief that school leaders plateau years seven to ten of service (Flintham, 2003; Earley and Weindling, 2007), the installation of a fixed term contract would alleviate the negative effects of plateau. It would provide leaders with the opportunity to assess their motivation to continue in the role, from both a personal and professional perspective. The introduction of fixed-term contracts would also enable a culture of career progression within the Irish primary schools.

8.6.4 Introducing a Formal Step-Down Procedure for School Leaders

The introduction of a formal step-down procedure for school principals is urgently required as evidenced by the findings in this study. The large percentage of principals in Ireland entertaining thoughts of stepping down is a key factor in this recommendation. Interviews with former school principals further highlights the pressing need to offer tangible solutions to address challenges such as mental health difficulties which seriously reduce the school leaders' capacity to continue in the role. These interviews highlight the lack of viable alternatives for leaders faced with this choice, allied to the lack of structured support offered for those who have resigned from the position. Negative consequences such as loss of pension benefits and mental health impacts due to a diminished professional status were revealed. To this effect, a formal step-down procedure should be established, one which takes into consideration the length of service and contributions made by outgoing principals. The implementation of a formal step-down procedure would have significant implications for the retention and wellbeing of school leaders. It would provide former school leaders with a supportive transition process and showcase an appreciation for their contributions to school leadership. This appreciation of school leadership would in turn promote long-term commitment and stability for those who are experiencing success in school leadership roles.

8.6.5 Clarify the role and responsibilities of school principal

The Education Act (1998) provides for the functions and duties of the school principal. The last time the role of the primary school principal was addressed by Departmental circular was back in 1973. An amendment to the Education Act (1998) to update the role in line with recent policy and curriculum reform is pertinent. Research findings in this study show large percentages of school principals reporting long working hours and expressing dissatisfaction with workload. This study outlines that over 85% of school leaders work in excess of 45 hours per week and 77% are dissatisfied with their current workload. Many school leaders in this study also state that their role is not clearly defined. At the heart of retention and recruitment issues are the working conditions currently faced by our school principals. With this in mind, the roles and responsibilities of the school principal must be clarified and clearly outlined. It is now recommended that all relevant stakeholders consult and clearly define the job description as relevant to the role of school principal. This will include an outline of specific responsibilities and expectations for those in the role. It is envisaged that role ambiguity would be reduced resulting in more effective leadership. The implications of addressing ambiguity in the role of school principals would extend to improvements in teaching and learning. By clarifying expectations and responsibilities, improved leadership practices are envisaged with the focus on enhancing student success.

8.6.6 A full review into the role of the teaching principal

The findings in this study validate the need for a comprehensive review of the role of the teaching principal to be undertaken within the Irish primary school system. The findings reveal significant challenges faced by TPs in managing both administrative duties and classroom teaching. Furthermore, significant findings of stress and workload dissatisfaction among this cohort are evidenced. A review into the teaching principal role is crucial to address the unique needs and challenges of TPs. Crucially, such a review presents an opportunity to explore innovative models of distributed leadership and collaborative practices that can support TPs in fulfilling their role more effectively. In light of the demonstrated middle leadership role of principals in the Irish context

(Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017; Murphy and Devine, 2023), it is imperative to incorporate this understanding into the comprehensive review of the teaching principal's role within the primary school system. By initiating a comprehensive review process, educational policymakers can gain insights into the complexities of teaching principalship, identify areas for improvement, and implement targeted interventions to support leaders. One of the aims for such a review would be to examine the long-term viability of the teaching principal role. The long-term viability of the role has been questioned academically by Darmody and Smyth (2011) and also by participants in this study. One alternative worthy of consideration is to geographically cluster a small number of schools together and appoint an administrative manager to these. The system of multi-school principals in small primary schools is in operation in the Netherlands (Deunk and Maslowski, 2020). This newly created managerial position would see the teaching principals already in situ continue to lead the teaching and learning in their own school. They would not be burdened by administrative tasks that heavily impact upon their ability to focus on the critical aspect of teaching and learning. The implication of such a system would be to release current teaching principals to concentrate on their teaching responsibilities without being heavily over-burdened by administrative tasks.

8.6.7 Promoting Principal Wellbeing and Mental Health

This study extends the evidence showing that school leaders are stressed. Qualitative harrowing accounts of mental health difficulties suffered by participating school principals are included. There is a need to target mental health initiatives at school leaders through the provision of professional development in this area. Emphasising the importance of self-care and wellbeing for school principals is recommended. Delivering key messages to principals about the importance of engaging in physical activity, maintaining hobbies, and setting aside personal time for relaxation is necessary. The inclusion of modules incorporating stress management techniques such as mindfulness would help school leaders more effectively self-manage. The efficacy of mindfulness training and similar approaches in mitigating stress among school leaders has been well-documented in recent literature (Beausaert *et al.*, 2016; Wicher, 2017; Wells and Klocko, 2018; Mahfouz, 2020).

Further supplementing the key messages from professional learning days by introducing mental health days for school leaders would enhance school leader wellbeing and self-care. Modelled after successful practices in other contexts, granting school leaders a fixed number of fully paid days per school year to prioritise their mental health and wellbeing is essential. (Pereira, 2022). Allowing principals access to a fixed number of fully paid days per school year to attend to their wellbeing is encouraged. The introduction of mental health days is prudent in light of consistent findings of stress and burnout suffered by Irish primary school principals (Darmody and Smyth, 2011, 2016; Riley, 2015; IPPN, 2022). Implementing these suggesting initiatives and providing professional development opportunities can significantly enhance the wellbeing and effectiveness of principals in their roles. This would ultimately contribute to a healthier and more sustainable work environment in primary schools.

8.6.8 Enhancing School Governance

The current model of governing schools appears to be largely ineffective in offering tangible support to all school leaders, as evidenced by findings from the Chief Inspector's report (Hislop, 2022) and participant feedback in this study. Principals in the qualitative phases of data gathering have expressed dissatisfaction with the level of support from their Boards of Management (BoM). The Governance Manual 2019-2023 (Department of Education and Skills, 2019a) advises board members to access relevant training, yet many participants bemoan the lack of support and expertise within their boards. To address this issue, it is recommended to enhance the training provided to BoM members by making it mandatory . This approach aligns with the need identified in the Chief Inspector's report and aims to equip board members with the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfil their duties more effectively.

The challenge of recruiting volunteers for BoM positions further exacerbates the issue of inadequate support. Given the difficulty in finding volunteers, it is necessary to explore options for compensating BoM members. Providing compensation would not only encourage dedicated participation but also ensure that board members have a clear understanding of their responsibilities

upon acceptance. By addressing these systemic issues, a more productive system of governance will be introduced to the benefit of the entire school community.

Collaborative leadership will create a more positive and sustainable educational environment for all stakeholders.

8.7 Future research opportunities

The following are noted as areas worthy of further investigation arising from a review of the literature and the findings of this PhD study.

- The intention of this study was not to actively investigate data through the lens of gender issues. However, it would nevertheless be worthwhile to analyse various themes identified within according to gender. Statistics show that in 2020/21, 85% of teachers working in primary schools were women, yet only 6% of these female teachers were principals. By contrast, 15% of teachers were males; 16% of these male teachers were in the role of school principal. Exploring gender in light of both the quantitative and qualitative data would further the understanding of these research findings.
- With the positive nature of the PDSL course espoused in literature (King and Nihill, 2019; Murphy, 2023), there is scope to investigate the pathways of course participants. Such a study would add to literature on career pathways and the impact of principal preparation for NAPs. It would also serve to further the understanding of retention and motivators offered in this doctoral research.
- While the area of workload and work intensification have garnered traction in literature, two less explored areas worthy of consideration are workload of principals with special classes and the workload of school leaders of start-up schools.
- There is scope to develop research under the theme of loneliness and social isolation of Irish primary school principals in light of findings within this research.
- The area of rural schools and the role of the teaching principal is still under researched. This is highlighted by the absence of Irish literature relating to school-community relationships,

multi-grade learning environments and school leadership in a recent scoping review of 21st-century research on small rural schools in Europe (Fargas-Malet and Bagley, 2022)

8.8 Limitations of the study

Limitations are present for this study. The potential areas highlighted for further exploration in the previous section show the presence of different areas of research that were unexplored in this current study.

Limitations also exist regarding the methods adopted. The qualitative sample size, seven current principals and six former principals, potentially limits generalisation. However, by offsetting this with a large quantitative sample and qualitative data gathered through the same questionnaire, generalisability can occur. These three data sets are triangulated in research-evidenced discussion leading to actionable recommendations and conclusions presented.

One of the issues with sampling for interviews was access to former principals. This group is relatively small, and some former principals were unwilling to interview. The nature of interviewing principals who have stepped down renders the study open to accusations of bias and negativity towards school leadership. Once more, quantitatively sampling a large cohort of current leaders allows a full picture of the daily realities to come to the fore. The smaller sample of former school principals is used to qualitatively strengthen findings and offer a unique perspective.

The study is potentially open to accusations of bias as the researcher is a former school principal who willingly chose to step down from the role. To combat this, the researcher has at all stages of data collection and analysis been transparent in matters relating to bias and reflexivity.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered are self-reported. The survey data was constructed in order to ascertain participants' perceptions of matters relating to wellbeing, job satisfaction, and areas of management. No pre-validated scales were used for the questionnaire. Carrying out such a robust and rigorous analysis of the data quantitatively, through the use of statistical testing ensures validity and reliability in findings.

8.9 Concluding remarks

"Change is inevitable but personal growth is a choice" Bob Proctor

This PhD journey has inspired personal growth, and new learnings abound. My personal journey into academic research began as a teaching principal undertaking a master's in education. These tentative steps have been followed by a great deal of change, both personally and professionally. I embarked on my PhD journey as a former teaching principal, driven to pursue further study in the field of school leadership. Continuing this pursuit during the COVID-19 pandemic brought opportunities for new learning and growth.

