

A Case Study Analysis of Irish Primary Schools  
Principals' Perspectives of and Experiences in Their  
Role

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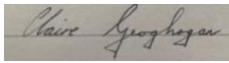
by

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## Summary

Research consistently concludes that school leadership impacts both directly and indirectly on a myriad of school factors (Grisson et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020; Day et al., 2016; Harris and Jones, 2020). Over the last two decades (2000-2020), the Irish education system has been subject to rapid policy changes, particularly in the area of school leadership (Murphy, 2020) and little research is available which explores how principals are navigating their role and coping within this new policy environment.

This exploratory study sought to address this gap in the research, by examining the role of the principal, in a selection of primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. It endeavoured to gain a deeper understanding of the practices, challenges and supports principals associate with their role and to examine to what extent, if any, the context of their school impacts on their duties, responsibilities, and experiences in the role.

As this research was concerned with exploring the perceptions of a selection of principals, an interpretivist theoretical perspective underpinned this study, with a relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology adopted. A qualitative, single-case study approach was employed, with two data collection methods utilised: documentary analysis and interviews.

Firstly, government circulars and publications from the years 2000-2020 were examined. From these official documents, eight were selected for further analysis, as these documents had a significant impact on the role of the principal.

Secondly, 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted with serving Irish primary school principals, from a variety of school contexts and denominations. Participating principals were from large, medium sized and small schools, incorporating the categories of non-DEIS, DEIS band 1, DEIS band 2 and rural DEIS. 21 interviews were conducted from November 2019 until March 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent restrictions resulted in interviews moving remotely. 11 telephone interviews were carried out from June to July

2020. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analyses involved multiple readings of the transcripts, coding, and the identification of emergent themes.

The most notable findings which emerged from the data are outlined below.

- The role of the principal is multidimensional, spanning managerial, administrative, pedagogical and leadership domains. There is ambiguity concerning the exact role and responsibilities of the principal. As the requirements of the role continue to expand in both volume and complexity, principals and other stakeholders require clarity over which tasks and responsibilities fall under their remit.
- Devolving responsibilities for initiatives such as Droichead, School Self-Evaluation and Fitness to Teach to principals is adding to their workload. Despite an apparent increase in autonomy in these areas, principals are constrained by policy requirements and measures to demonstrate compliance. Principals reported prioritising managerial tasks over leadership focused activities. Most administrative principals felt a disconnection from the children, while all principals felt time constraints impacted on their ability to be instructional leaders.
- The expansion and intensification of the role was noted by all principals. In addition to the increased workload, the major challenges evident are the changes to special education provision, a crisis in teacher recruitment and the notable increase in bureaucracy, with increases in mandatory paperwork. This is leading to role overload, role strain and role stress, as principals attempt to manage multiple and sometimes conflicting demands simultaneously. This is impacting on well-being, with many principals reporting their physical or mental health negatively affected by their role. This is contributing to difficulties in recruiting and retaining principals, as most principals believe the role is not sustainable in its current form. The Department of Education might consider working with principal bodies, such as the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and the National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) to create a realistic role descriptor, to address issues of role

ambiguity, role conflict and role strain. Additional initiatives need to be developed to specifically address principal well-being.

- Distributed leadership, as depicted in national policy is not being implemented as intended. There is uncertainty regarding the amount of responsibility that can be delegated to middle leaders. Currently, principals are delegating managerial tasks rather than sharing leadership responsibilities.





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## **Dedication**

*To my Granda, who from my earliest memories took me to and from school, starting me on the path to this moment.*

*To my Mam, who's belief in the importance of education and her love for lifelong learning has inspired me this far and continues to do so.*

*And to my sister Jennifer, who is simply always there for me.*



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## **List of Acronyms and Abbreviations**

BOM	Board of Management
CSL	Centre for School Leadership
CNS	Community National Schools
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CPSMA	Catholic Primary School Management Association
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DL	Distributed Leadership
ECB	European Central Bank
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
EU	European Union
GAM	General Allocation Model
GERM	Global Education Reform Movement
HEI	Higher Education Institute
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals' Network
LAOS	Looking at Our Schools 2016 A Quality Framework for Primary Schools
LDS	Leadership Development for Schools
NAPD	National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NPM	New Public Management
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PST	Professional Support Teams
SET	Special Education Teachers
SNA	Special Needs Assistant

SSE	School Self-Evaluation
SICI	Standing International Conference of Inspectors
WSE	Whole School Evaluation



# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction**

In recent decades school leadership has been the focus of global and national research, with thousands of studies conducted, articles written, and books published on the topic. School leadership is credited with directly and indirectly influencing a range of factors, including but not limited to; student attainment, student equity, attendance, parental involvement, teacher retention, school climate and school experience (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020).

