Deputy Principals – A Hidden Asset in Schools?

Introduction

Our work with aspiring school leaders prompted a research project on the position of deputy principal in Irish primary and post-primary schools. Anecdotally, we were aware of unevenness of practice. A survey of national and international literature indicated that the position is often poorly understood, under-appreciated, and under-researched. Recent discourse on school leadership has emphasised the value of greater collaboration, including 'distributed leadership' (e.g., Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; DE, 2022b, 2022c).

The Chief Inspector's Report 2016–2020 (DE, 2022a) observes that 'the extent of the burden of the principal's role' continues to be a matter of grave concern, 'despite the investing in restoring middle leadership posts and the increased powers to delegate roles and responsibilities across middle leaders'. As the chief inspector remarks, 'it is incumbent on the system as a whole to ensure that what has been provided to date is working effectively'.

We see deputy principalship as central to that discussion. In this short article, we wish to flag some emerging issues and to put them in the context of other recent work.

Survey of deputy principals

Our exploratory, interpretivist research project sought to explore the hidden potential in the role of deputy principal. The case study used a mixed-methods design, sending questionnaires to a wide population of deputy principals through networks, social media, and school emails.

Inductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) of 121 responses (49 primary, 72 post-primary) was used to generate questions for semi-structured interviews, which

Gerry Jeffers
Education Department, Maynooth University

Carmel Lillis
Education Department, Maynooth University

Majella Dempsey
Education Department, Maynooth University

This article offers a snapshot of current research into the position of deputy principals in Irish primary and post-primary schools. It describes findings from a recent survey of deputy principals, reporting their insights into the nature and reality of the role and assessing these issues in the context of other research on school leadership.

are currently being undertaken. Themes identified from analysing the questionnaire data include:

» Most deputy principals indicate high levels of professional commitment to 'making a difference' in their school and, in particular, to the students in their care.
» Respondents see an ability to communicate effectively with all stakeholders and to develop positive professional relationships with them as critically important in the role.
» The role of deputy principal is often poorly defined; the tasks associated with it can vary greatly from school to school and are often extensive. Under-definition of the role is generally most pronounced in smaller schools. In post-primary schools the clearest role definition is evident where there is more than one deputy principal.
» In the extensive lists of tasks associated with the role, 'timetabling' features in many. At post-primary level, many also see involvement with students as central, particularly in relation to their behaviour, discipline, wellbeing, and pastoral needs.
» Insufficient time to complete a multiplicity of tasks can be a frustrating feature of the position. At primary level, 42 of the 49 deputy principals also had full responsibility for teaching a class every day.
» The relationship between principal and deputy principal(s) is critically important and can play a major role in shaping overall school culture as predominantly positive or negative. Serious difficulties and tensions can arise in a school when these relationships malfunction.
» Many deputy principals at primary level act as special education needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) with responsibility for the administration, management, and leadership of all aspects of the schooling of the most vulnerable children, in addition to many other tasks.
» Respondents report satisfaction deriving from their role, as well as tensions, frustrations, and even contradictions arising from expectations, overload of tasks, time management, occasionally limited responsibilities, mediation and conflict resolution, and particular school contexts.

Policy and practice

Fresh thinking about deputy principalship is evident, even if at times implicitly, in some recent policy documents and in valuable articles written by practitioners. All of these resonate with our findings so far.

The publication in 2016 of *Looking at Our School* (LAOS) (DES 2016a, 2016b) was an important milestone in clarifying an understanding of school leadership in Ireland. The vision and thrust of its update six years later (DE 2022b, DE 2022c) are broadly similar, though reference to 'deputy principal' is notably more

frequent (62 compared to 23 in 2016 for post-primary; 61 compared to 3 for primary and special schools).

One illustration of how the leadership that is aspired to in LAOS works in practice appears in Rafferty et al. (2021). Four leaders in a large post-primary school explain how they have an effective senior management team 'mainly because there is clarity about our roles, informed by great discussion and collaboration' (p.184). The deputy principal says, 'When I became a DP, the clarity on our roles allowed a focus that could have been lost in the firefighting of daily school life but presented opportunities to grow and to adjust our roles as needed' (p.185). An assistant principal (AP1) says: 'The culture is key, cultivating the conditions by design or intent to nurture leadership at all levels. There is no blueprint for this journey. It is unique for each school, but it starts with a vision of where you would like to go' (p.189).

As we have stated elsewhere (Jeffers & Lillis, 2021), recognising each school's context as different, with consequent variations in vision, priorities, and the working out of relationships through professional conversations, is vital for effective schooling. The evidence from our current research suggests that many deputy principals can and wish to play a critical role in initiating, encouraging, nurturing, and sustaining professional conversations about a school's mission, values, vision, and context encouraging, nurturing, and sustaining professional conversations about a school's mission, values, vision, and context. even though these conversations are often fractured, incomplete, and interrupted by the immediate demands of daily school life. Openness to learning in the role, so clearly visible in Rafferty et al. (2021), appears vital.

In contrast to Rafferty et al. – and in some ways complementary – is Snow et al.'s (2021) highlighting of 'an emergence of toxic leadership experiences' with 'negative consequences for the teaching professionals who took part'. These included decreased job satisfaction, professional agency, and staff morale; reduced performance; increased attrition; and increased negative behaviours, including incivility.

Thus, in each school, leaders can and do shape the culture. Careful reading and understanding of that culture is a critically important skill for leaders prior to shaping a more positive culture (Barth, 2001). The potential of deputy principals to be central to nurturing positive cultures may be underestimated as they become overextended in devoting time to administrative and maintenance tasks rather than enabling genuine leadership. This seems like a lost opportunity, a case of unrealised potential.

Co-leadership

At primary level, Lynskey and O'Connor (2023) – a principal and deputy principal – offer a clear picture of how the thinking that informs LAOS (DE, 2022b) can translate into co-leadership: 'For us, co-leadership means leading our school together. This is achieved by sharing key responsibilities including decision making, planning, ownership of our school vision, problem solving, coaching and development and inclusion of our school community' (p.5). They note, critically, 'We are collaborators, thinking partners and peer mentors. Our model is about collaboration, not delegation' (p.5).

The disconnect between notions of distributed leadership among middle leaders and principals that Lárusdóttir and O'Connor (2017) identified in both Irish and Icelandic schools appears also problematic for some deputy principals in our study. A key issue, as they remark, arises when distributed leadership is seen 'strictly at the gift of the principal rather than a reciprocal relationship' (p.423).

A way ahead

Evidence in our research project points to strong desire among deputy principals to be more centrally involved in the leadership of the school community. The relationships between principals and deputy principals are pivotal to nurturing a culture of collaboration throughout a school. Obstacles to realising this include structures and policies that restrict deputies to tasks that are primarily administrative or allow insufficient time for meaningful leadership.

Even without structural reform, deputy principals can, as eloquently recounted in research from some schools, be vitally involved in participating in – and in some cases initiating – the professional conversations about context, values, vision, and goals associated with reflective practice. Indeed, the new emphasis on collaboration, particularly in the policy shifts articulated in *Looking at Our School,* suggests that reflective practice in schools has to be collective as well as individual.

This research is supported by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD).

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