It is hoped that the findings from this research will contribute to the understanding of school leadership. The participation of current and former school principals allows new insights to be garnered into the personal and professional reality of leading schools. Arne Duncan, former US secretary of education, stated that, *"There are no good schools without good principals. It doesn't exist."* The findings and recommendations proposed in this study, if enacted, may enhance the wellbeing of principals, and prompt supports that ensure our dedicated and diligent school leaders are ably supported and sustained in this key role.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Brian Cahill - Primary School Principal Survey

Thank you for considering participating in this research project. The purpose of this document is to explain to you what the work is about and what your participation would involve, so as to enable you to make an informed choice.

The purpose of this study is to examine the school leadership experiences of current and former primary school leaders in the Republic of Ireland. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire, which will include items on school demographics, your pathway to becoming a school leader, wellbeing as a school leader and your view of the positive and challenging aspects of the role.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate, and should you choose to do so you can refuse to answer specific questions, or decide to withdraw from the study. All information you provide will be confidential and your anonymity will be protected throughout the study. IP addresses will not be collected at any point, meaning the data you provide cannot be traced back to you.

During the online survey, an option to leave your email address is included. By leaving your email address and ticking the consent box to proceed with this questionnaire, you are also consenting to take part in a virtual face-to-face interview using the Microsoft Teams platform at a later date. This interview will be video-recorded and is expected to take 30-40 minutes to complete. Once the interview is completed, the recording will immediately be transferred to an encrypted laptop and wiped from the recording device. The interview will then be transcribed by the researcher, and all identifying information will be removed. Once this is done, the audio-recording will also be deleted and only the anonymized transcript will remain.

You maintain the right to withdraw from the study at any stage up to the point of data submission. At this point your data will be collated with that of other participants and can no longer be retracted.

The anonymous data will be stored on the University College Cork OneDrive system. The data will be stored for a minimum of ten years. The information you provide will contribute to a thesis as part of a PhD submission. The information you provide may contribute to research publications and/or conference presentations.

I do not anticipate any negative outcomes from participating in this study. Should you experience any distress arising from the research process, the contact details for the DES Employee Assistance Service (EAS) are provided below:

The EAS is accessible through the dedicated Free-phone Confidential Helpline at 1800 411 057 and is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Alternatively, text 'Hi' to 087 369 0010 to avail of EAS support on SMS & WhatsApp.

This study has obtained ethical approval from the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee.

Consent

1. I consent to take part in this study *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Background Information

2. Gender *

- ◯ Woman
- ◯ Man
- ◯ Non-binary
- ◯ Prefer not to say

3. Principal position *

- ◯ Administrative
- ◯ Teaching

4. To which age group do you belong? *

- ◯ 20-29
- ◯ 30-39
- ◯ 40-49
- ◯ 50-59
- ◯ 60 years +
- ◯ Prefer not to say

5. Location of your school *

- ◯ Munster
- ◯ Leinster
- ◯ Connacht
- ◯ Ulster

6. Qualifications Attained (Tick all that apply) *

- [ ] PhD
- [ ] Masters
- [ ] Postgraduate Diploma
- [ ] Bachelors Degree
- [ ] Other

7. School type (Tick all that apply) *

- [ ] Mainstream
- [ ] DEIS
- [ ] Gaelscoil
- [ ] Multi-denominational
- [ ] Non-denominational
- [ ] Special School
- [ ] Other

8. Which management body has responsibility for the school? *

- [ ] CPSMA
- [ ] Church of Ireland Education Board
- [ ] National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
- [ ] An Foras Pátrúnachta
- [ ] Educate Together
- [ ] Muslim Primary Education Board
- [ ] Other

9. For how many years have you been principal in this school? *

10. For how many years have you been principal in another school(s)? (Answer only if applicable)

11. Had you ever served as Deputy? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

12. Had you taken any courses in leadership before taking the role of school leader? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

13. Did you engage in a leadership course after your appointment as school leader? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

14. How prepared did you feel for the job of school leader? *

- ◯ Very prepared
- ◯ Somewhat prepared
- ◯ Neither prepared nor unprepared
- ◯ Somewhat unprepared
- ◯ Very unprepared

15. Rate the following in terms of influence on your decision to become a principal *

	very important	important	slightly important	not at all important
Remuneration	○	○	○	○
The ability to influence the direction of the school	○	○	○	○
Having the opportunity to make a difference in students' lives	○	○	○	○
Prestige of the position	○	○	○	○
Location of the school	○	○	○	○

Wellbeing

16. On average, how many hours of work did you do in the last week? *

- ◯ Less than 45 hours
- ◯ 45-59 hours
- ◯ 60-75 hours
- ◯ More than 75 hours

17. During the past week, how often have you felt any of the following at work? *

	almost always	frequently	sometimes	once in a while	almost never
Engaged	○	○	○	○	○
Excited	○	○	○	○	○
Exhausted	○	○	○	○	○
Frustrated	○	○	○	○	○
Happy	○	○	○	○	○
Hopeful	○	○	○	○	○
Overwhelmed	○	○	○	○	○
Safe	○	○	○	○	○
Anxious	○	○	○	○	○
Worried	○	○	○	○	○
Stress	○	○	○	○	○
Strain	○	○	○	○	○

18. Have you ever considered stepping down from your role? *

Select your answer ∨

19. Please elaborate further

20. Would you recommend the role of school leader to others? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

21. Please explain

22. I feel motivated in my role *

- All of the time
- More often than not
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever

23. How effective do you feel at your job right now? *

- ◯ Very effective
- ◯ Somewhat effective
- ◯ Neither effective nor ineffective
- ◯ Somewhat ineffective
- ◯ Very ineffective

24. How much does your work matter to you? *

- ◯ A tremendous amount
- ◯ Quite a lot
- ◯ Matters some
- ◯ A little bit
- ◯ Does not matter at all

25. Overall, how satisfied are you with the job right now? *

- ◯ Extremely satisfied
- ◯ Somewhat satisfied
- ◯ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- ◯ Somewhat dissatisfied
- ◯ Very dissatisfied

26. I feel stressed in my job *

- ◯ Strongly agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Neither agree nor disagree
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly disagree

27. How confident do you feel in your role as school leader? *

- ◯ Confident
- ◯ Neutral
- ◯ Not confident

28. What do you believe to be the impact of the job on your mental health

- ◯ None at all
- ◯ A little
- ◯ A moderate amount
- ◯ A lot
- ◯ A great deal

29. What do you believe to be the impact of the job on your physical health

- ◯ None at all
- ◯ A little
- ◯ A moderate amount
- ◯ A lot
- ◯ A great deal

Positives and challenges associated with the role

30. How satisfied are you with the following

	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Workload	○	○	○	○	○
Principal release days	○	○	○	○	○
Substitute availability	○	○	○	○	○
Managing teaching staff	○	○	○	○	○
Managing ancillary staff	○	○	○	○	○
Technology in your school	○	○	○	○	○
Condition of the school building (toilets, staff room, etc)	○	○	○	○	○
Special Education Provision	○	○	○	○	○
Dual role of teaching plus leadership role	○	○	○	○	○

32. What are the most positive aspects of being a school leader? *

33. If you could change three things about your role as school leader, what would you change? *

31. How important are the following as areas of support for you: *

	Extremely Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Extremely unimportant
Teaching staff	○	○	○	○	○
Ancillary staff	○	○	○	○	○
Board of Management	○	○	○	○	○
Parent Body	○	○	○	○	○
Inspectorate	○	○	○	○	○
Centre for School Leadership	○	○	○	○	○
IPPN	○	○	○	○	○
INTO	○	○	○	○	○
National Principals Forum	○	○	○	○	○
PDST	○	○	○	○	○
Family/Friends	○	○	○	○	○
DES	○	○	○	○	○
CPSMA	○	○	○	○	○
Other	○	○	○	○	○
SNAs	○	○	○	○	○

32. What are the most positive aspects of being a school leader? *

33. If you could change three things about your role as school leader, what would you change? *

Email address for follow up interview

34. If you would be willing to take part in a follow up interview please leave an email address in the box below. Many thanks

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Microsoft. The data you submit will be sent to the form owner.

Microsoft Forms

Appendix 2: Information Sheet

Thank you for considering participating in this research project. The purpose of this document is to explain to you what the work is about and what your participation would involve, so as to enable you to make an informed choice.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the school leadership experiences of current and former school leaders in Irish primary schools. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an online interview with the researcher. This interview will recorded and is expected to take 30-40 minutes to complete.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate, and should you choose to do so you can refuse to answer specific questions or decide to withdraw from the interview. Once the interview has been concluded, you can choose to withdraw your details at any time in the subsequent two weeks.

All of the information you provide will be kept confidential and anonymous and will be available only to the researcher and to the two supervisors. The only exception is where information is disclosed which indicates that there is a serious risk to you or to others. Once the interview is completed, the recording will immediately be transferred to an encrypted laptop and wiped from the recording device. The interview will then be transcribed by the researcher, and all identifying information will be removed. Once this is done, the audio- recording will also be deleted and only the anonymized transcript will remain. This will be stored on the University College Cork OneDrive system and subsequently on the UCC server. The data will be stored for a minimum of ten years as per University College Cork requirements. The information you provide will contribute to a thesis as part of a PhD submission. The information you provide may contribute to research publications and/or conference presentations.

I do not anticipate any negative outcomes from participating in this study. Should you experience any distress arising from the research process, the contact details for the DES Employee Assistance Service (EAS) are provided below:

The EAS is accessible through the dedicated ***Free-phone Confidential Helpline*** *at* ***1800 411 057*** *and is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Alternatively, text 'Hi' to 087 369 0010 to avail of EAS support on SMS & WhatsApp.*

This study has obtained ethical approval from the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any queries about this research, you can contact me at 116222082@umail.ucc. ie and also my supervisors Dr. Joseph Moynihan at joseph.moynihan@ucc.ie and Dr Wesley O'Brien at wesley.obrien@ucc.ie. If you agree to take part in this study, please sign the consent form overleaf.