School leadership is a broad concept which can include principals, deputy principals, in-school management teams and individual teachers. However, research literature in the majority points to the centrality of the school principal, who is critical to the improvement and continuing success of a school (Reid, 2021; Barr and Saltmarsh, 2014; Boyd et al., 2011; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Although much research has been conducted into effective leadership models and practices, there are limited studies into how principals personally perceive and experience their role. This study explored the role of the principal in the Irish primary education setting, from dual perspectives: that of policy and principals' personal perspectives. It investigated the ways in which contemporary policy changes in Ireland have impacted on how principals perceive and experience their role.

This introductory chapter outlines the aims and rationale of the research. It provides a context for the study, by describing Ireland's current educational policy landscape. It presents an

overview of the methodology utilised, an outline of the remaining chapters and includes the specific research questions which underpinned this study.

## 1.2 Aims of this study

The overall aim of this study was to explore and analyse the perceptions of 31 currently serving primary school principals, from a range of school contexts in the Republic of Ireland, on their experiences in their role. It investigated the lived experiences of the principal focusing on how they viewed and described their role, particularly in light of the rapidly evolving policy landscape. It examined what principals in different contexts describe as their everyday tasks, activities and responsibilities and the way in which these practices are carried out in individual school settings. It explored how principals are coping with the numerous changes in the education system and to what extent, if any, these changes are impacting on their personal well-being. The key research questions which underpinned this study were:

**Table 1.1: Research questions**

<b>Research Questions</b>
Based on legislative and policy statements, what is the role of the principal?
How do principals perceive their role?
What are the main challenges principals associate with the role?
What impact, if any, has the nature of the role on the well-being of the principal?
What support is available, and of the support available, which are utilised by principals and why?
What are principals' perceptions of the levels of autonomy and accountability present in their individual school contexts?

### **1.3 Context of and rationale for the study**

According to Osborn et al. (2002, p. 798) “leadership is embedded in context” and “contexts and leadership actions are intricately intertwined” (Brauckman et al., 2020, p.1). In order to provide a context for this research, this section provides a brief outline of the contemporary Irish education system and the changing educational landscape in Ireland in relation to school leadership. It provides an overview of the structure of the Irish primary school system.

#### ***1.3.1 School leadership: the changing educational policy context in Ireland***

The past twenty years have witnessed a significant drive towards education reform in Ireland and worldwide. In Ireland, the area of school leadership has been subject to a targeted reform agenda. The concept of a continuum of leadership, with distinct stages of leadership is included in the *Looking at Our Schools A Quality Framework for Primary Schools 2016* (LAOS) document and the Centre for School Leadership publications. These stages include teachers, middle level, senior leaders, newly appointed principals, and experienced principals. Several documents and circulars suggest that leadership is not reserved for those in formal leadership roles (Nguyen et al., 2019), but should include all teachers and relate closely to teaching and learning. Yet despite this the Department of Education and Skills (DES) clarifies that the term “school leaders” generally does refer to those with “formal leadership roles including teachers with posts of responsibility and others who carry out roles and responsibilities integral to the administration, management and leadership of the school” (DES, 2017, p.6). The establishment of the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) in 2014 and the Professional Development Service for Teachers Leadership (PDST Leadership) demonstrate the apparent importance the DES places on the development, training, and support of school leaders, though no plans are evident yet to introduce formal requirements

for principals or aspiring principals to engage with these services. The last two decades have witnessed a shift in thinking from the idea of the school principal as the manager of a school (Education Act, 1998) to a leader, evident in the language and terminology now used in official government publications. The principal is responsible for improving teaching and learning, leading school development, developing leadership capacity in others and managing the organisation (LAOS, 2016).

