

The More Things Stay the Same, the More They Change

Reflecting on 30 years of leading a primary school

Beginnings

I'm not sure I ever envisioned writing a piece reflecting on 30 years of principalship by mentioning elephants in the first line. There I was, an excited passenger in a safari jeep pursuing decent photographs of Kenya's most spectacular creature, when somehow the internet connected long enough for an email to arrive. It was Aladdin telling me I had been removed from access to my school's information management system, and assigning the blame to my school's faithful secretary. The curt message bore no signs of emotion, possibly due to AI input.

A safari would never have been possible before the status of my gratuity changed from impending to imminent. Lack of money would have come second only to lack of time. Twenty days away from home would have been unconscionable for a principal, even during the summer holidays – a misnomer thanks to staff appointments, summer camps, building repairs, courses, and other activities. Smiling through gritted teeth at reminders of your luck in having such a long break every year.

I was appointed principal on 28 June 1994. I can be specific about the time too. It was 6:30 pm, just after Ireland had drawn with Norway to reach the second round of the World Cup. It was probably the worst match of the tournament. I remember it only because five minutes after the long whistle, a short phone call from the parish priest of Killeigh informed me that, from 1 September, I would be the new principal in the village school.

I was 28 years old, with seven years of teaching experience in three schools and now, within six weeks of my wedding, I was drawn into further uncharted waters. My fiancée, Marguerite, and I were teaching in the suburbs – she in Leixlip, me in Castleknock, and were



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After 30 years as a primary school principal, the author, recently retired, reflects on how he came to lead a school in the Irish midlands in the mid-1990s. The article examines the school leadership role and how it has changed in the years since, comparing the challenges then with now and casting an eye to the future of school leadership in Ireland.

making plans to live close to both. As we were both from Offaly, with a free site at home, it made economic sense to look at our long-term future in the midlands. The call that day, following disappointments elsewhere, changed everything and brought forward our plans for a homeward move. Marguerite soon also secured work in Offaly, and days after our honeymoon we started our new jobs, with me as the rawest of new school leaders.

I arrived into a school with 182 pupils, six teaching staff, and a learning support teacher shared between three local schools. The building had been completed just six years previously. Photographs on the walls indicated a proud community at its opening. This added to the pressure in my head, hoping I could live up to the expectations of these people who had lobbied politicians, organised raffles, collected money, and now trusted me to lead the learning of their children in their beautiful new school.

I had no training or preparation for being a principal, other than working under very good ones. It would be six more years before the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) was founded. The only opportunity for professional engagement with other principals came at Cumann na mBunscol or Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) meetings or events promoting Green Schools or other initiatives, which were always held after school. I did however appreciate the opportunity I was given, in the parish next to home, and I vowed to give the job every joule of energy I could generate to make it the best school it could be for every child coming through the door.

Then and now

As I write, the post-Budget discussions are about €9m for phone pouches and all the other priorities that could have been addressed, including access to special educational needs professionals and supports, class size, leadership support, and full restoration of posts of responsibility. Thirty years in principalship has taught me to treat budgets, circulars, announcements, and ministerial priorities as just news, neither good nor bad. Allowing blood pressure to increase over such matters only affects one adversely. But of course we can react, express disappointment and displeasure over the lack of what we see as appropriate and necessary resources.

When I compare today with conditions in 1994, the 1994 me would be quite happy with how the job of school leader has evolved. Back then, having 182 pupils allowed us six teachers – 10 more pupils were necessary for the next appointment. A senior-class pupil could figure that to mean an average of 30.3 children per class. There were no special needs assistants. There was no secretary, caretaker, or office. The only computer had come via Quinnsnorth vouchers. On the principal's desk sat the school phone.

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I wasn't long in the school before finding myself in the role of Cumann na mBunscol secretary. To contact one school, I had to call the village phone box, positioned conveniently outside the school, where an open window in the principal's classroom allowed one pupil to race out and answer it. By today's standards this was completely unacceptable, but it was not untypical of issues faced by principals then. Letters to parents were handwritten and photocopied. To have a substitute teacher paid, a long form had to be filled out and signed by the board of management chair.

There were more jobs than teachers then, bearing in mind the vastly smaller number in special education teaching. A young teacher I appointed to a career-break vacancy told me she and her college friends picked Tullamore as a base, before seeking jobs, such was their confidence in securing work.

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The inspector called regularly. I heard afterwards from a trainee cigré (inspector) that when shadowing our guy, he was told that Killeigh always had nice biscuits. Mariettas were discussed as a strategy but never replaced the Hobnob – it was too big a price to pay!

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Sustainable leadership

I share this snapshot of school life 30 years ago knowing that changes have brought huge improvements in learning and working conditions and created many challenges to test the sustainability of school leadership into the future. Yet the recent major Irish Principals and Deputy Principals Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey carried out through Deakin University shows that on a scale of 1–10, principals' opinion on the role's sustainability is just 3.61. Why? The question is comprehensively explored in IPPN's research-based report on the sustainability of school leadership, published in 2022, with two progress reports published since.

Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action – A Roadmap to Sustainable Leadership delves deep into leadership of primary schools today. It draws meticulously from each piece of enacted legislation, department circular, and policy guideline, the tasks and duties falling to the principal, and cross-references them with the Quality Framework for Leadership and Management detailed in *Looking at Our Schools* (2022), assigning each to the most appropriate of the four domains identified.

In an ideal world, Leading Teaching and Learning is the domain where the principal and school leadership team will do most of their work. However, the

162 documents explored by researchers identify only 25% of the duties and responsibilities listed as falling under this domain. Leading School Development and Developing Leadership Capacity account for only 18% and 16%, respectively. The standout detail is that 100% of all documents detail duties and responsibilities that fall under Managing the Organisation.

After 30 years leading the same school, I would probably score my sustainability as a principal at higher than 3.61. The school context, local knowledge, experience, positive parent/staff/pupil relationships, supportive board, and feedback from inspections have all been reassuring and affirming, leading to high job satisfaction at the end of my time as principal.

However, I have concerns for the future of school leadership. As a leader, I saw few tasks as undoable, or targets as unreachable, when looked at individually. But the pile-up of duties is unsustainable. It's akin to the game of Buckaroo, where various objects are attached before the spring activates, throwing everything off. Like the principal, the normally compliant beast of burden can only take so much before it all becomes too much.

Discussing a recent appointment of an excellent young teacher with a principal recently, we agreed that her qualities would see her enjoy a successful career in leadership. It is essential that people like her see leadership as rewarding and seek to fulfil their potential in it. Her career path could be a litmus test for recruiting and retaining school leaders as we head towards the middle of the 21st century.

And when she gets an email around 2060 informing her that her access to school records has ceased, she too can smile as she reflects on a rewarding career leading the learning of the next generation. If she is on safari when that occurs, a very old elephant may just remember the last time they saw a similar human smile and conclude that she too has loved her time as a school leader.

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