Appendix 3: Key for coding of quantitative data

GENDER

Woman =	1
Man =	2
Prefer not to Say =	3

PRINCIPAL POSITION

Admin =	1
Teaching =	2

AGE GROUP

20-29 =	1
30-39 =	2
40-49 =	3
50-59 =	4
60+ =	5

LOCATION

Munster =	1
Leinster =	2
Connacht =	3
Ulster =	4

QUALIFICATIONS ATTAINED:

PhD	1 = yes	2 = no
Masters	1 = yes	2 = no
Postgraduate Diploma	1 = yes	2 = no
Bachelor's Degree	1 = yes	2 = no
Other	1 = yes	2 = no

SCHOOL TYPE:

Mainstream	1= yes	2 = no
DEIS	1= yes	2 = no
Gaelscoil	1= yes	2 = no
Multi - denominational	1= yes	2 = no
Non – denominational	1= yes	2 = no
Special School	1= yes	2 = no
Other	1= yes	2 = no

MANAGEMENT BODY OF SCHOOL

CPSMA =	1
Church of Ireland Board =	2
National Association of Boards of Management in Special Schools =	3
An Foras Pátrúnachta =	4
Educate Together =	5
Muslim Primary Education Board =	6
Other =	15

EVER SERVED AS DEPUTY

Yes =	1
No =	2

LEADERSHIP COURSES BEFORE?

Yes = 1

No = 2

LEADERSHIP COURSES AFTER?

Yes = 1

No = 2

HOW PREPARED DID YOU FEEL FOR THE JOB OF SCHOOL LEADER?

Very prepared = 5

Somewhat prepared = 4

Neither prepared nor unprepared = 3

Somewhat unprepared = 2

Very unprepared = 1

RATE THE FOLLOWING IN TERMS OF INFLUENCE ON YOUR DECISION TO BECOME A PRINCIPAL

REMUNERATION

The ability to influence the direction of the school

Having the opportunity to make a difference in students' lives Prestige of

the position

Location of the school

very important = 4

important = 3

slightly important = 2

not at all important = 1

HOURS WORKED IN THE LAST WEEK

Less than 45 = 1

45-59 hours = 2

60-75 hours = 3

More than 75 hours = 4

DURING THE PAST WEEK – HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU FELT AT WORK …..

	Engaged	Excited	Exhausted	Frustrated	Happy	Hopeful	Overwhelmed	Safe	Anxious	Worried	Stress	Strain
Almost always	5	5	1	1	5	5	1	5	1	1	1	1
Frequently	4	4	2	2	4	4	2	4	2	2	2	2
Sometimes	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Once in a while	2	2	4	4	2	2	4	2	4	4	4	4
Almost never	1	1	5	5	1	1	5	1	5	5	5	5

HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED STEPPING DOWN?

Yes = 1

On occasion = 2

No = 3

WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THE ROLE TO OTHERS?

Yes = 3

Maybe = 2

No = 1

I FEEL MOTIVATED IN MY ROLE

All of the time = 4

More often than not = 3

Sometimes = 2

Hardly ever = 1

HOW EFFECTIVE DO YOU FEEL IN YOUR JOB RIGHT NOW?

Very effective = 5

Somewhat effective = 4

Neither effective nor ineffective = 3

Somewhat ineffective = 2

Very ineffective = 1

HOW MUCH DOES YOUR WORK MATTER TO YOU?

A tremendous amount = 5

Quite a lot = 4

Matters some = 3

A little bit = 2

Does not matter at all = 1

OVERALL, HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH THE JOB RIGHT NOW?

Extremely satisfied =	5
Somewhat satisfied =	4
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied =	3
Somewhat dissatisfied =	2
Very dissatisfied =	1

I FEEL STRESSED IN MY JOB

Strongly agree =	1
Agree =	2
Neither agree nor disagree =	3
Disagree =	4
Strongly disagree =	5

HOW CONFIDENT DO YOU FEEL IN YOUR ROLE?

Confident =	3
Neutral =	2
Not confident =	1

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE THE IMPACT TO BE ON YOUR MENTAL HEALTH?

None at all =	5
A little =	4
A moderate amount =	3
A lot =	2
A great deal =	1

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE THE IMPACT TO BE ON YOUR PHYSICAL HEALTH?

None at all =	5
A little =	4
A moderate amount =	3
A lot =	2
A great deal =	1

HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH THE FOLLOWING:

	Very satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Workload	5	4	3	2	1
Principal Release Days	5	4	3	2	1
Substitute availability	5	4	3	2	1
Managing teaching staff	5	4	3	2	1
Managing ancillary staff	5	4	3	2	1
Technology in your school	5	4	3	2	1
Condition of the school building	5	4	3	2	1
Special Education Provision	5	4	3	2	1
Dual role of teaching plus leadership	5	4	3	2	1

HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE FOLLOWING AREAS OF SUPPORT FOR YOU?

	Extremely important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Extremely unimportant
Teaching staff	5	4	3	2	1
Ancillary staff	5	4	3	2	1
Board of Management	5	4	3	2	1
Parent Body	5	4	3	2	1
Inspectorate	5	4	3	2	1
Centre for School Leadership	5	4	3	2	1
IPPN	5	4	3	2	1
INTO	5	4	3	2	1
National Principals' Forum	5	4	3	2	1
PDST	5	4	3	2	1
Family/Friends	5	4	3	2	1
DES	5	4	3	2	1
CPSMA	5	4	3	2	1
Other	5	4	3	2	1
SNAs	5	4	3	2	1

Appendix 4: Interview Protocol for current School Leaders

Motivation for becoming a principal.
What motivated you to pursue a career as a school principal?

If applicable, please share any prior leadership experience that influenced your decision. Did you undergo any formal preparation or training for this role?

How did factors like location, remuneration, or personal aspirations play a role in your decision?

Changes in the School Leader Role:

In your time as a school leader, what significant changes have you observed in the role? Are these changes generally considered beneficial or disruptive to your role?

Personal and Professional Adaptation:

How have you personally and professionally evolved since becoming a school principal? Have you noticed changes in your confidence, work-life balance, or in-school management skills over time?

Stress in the Role:

Many principals describe the role as stressful. Could you share your thoughts on this? How do you manage and sustain yourself in this role?

Are there specific strategies or support systems that you rely on?

Distinguishing Stress from Strain:

When do you believe stress in the job can escalate into strain or become unhealthy?

How do you personally differentiate between stress and strain in the context of this job?

Board of Management Effectiveness:

How effective do you find your Board of Management (BoM) in supporting your leadership and the school's goals?

Consideration of Stepping Down:

Have there been occasions when you seriously considered stepping down from your role as

a school leader?

Can you describe the thought process and factors that led to these considerations?

If relevant, how do you view the differences between being a teaching principal and an administrative principal?

Current Leadership Priorities:

What are your current priorities in your leadership role?

Are there any specific that you are focusing on at the moment?

Additional questions for former School Leaders:

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR FORMER SCHOOL LEADERS:

Having stepped down as a school leader, could you explain in more detail what influenced your decision to do so?

Procedure for Stepping Down:

Can you provide insights into the process of stepping down from the role of school leader?

Regrets About the Decision:

Do you have any regrets about your decision to step down from the role of school leader? Is there anything you would have done differently in hindsight?

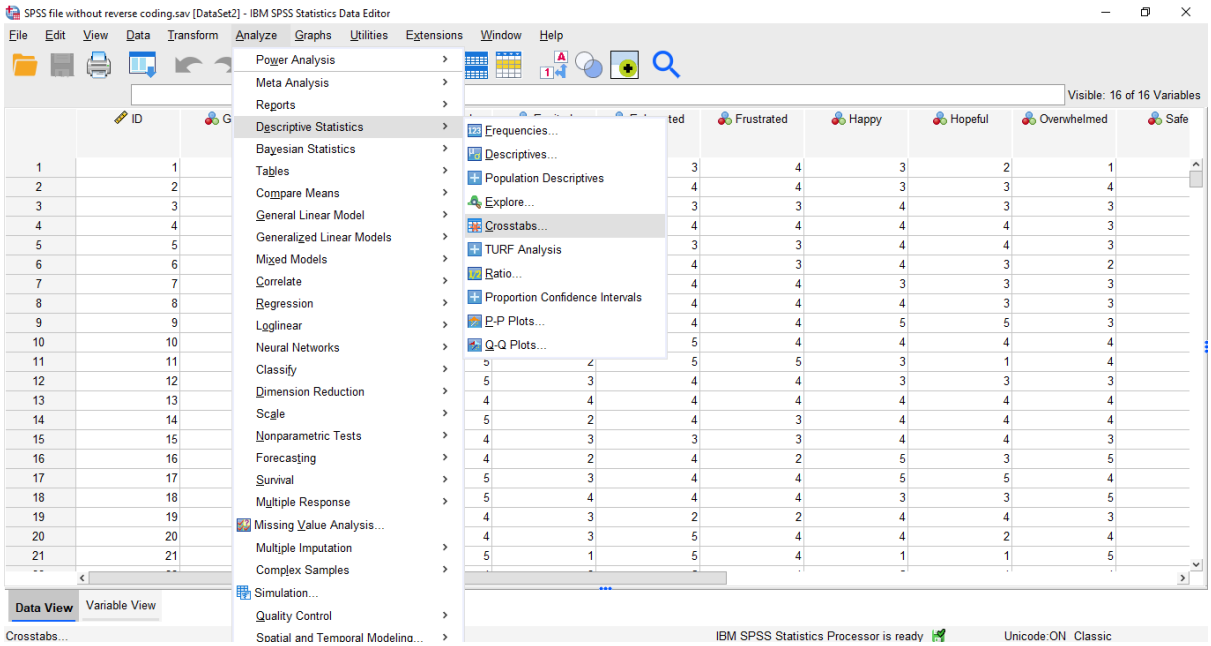
Reconsidering the Role:

What, if anything, would entice you to consider returning to the role of school leader?