Over the past five years new leadership and management structures have been introduced into primary schools, with changes made to the language of school leadership (with the redesignation of Assistant Principal as Assistant Principal 1 and Special Duties Teachers as now Assistant Principal 11) and the recruitment and appointment to these posts (Circular 000063/2017). DES publications repeatedly link effective school leadership with improvements in teaching and learning (*Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, 2011; LAOS, 2016) and place responsibility for the leadership of school improvement and development primarily with principals. Improvements in school leadership practices are linked with improvements in teaching and learning, which in turn is linked with better pupil outcomes, in the areas of literacy and numeracy (Circulars 0063/2017, 0070/2018, 0044/2019). In line with performativity (Ball, 2003), school improvement somehow became linked with the introduction of targets, standards, and statements of effective practice. This is evident in the learning outcomes in the Primary Languages Curriculum (2019), the statements of effective practice in the LAOS (2016) document and the setting of measurable targets for school self-evaluation. This was matched with an increase and intensification in both internal and external school evaluations. The mandatory introduction of school self-evaluation (SSE) in 2012 formalised the role principals play in prioritising school needs,

gathering factual data, setting targets, and measuring success. The ever-changing targets, pressures to achieve them and paperwork to record them adds considerable to the workload of the principal.

In addition to SSE, the different policies and initiatives introduced in an attempt to raise standards directly and indirectly impact upon the role and workload of the principal. These reforms include changes to teacher induction (Droichead), the Special Education Teaching Allocation, the introduction of an additional 36 non-teaching hours for teachers (known as Croke Park hours) and the establishment of a new Primary Languages Curriculum. These changes and their impact on the role of the principal are explored in greater depth in Chapter 2.

The emphasis on leadership development and enactment in the LAOS (2016) document goes as far as to require principals to “empower” teachers to adopt leadership roles and “lead developments in key areas” within the school (2016, p. 28) and provide opportunities for pupils to develop their leadership capacity. The concept of distributed leadership is introduced in Circulars 0063/2017, 0044/2019 and 0016/2018 as a way of devolving responsibility and creating leadership opportunities. However, the practical application of distributed leadership is not without its challenges in schools.

The long-term impact of COVID-19 on leadership in primary schools is unknown. Harris and Jones (2020) described the pressures on principals to manage school closures, remote teaching and safe re-openings as “relentless” (p.244). In addition to the usual pressures and challenges of the role, principals now must cope with staff shortages, adherence to strict safety and cleaning measures, in addition to increased levels of fear, anxiety and stress within

the school community. In the UK, Beauchamp et al. (2021) found principals struggled to cope with the sheer volume of communication from government agencies, departments and information shared on social media and needed to demonstrate flexibility and a readiness to change practice without warning. Similar to Brown et al.'s (2021) study in Northern Ireland, principals in the Republic of Ireland were also asked to engage in additional tasks outside of their remit, such as contact tracing, increasing the pressures and workload.

### ***1.3.2 Schooling in Ireland: an overview of the primary education sector***

Education in Ireland is divided into different sectors: early childhood, primary, post-primary, third level and further education. Primary schools generally cater for children from the ages of four to twelve (from junior infants to 6<sup>th</sup> class), with enrolment in some formal education compulsory from the age of six (Education (Welfare) Act, 2000). The majority of primary schools in Ireland (96%) are privately owned by various religious organisations, but are state funded (Coolahan, 1981), with a national, centralised curriculum. Unlike other countries, school choice is not limited by postcode. Parents can enrol their child in any school of their choice, provided a space is available. The enactment of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 prevents schools from denying enrolment to children on various grounds, one of which is special educational needs. Therefore, many mainstream primary schools now have special classes too.

As of September 2021, there were 545, 493 children attending 3, 240 mainstream primary schools across Ireland (data retrieved from <https://data.cso.ie/>). There is a mixture of urban and rural settings, with schools ranging from one teacher schools, with less than fifteen pupils, to sixty teacher schools with over a thousand pupils. The small-scale nature of many

schools means that over half of appointed principals carry out full-time teaching duties in addition to principalship. Although in practice the role of teaching and administrative principals differs greatly, both are subject to the same requirements in terms of leading and managing school life, with the additional responsibilities and time constraints of the teaching principal largely ignored (INTO, 1991, HayGroup, 2002).

### ***1.3.3 Rationale for this study***

More than two decades ago, Troman (1996) described the headteacher as “a shadowy figure” (p.120) and although the intervening years have produced some research focusing on the principal (Sugrue, 2005; Robinson, 2011; Kelchtermans, Piot, and Ballet, 2011; Kellough and Hill, 2015; Stynes and McNamara, 2019, Eacott, 2020) there is still a limited amount of research available which explores how principals experience the role, particularly in an Irish context. Following their research, on school principals in Ireland, Morgan and Sugrue (2008) argued that “we are still left very much in the dark as to what Principals actually do during their working day” (p.13) and Stynes and McNamara (2019) concluded that the “microanalysis of lived leadership experiences” is still unresearched (p.25). Given the rapidly changing policy environment which principals are expected to navigate and the cultural shifts in the expectations of the role in the last two decades, it is unsurprising that occupational stress is prevalent among principals (Darmody and Smith, 2011, 2016). This gap in the available research combined with the continuous and fast paced changes in the role (Murphy, 2019) itself, necessitated an investigation into principals’ perceptions and experiences in their role.

## **1.4 Methodological Overview**

This study was concerned with exploring the lived experiences of primary school principals. As such a qualitative, single-case study approach was employed, with two data collection methods utilised: documentary analysis and interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 currently serving primary school principals from a variety of school settings.

## **1.5 Structure of the Thesis**

Chapter One presented the background and rationale for this study. It outlined the aims and research questions of this study, introduced the national and international context, and provided the rationale for the study.

Chapter Two delves deeper into the Irish context, critiquing the factors which influence national policy. The evolution of the role of the principal is traced from the formation of national schools to the role of the principal in contemporary Ireland. Ireland's somewhat unique system of governance (Coolahan, 1981) involving patrons, boards of management and the national Department of Education is presented to illustrate the various stakeholders with whom the role of the principal is negotiated.

Chapter Three examines the conceptual literature around globalisation, neoliberalism and their impact on the autonomy and accountability of Irish principals.

Chapter Four presents and justifies the methodological approach. It explores the theoretical framework and outlines the research approach and data collection tools selected. This chapter discusses ethical issues and includes the limitations of the study.



Chapter Five presents the findings from a systematic review of the official government documents analysed.

Chapter Six presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with thirty-one primary principals. This chapter is presented thematically, based on the major themes which emerged from the interviews.

Chapter Seven offers a synthesis of the main findings and critically compares the findings with the literature examined in chapters two and three. Role theory, encompassing the associated concepts of role ambiguity, role strain and role stress, is used as a conceptual lens by which to investigate the role of the principal.

Chapter Eight summarises the overall findings and offers some recommendations for improvement in policy and practice.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

This introductory chapter provided an overview of this dissertation, presenting the aims, rationale and context for this study. Chapter Two explores contextual literature in greater depth and detail.



## **Chapter 2: Literature review: The historical and current context in Ireland**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The development of educational policies is influenced directly and indirectly by a myriad of factors such as global trends, developments and shifting priorities (Arar et al., 2019). In addition to international policy trends, the historical, political, social and cultural climate of a country impact on its policy formation and implementation. The Irish context is no exception to these factors of influence (King and Nihill, 2019). The environments in which principals operate are shaped by the educational policies of the time and their influence on school life is extensive (Bell and Stevenson, 2015). They can determine school priorities, resources, procedures, and initiatives to be implemented (Smith and Bell, 2014). The role of the principal in negotiating educational policy should not be underestimated. Principals as gatekeepers (Kelchtermans et al., 2011) act as this link between national and local levels, interpreting and implementing these educational policies on a practical level within their individual school settings.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section sets out the landscape in which Irish primary school principals operate and navigate on a daily basis. The historical and legislative framework for the management of schools is discussed before contemporary issues (2000- present) impinging on the role of the principal are considered. This exploration of the national educational context is necessary to fully appreciate the complex and delicate ecosystem that principals' traverse.

The second section traces the evolving role of the primary school principal. It considers the increasing responsibilities and expectations placed on principals who are operating under increased public scrutiny. The impact of the role on principal well-being and the quality of the preparation and supports currently available are also examined.

## **2.2. Exploring the educational landscape**

In order to fully comprehend the environment in which the primary principal operates it is necessary to explore the historic, legislative and cultural features which shape the Irish education system. This provides a context for examining the changing role of the principal in Ireland.