Appendix 5: Quantitative Analysis using SPSS

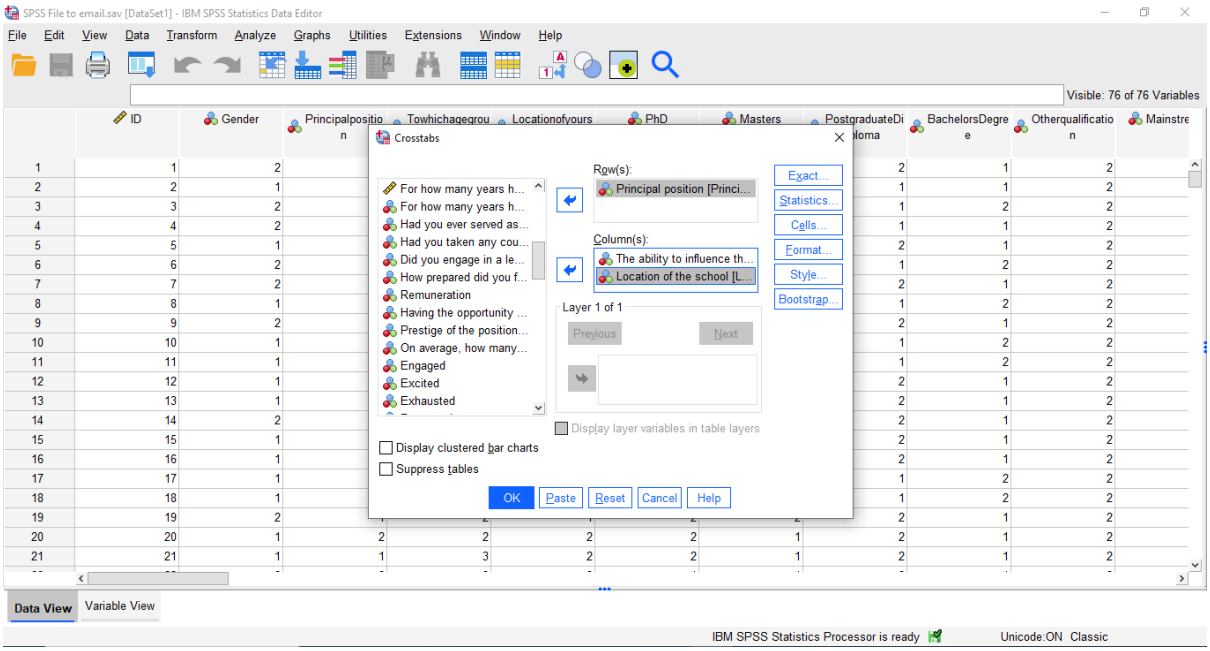
Chi-Square test for Independence

1. From the menu at the top of the screen, click Analyze, then Descriptive Statistics, and, then Crosstabs.

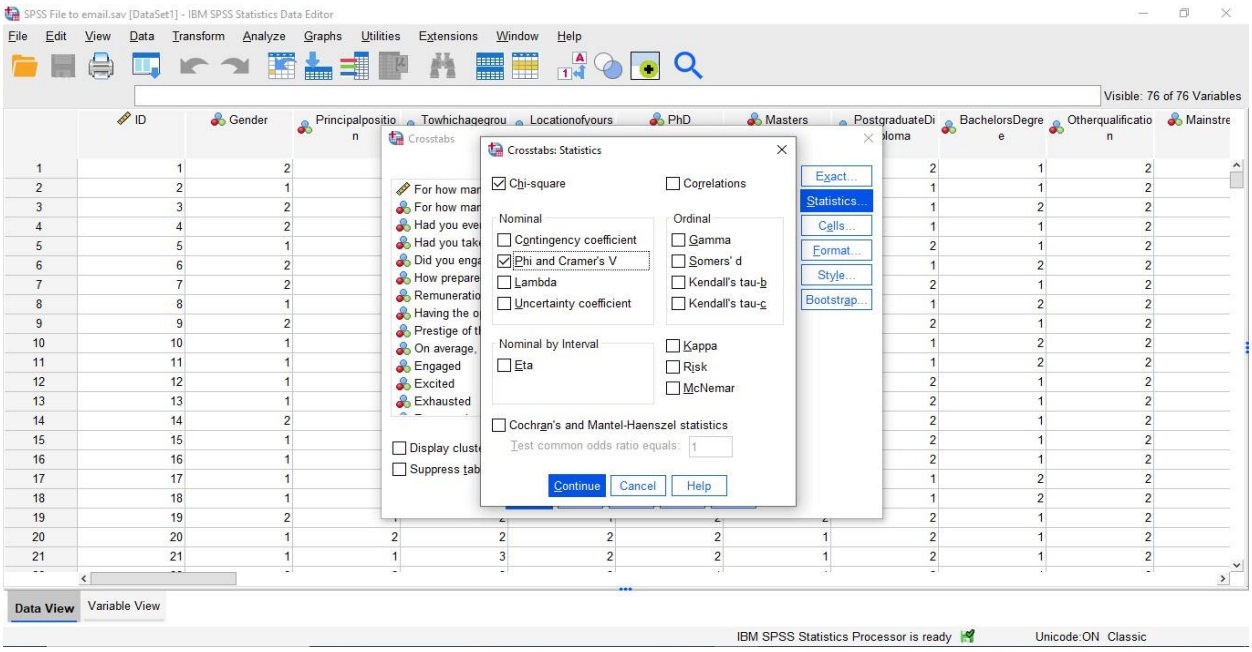


2. Click on the variable – ***principal position in this study*** – to be the row variable and click on the arrow to move it into the box marked Row(s)
3. Click on the other variable to be your column variable – location of the school and the ability to influence the direction of the school – click on the arrow to move it into the