### ***2.2.1 The historical context of primary education in Ireland***

Education in Ireland from as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century was largely the responsibility of the Christian Church and operated for hundreds of years with little or no state intervention. However, the dissension and ultimate separation of the English monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church resulted in the introduction of educational legislation in Ireland. The aims and objectives of early educational legislation were not to merely improve academic standards. Rather it was a tool to promote Protestantism, the English language and culture while simultaneously eradicating the Catholic and Irish identity (Harford, 2009, Coolahan, 1981). The Penal Laws sought to undermine the political and social statues of Catholics and to suppress Catholic educational institutions. Legislation such as the Act to Restrain Foreign Education 1695 prevented Catholics from attending formal education. Illegal Catholic schools, widely known as ‘hedge schools’ were formed and merged Catholicism, Irish cultural identity, and education in the minds of the public. The restrictions remained in place

until the Penal Laws were revoked in 1782 and 1793 but this connection between education, religion and politics remained and is still evident in the structure of the education system today.

The first major landmark in the emergence of a formal system of primary education in Ireland was the formation of national schools. Established in 1831, national schools were originally intended to provide elementary education to all children, of all religions, in a non-denominational setting (Coolahan, 1981). However, this did not materialise. Denominations still viewed schools as important mediums for the promotion and transmission of political, social, and religious ideology and were unwilling to relinquish any facet of control over them (Harford, 2009). Instead within a twenty-year period, most schools became denominational, and the ‘manager’ of the school was usually the local clergyman. Managers appointed teachers to schools, on the basis that they promoted this faith. This faith then became the underlining ethos of the school. Despite Ireland’s changing religious and cultural demographics over the past 30 years, the vast majority of primary schools (96%) are still denominational in nature, with religious denominations owning and running schools.

The growing costs of providing education sparked the British Treasury to commission reviews into education expenditure. The Powis Commission (1870) noted poor school buildings, a lack of funding, poor pupil attendance levels and extremely low pupil attainment level. This was the first time the government had drawn parallels between increasing efficiency in education, improving value for money and controlling public expenditure on education. Accountability measures were introduced to raise standards. Over the years the state experimented with various accountability mechanisms for teachers such as Payment by

Results, a rigorous regime of inspection and the Primary Certificate Examination. Although eventually abolished and replaced with inspections from the early 1900s, the idea of test-based accountability left a significant influence on Irish education, which is exemplified with the continued use of standardised testing in primary school and in the importance of the Leaving Certificate as a terminal examination for senior cycle students in post-primary schools.

The introduction of the Free State (1922) saw little structural changes in the Irish education system, with the exception of the formation of a Department of Education to oversee primary, secondary and technical education. Content with maintaining control of the curriculum implemented and the textbooks selected, this department took no responsibility for the establishment or management of schools, instead allowing them to continue to operate under denominational patronage. Glendenning (2012) suggests that it was a “State-funded system rather than a State system of education” (p.42) with the State setting the curriculum, paying salaries and providing buildings grants when needed, but remaining wholly removed from the day-to-day management of schools. Fleming and Harford (2021) argue that the “state’s main contribution to education is in the form of the personnel it provides to schools” (p.7). Today this has created a somewhat unique situation, whereby the government funds the education system but devolves responsibility to other agencies for the registration, vetting and performance of teachers and to volunteers (boards of management), for key school-based decisions. Ó’ Buachalla (1988) credits this minimal state interference which remained largely intact until the 1960s to the power of the Catholic church, close church-state alliance, and the government’s ideological and practical preference for limited intervention in education.

### ***2.2.2 Social and political changes impacting on the context of primary education in Ireland (up to 2000)***

The poor economic climate in the 1950s prompted the government to rethink its economic policies and they looked to international agencies for inspiration. O'Connor (2014) argued that the "high levels of state indifference and a chronic lack of ambition in education" (p.196), in addition to low levels of state investment, were the main reasons for the economic stagnation experienced in Ireland. Attendance at international conferences such as the Washington Policy Conference in 1961 on *Economic Growth and Investment in Education* resonated with emerging government thinking that linked the expansion of the economy with investment in education (Hyland, 2014). This conference led to Ireland's participation in the OECD's pilot study in investment in education in the 1960: this pilot study was influential in contributing to a "paradigm shift" (Murray, 2012, p. 67) in Irish education policy, forging a connection between education, employment and economic prosperity which continues to this day. Even today expenditure in education is viewed as an investment in Ireland's further economic development. Recommendations made by Investment in Education (1965) informed government policies for the expansion of education provision for decades to follow (Fleming and Harford, 2014; Loxley, Seery and Walsh, 2014).

Irish's membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 and later the European Union further increased the influence of external international or regional bodies on Irish policy formation. Education Ministers from the various member states meet and agree on educational policies and strategies aimed at improving education outcomes across the union. The sharing of experiences and best practices is encouraged and facilitated across member states, through organisations such as The Standing International Conference of

Inspectors formed (SICI). Established in 1995, the SICI aims to “promote and support partnership and cooperation between inspectorates and actively participate in the international debate about evaluation and quality improvement in education” (SICI, 2016, p. 6).

Ireland enjoyed an unprecedented period of economic expansion between the mid 1990s to the early 2000s which became known as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era. This strong economic growth impacted on Ireland’s political and social landscape, reversing the traditional trend towards emigration and resulted in strong inward migrations patterns (Harford, 2010). International policies in the 1990s linked the concepts of increased investment in education with improved educational outcomes and a more competitive economic performance (O’Connor, 2014). With these increased investment in education the concepts of quality assurance, evaluation and accountability also became more significant (McNamara et al., 2020). Although present in Ireland since the establishment of the education system in the 1830s, the Education Act, 1998 now gave legislative powers to the Inspectorate to evaluate schools.

Although the 1990s saw the economic climate in Ireland grow rapidly, different facades of society did not reap equal benefit. The Education Act, 1998, 32 (9), defined educational disadvantage as “the impediment to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education” and sparked the establishment of committees to address educational disadvantage. Fleming and Harford (2021, p.4) describe the adoption of a policy of “positive discrimination” whereby schools are awarded additional resources, teachers, and funding through the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative. Established in 2005 and reviewed in 2017, the



DEIS programme categorises schools into three different bands of disadvantage: DEIS band 1, DEIS band 2 and rural DEIS, depending on a number of factors. These factors include parental employment, parental educational levels, enrolment by particular societal groups and geographic location. Schools participating in the DEIS programme are required to produce measurable targets and actions for improvement in the areas of literacy, numeracy, attendance, and parental engagement, in the form of a DEIS Action Plan. This plan is reviewed every two years and is subject to inspection by the DES.

The period, from the 1990s until 2007, saw successive government budgets lowering taxes while increasing spending on public services, though spending on education during this period remained lower than the OCED average (Drudy, 2011). The increased spending on education, combined with a creeping managerial agenda throughout the public sector, resulted in a greater demand from the public for more transparency and accountability. MacRuaric and Harford (2008) argued that although teacher unions attempted to resist measures such as the introduction of official league tables, media interest intensified the public's interest in the collection and publication of measurable data, in the form of test results.

### **2.3 The legislative and regulatory framework for primary schools in Ireland**

As stated previously government policies and decision-making in education from 1922-1998 operated in largely an informal manner, within a traditional pre-independence legislative framework (Walsh, 2007; Glendenning, 2012). Educational policy relied mostly on government circulars, rules, and regulations, with the non-statutory *Rules for National Schools* 1965 serving as a key framework for schools. The Education Act (1998) was the

first comprehensive piece of legislation relating to primary, second-level, and adult education in Ireland, since the foundation of the Irish state. The legislation confirmed the crucial role of the Minister for Education in making educational policy. It also reinforced the idea of partners in education, evident in the 1992 Green Paper *Education for a Changing World* and the 1995 *White Paper Charting Our Education Future* and cemented in legislation that need to work in partnership with various stakeholders. It gives “statutory recognition” to school patrons, management boards, the NCCA and the inspectorate, while including provision for the establishment of parents’ associations, student councils and boards of management (Coolahan, 2017, p. 207). It outlines the role and responsibilities of the various partners in education and sets out procedures to be followed in the event of parent or student grievances. It introduced into legislation the idea that schools are accountable to students and parents for the quality of education provision received.

Since the enactment of this landmark piece of legislation the government has proceeded to issue further legislation and over 100 circulars. Schools are encouraged and, in some cases, mandated to create policies describing the steps taken to ensure adherence to these state requirements. Mandated policies at school level include enrolment, code of behaviour, anti-bullying, child protection, equality and anti-harassment, health and safety statement, grievance procedures, school plan and data protection. Policy templates are available online from the DES and IPPN. These serve to define the parameters in which schools and principals operate. They also reduce the autonomy and freedom of the school to respond to issues on a case-by-case basis, as principals are bound to follow their school policy. On their website the DES list the following legislative acts as imperative for schools.