box marked Columns



4. Click on the Statistics button. Tick Chi-Square and Phi and Cramer's V. Click on Continue.

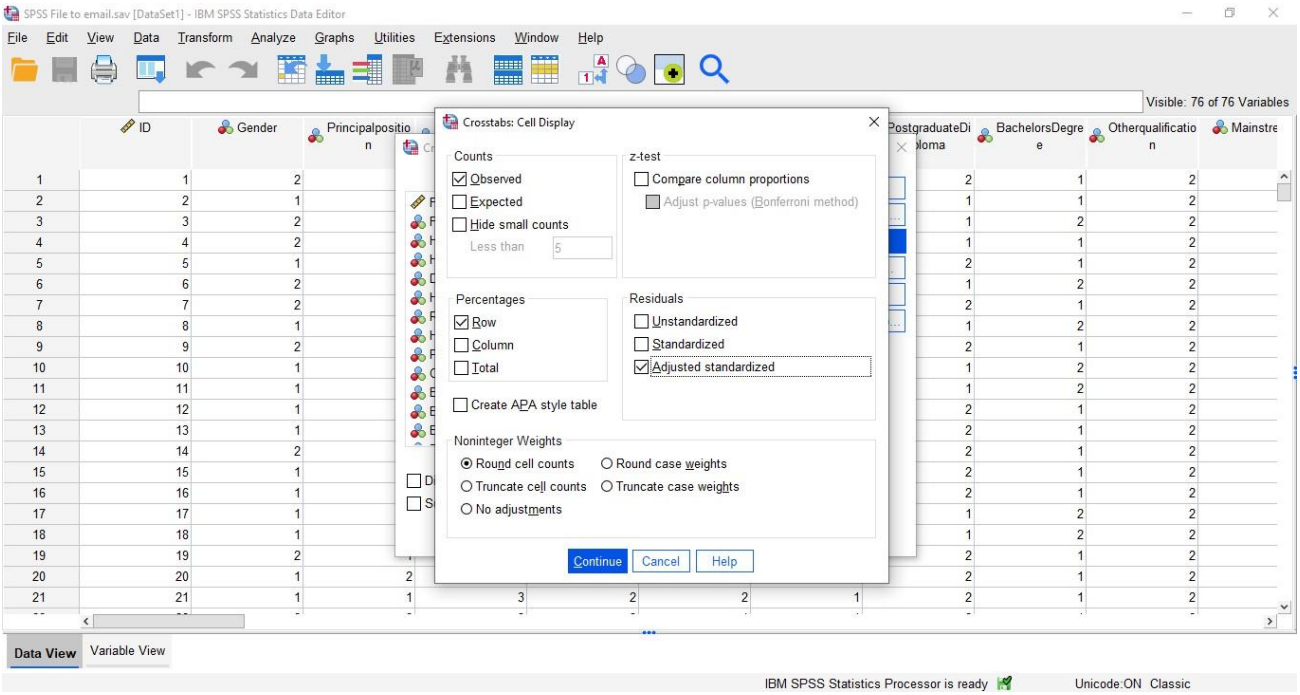


5. Click on the cells count

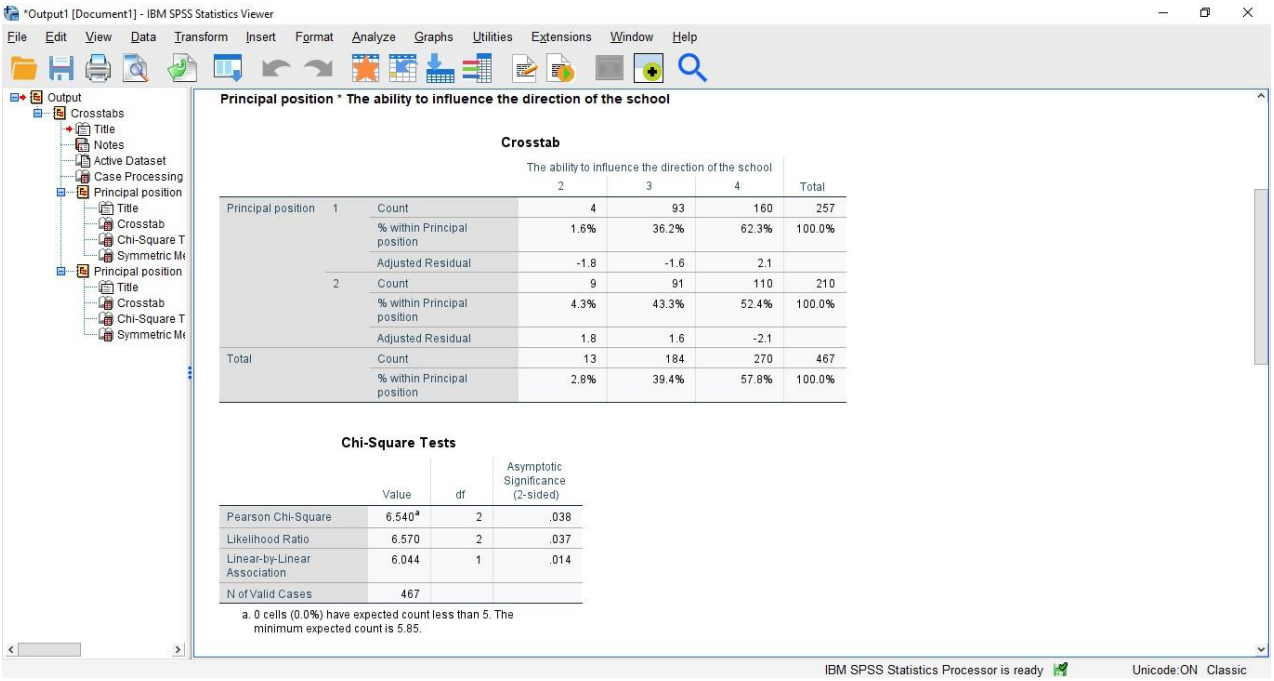
   a. In the Counts box, make sure there is a tick for Observed

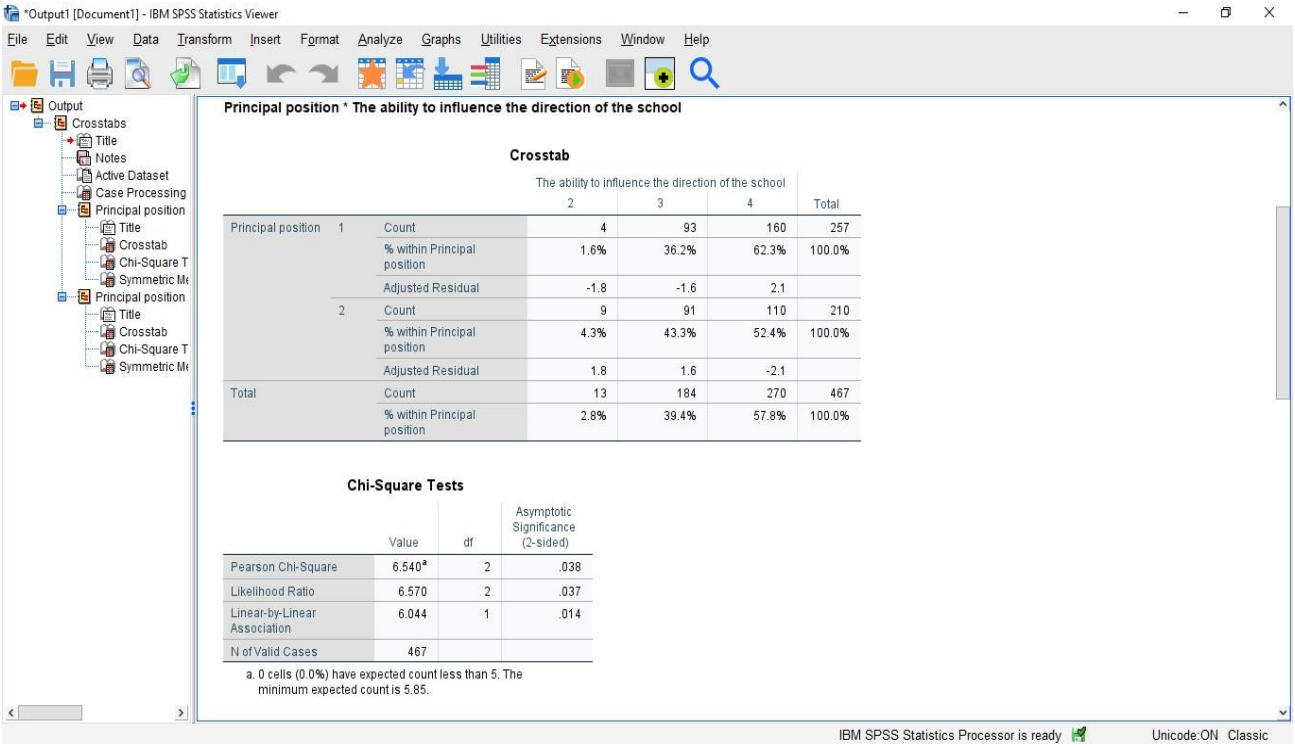
   b. In the percentage section, click on the Row box