**Table 2.1: Key legislation for primary schools (www.education.ie)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Act</b>
2019	Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019
2018	Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018
2015	Teaching Council (Amendment) Act 2015
2015	Education (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2015
2012	Education (Amendment) Act
2007	Education (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act
2006	Teaching Council (Amendment Act)
2005	The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005
2004	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
2001	Teaching Council Act
2000	Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act
2000	Education (Welfare) Act
1998	The Education Act 1998

## **2.4 Contemporary policy changes impacting on the role of the primary principal in Ireland**

Drawing on a select range of literature in the Irish context, the following section reviews the key contemporary issues affecting the primary school principal in Ireland. These issues include the demand for more parental choice, changes to the provision of education for children with special needs, an increase in accountability measures and more recently, the impact of COVID-19.

### ***2.4.1 The drive towards increased parental choice***

A feature of Irish education policy in the last decade is the drive to offer parents more choice of schooling. Although the first multi-denominational school, known as the Dalkey School Project, was founded in 1978, it is only in the last 20 years that Educate Together schools have grown in popularity in tandem with Ireland's diversifying society, with 136 primary schools now available countrywide. Another break with the traditional model of patronage

occurred with the establishment of Community National Schools (CNS) in 2006. CNS are multi-denominational schools, which are designed to cater for children of all religions and none and are under the patronage of the Education and Training Board. CNS were the first schools to be established under the direct authority of the state since the mid 1800s.

Recognising that Irish society had changed significantly in the past decades and influenced by international agencies such as the UN and EU (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather (2012), a forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector was established in 2011. It investigated the system of school patronage, the potential demand for a diverse range of school patrons and proposing possible alternatives to the traditional system of denominational patronage. Parents, as stakeholders were encouraged to express their views. A report published by the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (2012) noted the impact of the large number of migrants arriving in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger era, the changing emphasis on the role of the Catholic church, and the need for diversification of school patronage in order to meet the needs of the diversity of faiths, religions and cultures now present in Ireland. Census reports between 1961 and 2011 also showed an increase of over 255,720 people identifying themselves as having “No Religion”. Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather (2012), the authors of the Forum report, suggest that reports detailing decades of significant institutional abuse by religious orders, coupled with dissatisfaction at church authorities’ investigation of such allegations led to an increased public desire to separate church and state. However, this task may prove difficult as the Irish Constitution (1937) recognises and protects the rights of denominational schools, which currently make up approximately 96% of schools in Ireland. This is achieved through the funding of schools, from varying denominational and non-denominational patronages. The Forum made a

number of recommendations, such as promoting inclusion in existing primary schools, divesting some religious patronages, and establishing future non-denominational patronages. To date some progress has been made on increasing the number of multi-denominational schools available, with the establishment of 13 new schools. However, in the eight years since the report only 2% of Catholic schools have been divested (McGuire, 2021).

#### ***2.4.2 The move towards greater inclusion for children with additional needs***

Unlike other school systems where parents are geographically restricted in their school selection, parents in Ireland have always been free to enrol their child in a school of their choice, space dependent. Best practice for the provision of education for children with additional needs has changed hugely in the past three decades, with a move away from special schools towards inclusion in mainstream settings instead, with over a quarter of the school population identifying as having an additional need (McCoy et al., 2019). Education for children with additional needs is subject to the provisions in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004). Initially intended to be introduced on a phased basis over a 5-year period, elements of the EPSEN Act (2004) have not been implemented to date. Successive budgetary cuts to education have impacted on the governments' decision to suspend elements of the act, such as the statutory right to an assessment for children with special needs and the responsibilities of schools to create Individual Education Plans, based on these assessments (Inclusion Ireland 2013; Perry and Clarke 2015). While on paper, the government is increasing its spending on additional needs, Kenny et al., (2020) argued that Ireland still has one of the lowest levels of spending on education in Europe and that the cuts during the economic crash to related services, such as

occupational therapists, psychologists and speech and language therapists are negatively impacting SEN provision in schools.