c. In the Residuals section, click on Adjusted standarised



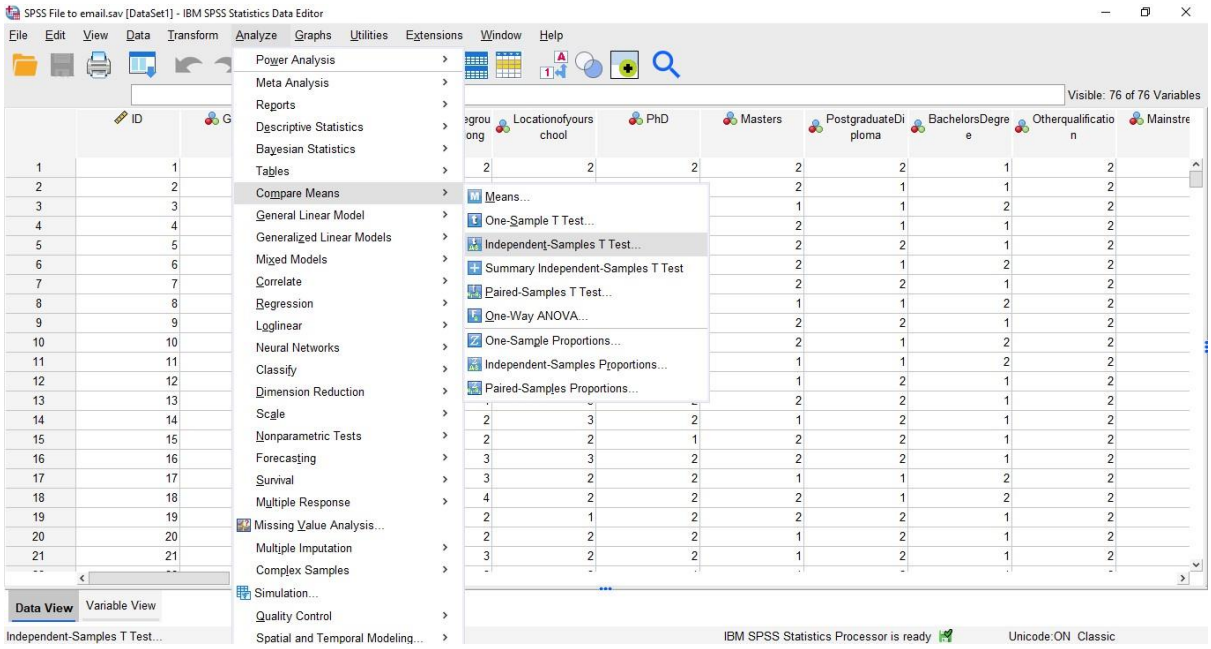
6. Click on Continue and then OK



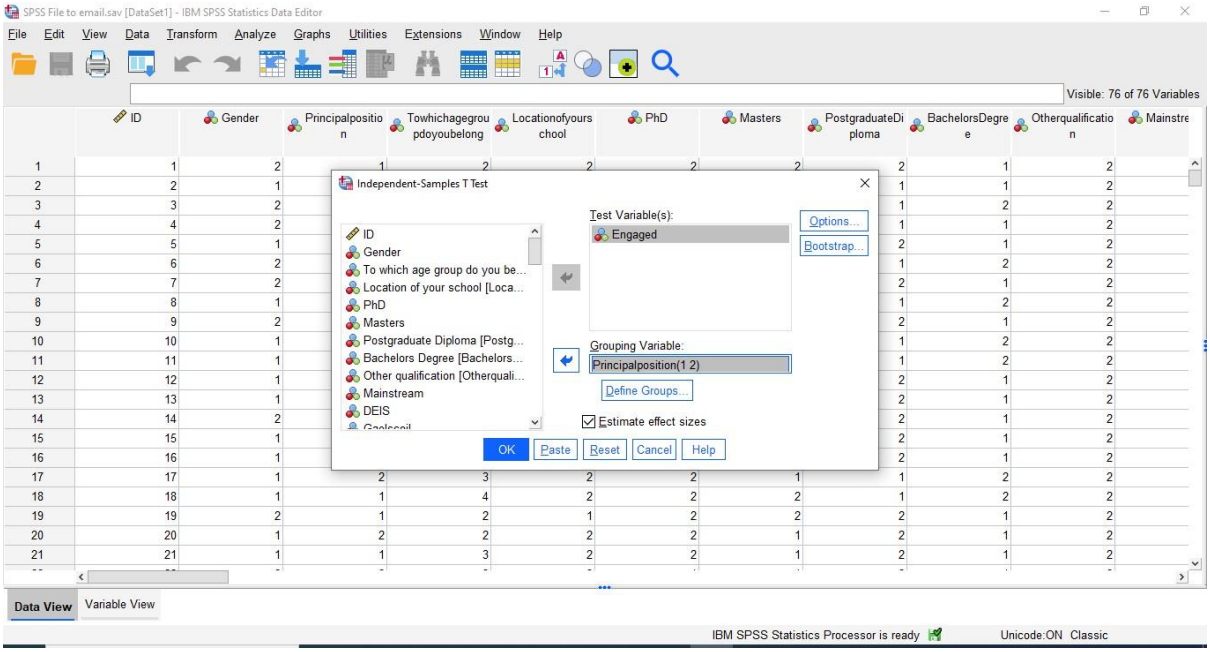


Procedure for independent-samples t-test

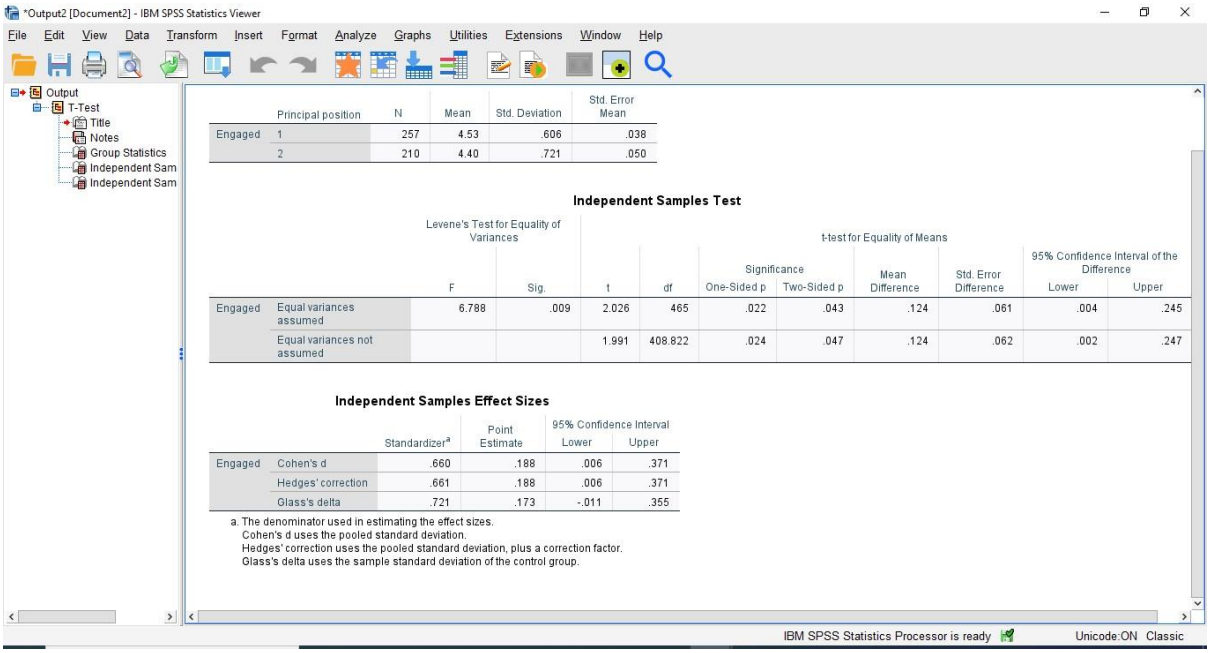
1. From the menu at the top of the screen, click Analyze, then select Compare means, then Independent Samples T Test
2. Move the dependent (continuous) variable – engagement. – into the Test Variable box



3. Move the independent variable – principal position – into the section labelled Grouping variable
4. Click on Define groups and type in the numbers used in the data set to code each group. In this study, 1 = administrative principal and 2 = teaching principal.

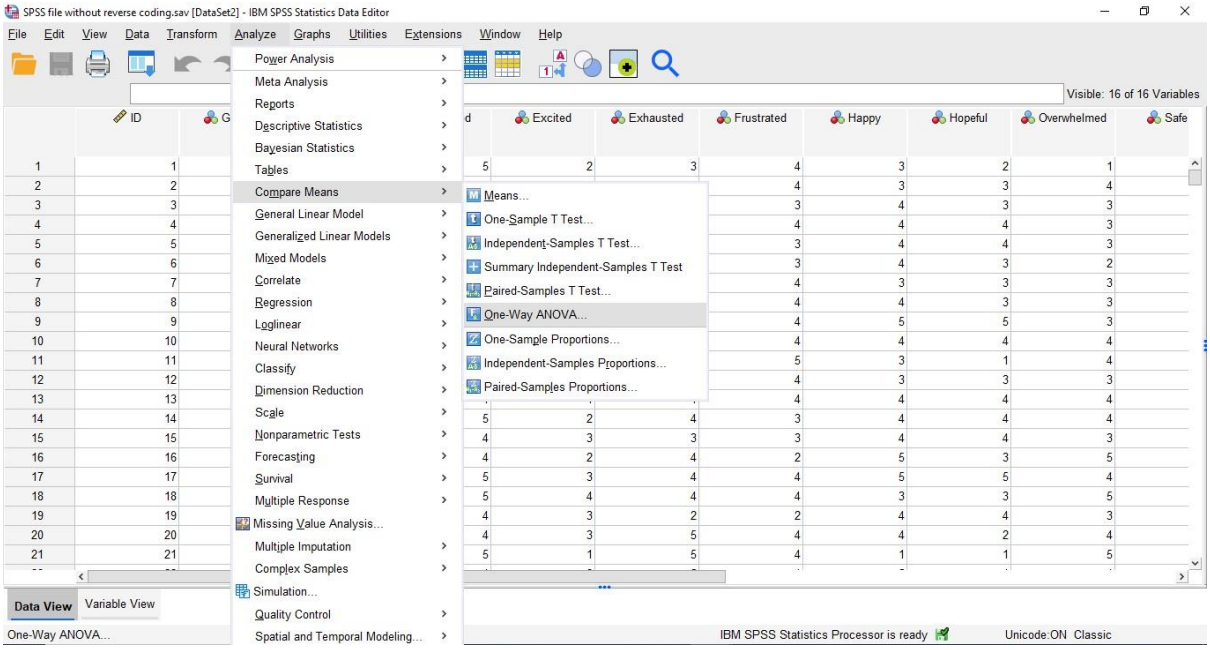


5. Click on Continue and then OK.

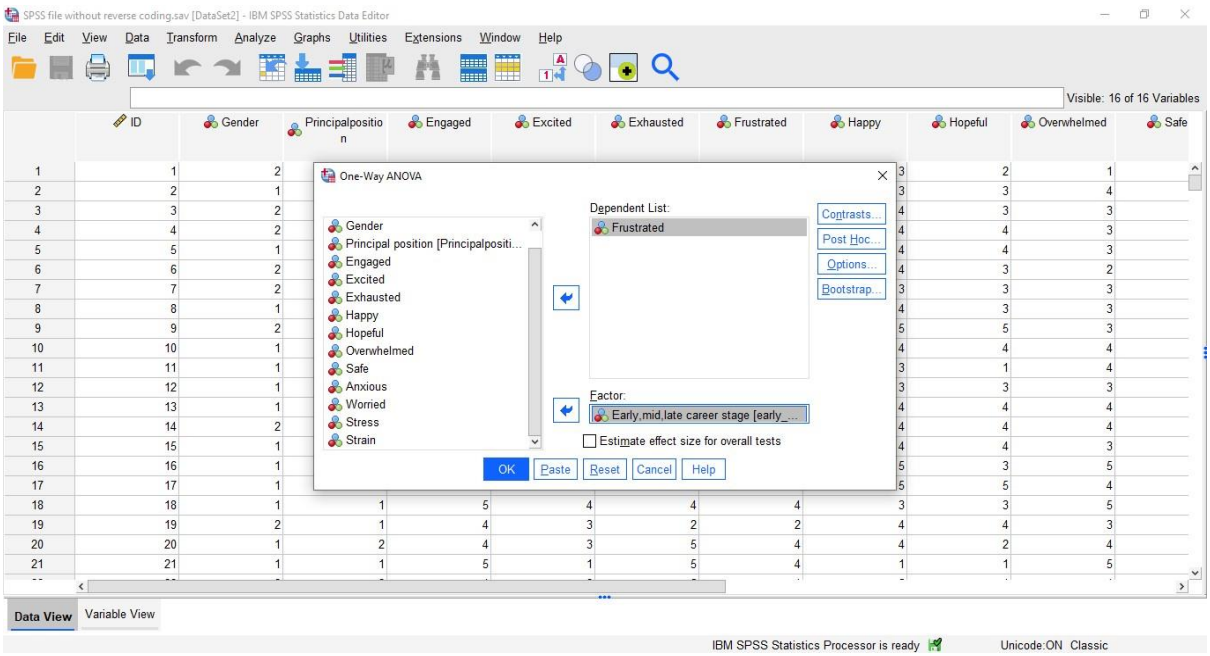


Procedure for one-way between-groups ANOVA with post-hoc tests

1. From the menu at the top of the screen, click Analyze, then select Compare means, then One-Way ANOVA



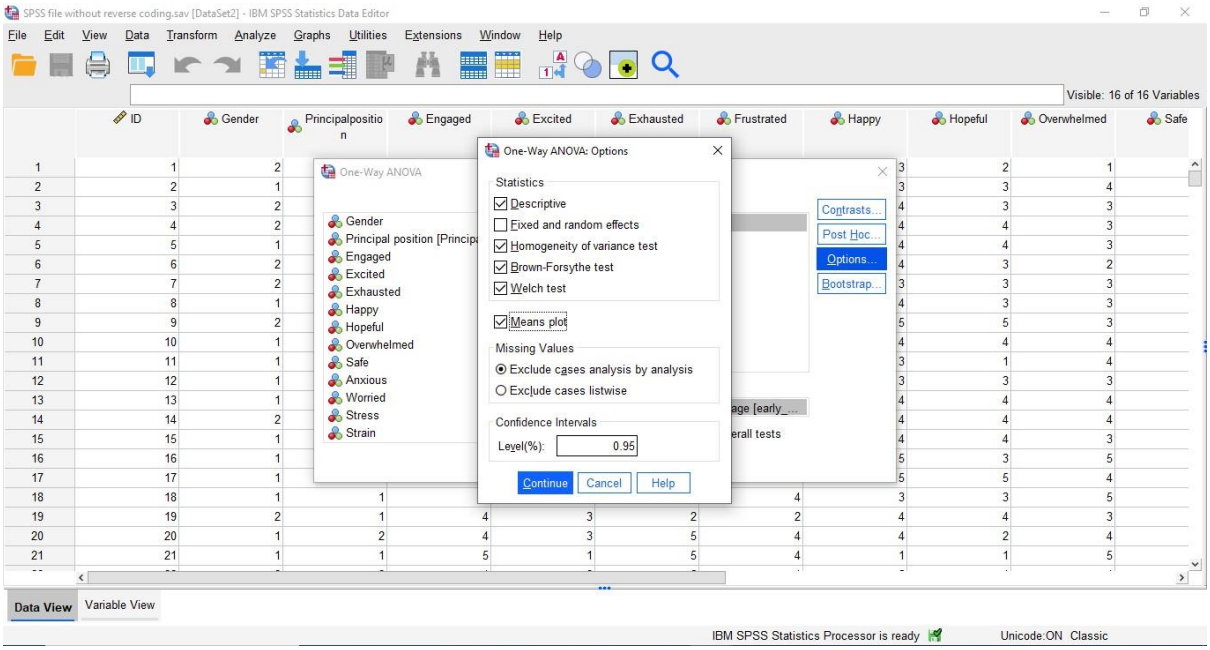
2. Click on the dependent (continuous) variable – frustration, satisfaction, etc. . Move this into the box marked Dependent List by clicking the arrow below.
3. Click on your independent, categorical variable (in this study career stage). Move this into the box labelled Factor.



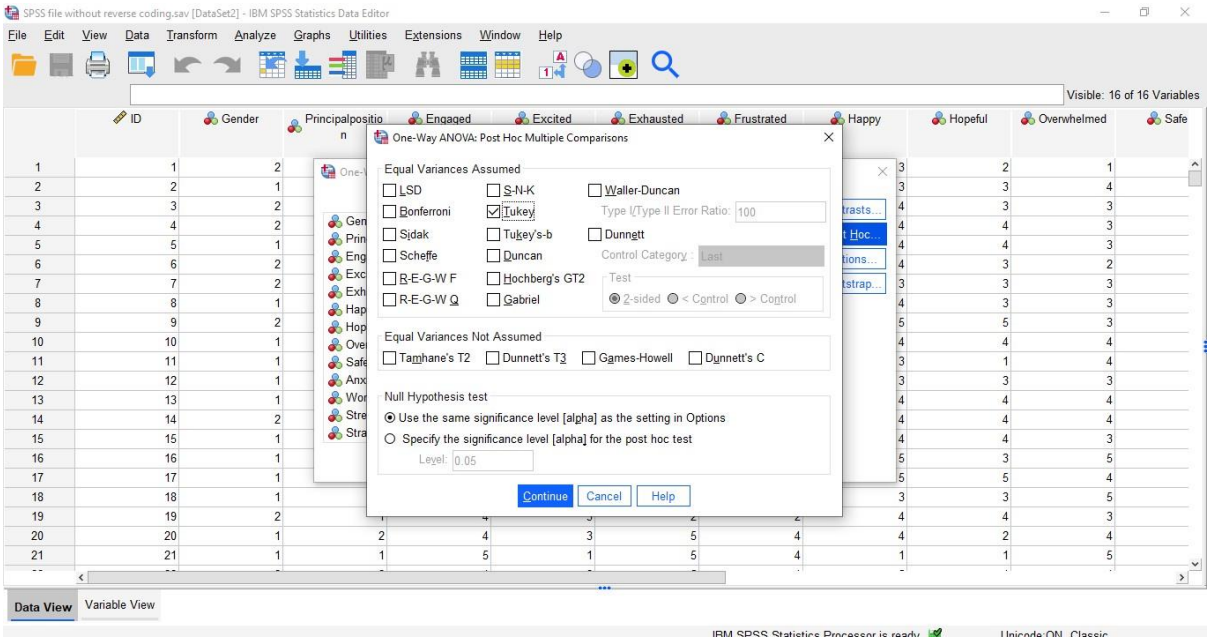
4. Click on the Options button and click on Descriptive, Homogeneity of variance test, Brown-Forsythe, Welch, and Means Plot.

5. For Missing Values, make sure there is a dot marked Exclude cases analysis by analysis.

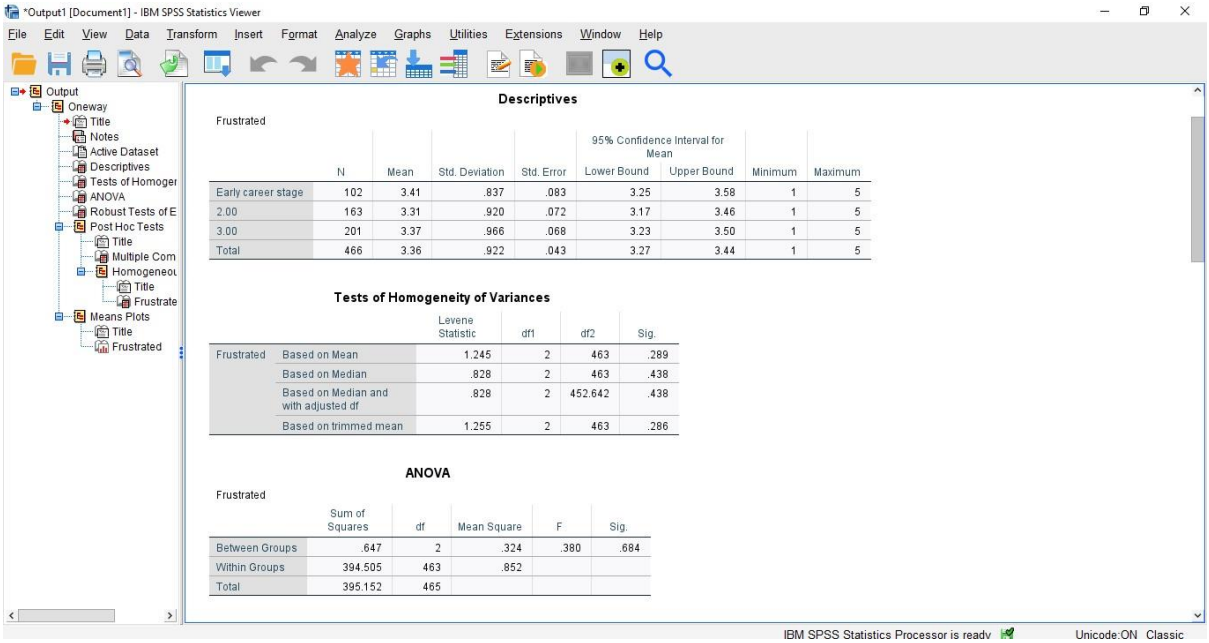
   Click on Continue.

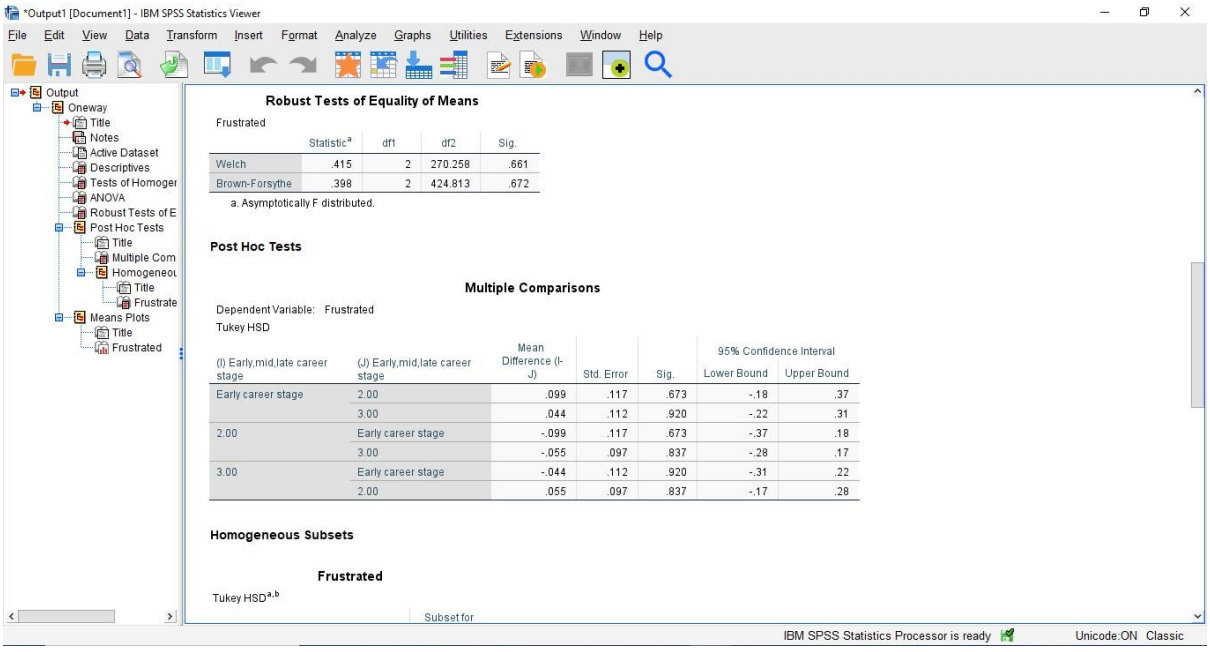


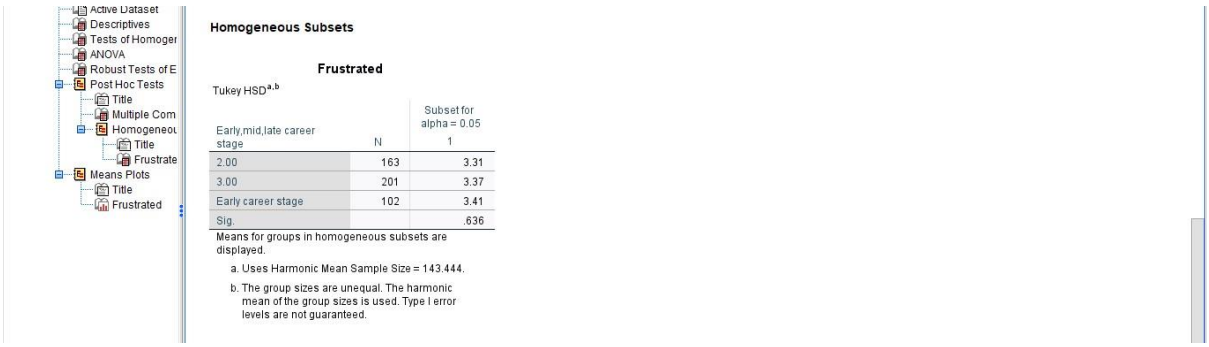
6. Click on the button marked Post Hoc. Click on Tukey.



7. Click on Continue and then OK.


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Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.
a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 143.444.
b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used. Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

Appendix 6: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the dataset

The following are insights noted following all six interviews with former school leaders.

Paul –

- unplanned journey to principal
- witnessed significant changes in the role
- increased collaboration among principals
- high levels of stress, especially in dealing with staff issues
- develop coping mechanisms - boundaries between work and personal life.
- no regrets about closing the school and stepping away from the principalship
- absolute certainty and awareness of the challenges involved needed to enter leadership

Alison

- motivation - Educate Together school as a parent; opportunity to shape the school
- found the role consuming and challenging, lonely, stress.
- deliberate transition out of the principal role, smooth handover of responsibilities to her successor and the school board.
- step down due to the overwhelming demands of the role and its negative impact on her wellbeing.
- no intention of returning to the role of principal

Eleanor

- always aspired to become a principal

- lacked formal preparation for the role
- challenge of transitioning from colleague to leader
- work-life balance - three young children.
- role evolved, with significant changes in areas like school self-evaluation, child protection, GDPR, and digital technologies.
- bullying from the board chairperson
- discussed formal step-down process and support network for principals leaving the role
- doesn't regret leaving and advocates for others to do the same if necessary.
- the importance of support networks, work-life balance
- believes in exploring shared administrative roles for small schools to allow principals to focus on teaching and learning.

Mairead

- a teacher in a small three-teacher school, became deputy principal - early exposure to leadership
- courses and conferences
- immediate challenges as principal - Whole School Evaluation (WSE) and school extension
- burnout due to overwhelming responsibilities and lack of work-life balance.
- step down as principal - health and family life
- discusses the challenges faced by many young principals – stress and strain
- notes importance of supportive boards of management and staff relationships

- work-related stress - toll on personal life.
- no regrets about her decision to step down

Siobhan

- principal at a small school for three and a half years
- motivation for becoming a principal was the desire for a challenge and to work in her community
- felt somewhat unprepared for the role initially
- good support network from previous principals, local colleagues, and CPSMA and IPPN
- workload - work-life balance
- step down - family, avoid missing important moments in her children's lives
- teaching role within the school
- no regrets about her decision

Áine

- motivation to become a principal - community and a desire to maintain the school for her own children.
- deputy for two years
- no formal leadership training before becoming principal
- more invested in administration than teaching, unexpected challenge
- work-life balance was difficult due to the demands of the role, especially as a teaching principal in a small school.

- described the principalship as stressful and all-consuming, affecting her personal life and well-being.
- Importance of setting boundaries for her personal time.
- BOM ill-equipped to handle sensitive issues
- stepped down from the role due to the workload and work-life balance
- challenges transitioning back to a teaching role - stigma
- In future would prefer a deputy position in a larger school.

Phase 2: Coding

Beginning the coding process using the interviews with former school leaders.

Code Label	Data
Accidental	Paul's unexpected journey into the principalship role
Unique	Challenges faced by Alison as a lone teacher in a startup school
Resilience	Eleanor's experience of bullying from the board chairperson
Support	Mairead's emphasis on the importance of supportive boards of management
Balance	Siobhan's decision to step down to prioritise family and work-life balance
Struggle	Áine's struggle to balance teaching and administrative duties as a principal

Phase 3: Generating initial themes

Coded words and initial themes across all interviews

Insight	Coded Word
Motivation for becoming a principal	Motivation
Limited preparation before taking on the role	Preparation
Initial "shell shock" upon becoming a principal	Adaptation
Difficulty in balancing work and personal life	Work-Life Balance
Distinguishing between stress and strain	Stress Management

Importance of support systems	Support Networks
Challenges in managing teaching and administrative duties	Role Juggling
Finding motivation in working with children	Passion
Prioritising tasks such as managing building projects and recruitment	Time Management
Frustration with managing building projects due to lack of expertise	Delegation
Advice for new principals to seek mentoring and coaching	Mentorship
Feeling isolated and lonely in the role	Loneliness
Coping mechanisms such as relaxation and outdoor activities	Self-Care
Confidence in decision-making and leadership	Confidence
Facing stress and strain in the principalship role	Resilience
Recognition of personal growth and development	Growth Mindset
Challenges and uncertainties about future career paths	Reflection
Impact of COVID-19 on education dynamics	COVID-19
Struggle with maintaining boundaries between work and personal life	Boundaries
Lack of understanding among board members regarding roles and responsibilities	Communication
Seeking support from peers, organisations, and family	Community
Prioritising student well-being and happiness	Student Focus

Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes

Themes being reviewed and developed with evidence from interviews

Theme	Coded Words	Examples
Leadership Skills	Leadership, Decision-making	**Leadership:** Harry believed he had the ability to lead an organisation **Decision-making:** Karen emphasised the importance of effective decision-making.
Work-Life Balance	Work-life balance, Personal well-being	**Work-life balance:** Sinead struggles with maintaining a work-life balance **Personal well-being:** Laura prioritises exercise and spending time with family.
Stress and Support	Stress, Support	**Stress:** Carol distinguishes between stress and strain in her role. **Support:** Harry finds support from his family and friends.
Career Reflection	Career path, Future considerations	**Career path:** Laura reflects on her career path and considers her options. **Future considerations:** Sinead acknowledges the challenges and uncertainties.

Challenges and Priorities	Challenges, Priorities	**Challenges:** Shona faces challenges in delegating responsibilities. **Priorities:** Karen's current priorities include managing workload and maintaining balance.
Teaching vs. Administration	Teaching, Administration	**Teaching:** Karen expresses her dedication to teaching. **Administration:** Carol believes it's impossible to balance teaching and administrative duties.
Support Networks	Support, Networking	**Support:** Ellen finds support from professional groups. **Networking:** Laura relies on colleagues and external organisations for advice.

Phase 5: Refining, defining, and naming themes

Refining and naming the themes in readiness for drafting of findings

Theme	Example of data
Relationships with Pupils	"The parish expects you to be there at ceremonies and matches and the rest of it." - Áine
Relationships with Staff	"None of the other staff would take on the deputy role." - Áine
	"I was dealing with a lot of residual resentments and hurt that even before my time, and that were carrying on and hadn't been resolved." - Áine"
	"Transitioning from colleague to leader was challenging." - Eleanor
Relationships with the School Community	"The parish expects you to be there at ceremonies and matches and the rest of it." - Áine
Relationships with the Board of Management	"Board of management? Kind, kind, ill-equipped people, I would say." - Áine
	"The boards were very unwilling to act, where it was needed." - Áine
Workload	"You're just so... then you're in your class, you're in the office, you're sorting SNAs, payrolls, bus escorts, the whole lot of it." - Áine"
	“ constant responsibilities and challenges." - Siobhan
Teaching Principal	"I think it's completely different. It's more difficult to draw the line I think." - Áine
	"Because it's a lonely position while I was doing it." - Áine
Adjusting to the Role	"I think I had to become I suppose more invested, I felt more invested in the administration than the actual teaching." - Áine
	"Transitioning from colleague to leader was challenging." - Eleanor
Health and Wellbeing	"It just feels never-ending." - Áine
Work-Life Balance	"It just feels never-ending." - Áine

	"Siobhan decided to step down primarily to prioritise her family and avoid missing important moments in her children's lives." - Siobhan
Loneliness	"Because it's a lonely position while I was doing it." - Áine
Supports	“I had a good support network from previous principals, local colleagues, and organisations like CPSMA and IPPN." - Siobhan
Stepping Down	"I decided to step down primarily to prioritise my family and avoid missing important moments in my children's lives." - Siobhan
	"Well, I did it actually quite kind of suddenly, when, when the only way you can do it is if a permanent role comes becomes available in your school." - Áine