However, schools are expected to continue to provide for the educational needs of all children in an inclusive environment, regardless of the level of funding provided. A lack of available spaces in mainstream schools for children with SEN resulted in the Minister for Education compelling schools to open special classes from 2019, with little or no warning. The impact of the EPSEN Act (2004) on the workload of the principal was noted by the National Disability Authority, which highlighted the increase in the volume and difficulty of work for the principal. The expanded role includes liaising with a variety of government agencies such as the NCSE, NEPS, SENO, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists, in addition to special needs assistants and special education teachers. Principals must ensure that all children are receiving the appropriate level of support for their individual needs by correctly identifying student needs, arranging for psychological assessments when necessary, co-ordinating mainstream and special education timetables and purchasing necessary resources. All of which must be recorded in detailed individual plans, records, and financial accounts. The National Disability Authority (2006) identified the role of the principal as “critical to the delivery of inclusive, special education” (p.8), while Shevlin and Flynn (2011) note that the role extends far beyond the practicalities of managing inclusion. Rather the principal is responsible for the creation of an inclusive, welcoming school culture and has “ultimate responsibility and accountability” for the inclusive practices therein (2011, p. 129).

### ***2.4.3 The rise in accountability measures pertaining to school evaluation***

Leithwood and Day (2008) suggest that there is a “worldwide effort by educational policy-makers to reform schools by holding them more publicly accountable for improving pupil performance on state or national tests” (p.1). Ireland is no exception to this international trend, and the most notable characteristic of recent Irish government policies is the apparent increase in accountability measures imposed on schools. O’Sullivan (2011) suggests that “the speed of the economic crash and the fall from grace of figures of authority have had the, perhaps, inevitable outcome of a blame culture clamouring for transparency and accountability” (p. xii). Mooney Simmie et al., (2016) also suggest that the 2008 recession acted as a catalyst for increased demands for accountability in education, resulting in schools “sandwiched within a new political narrative of high control and low trust” (p.2). Similarly, MacRuairc and Harford (2008) believe that schools are experiencing “an unprecedented level of monitoring and evaluation” (p.509). However, Conway and Murphy (2013) argue that “high-stakes results driven accountability” coupled with “adherence to professional norms” have long featured in the culture of Irish education (p.12).

Evaluations have existed in some form, since the very inception of National Schools in 1831, with the almost immediate creation of the Inspectorate in 1832. Following the abolition of the payment by results initiative in the early 1900s, the inspectorate oversaw a rigorous regime of inspection, with obligatory inspections of all teachers. A reform of the inspection system in 1957-59 replaced the previous practice of mandatory general inspections and the award of a merit mark in each subject, with a greater emphasis on adherence to professional norms than far reaching accountability measures (Walsh, 2009). Standardised testing as a means of measuring pupil attainment was reintroduced as a compulsory requirement by the

Department of Education in 2007. Pupils were required to complete standardised English Reading and Maths tests twice during their time in primary schools, the results of which were to be communicated to parents through their report cards. While the data collected could be used for research purposes the DES were clear that individual schools would not be identified in any way or linked to the results of testing (Circular 0138/2006). The National Literacy and Numeracy strategy (Circular 0056/2011) reversed this decision and reinforced reliance on standardised testing, which was increased to three stages in the child's primary education (2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> classes respectively). Significantly, the principal is now required to report the aggregate test results to the board of management and submit them to the Department of Education annually. These results form part of a school's educational profile, which in conjunction with other factors is used to determine the levels of Special Education Teachers allocated to a school (Circular 0013/2017).

The results of standardised testing also form the basis for a school's self-evaluation process. Following on from the publication of the *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life document* (2011), the DES published Circular 0093/2012 requiring all schools to participate in a school self-evaluation process (SSE). With the purpose of improving the "overall quality of education" and "pupil learning outcomes" through a "collaborative, reflective process of internal school review", SSE requires schools to gather evidence relating to their practice and analyse their findings. These areas of "strengths and weaknesses", in conjunction with an improvement plan are then compiled into a SSE report, which is circulated to the wider school community. The *School Self Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020* detail the manner in which SSE should be organised. It highlighted the need to include all members of the school community i.e., parents and pupils in the consultation process.



The Minister for Education and Skills Richard Bruton highlighted the importance of public confidence in the profession and accountability for teachers. Echoing this need for a better response from schools to parental complaints, the Ombudsman for Children Dr Niall Muldoon (2017) described how over half the complaints received by his office relate to education. As noted by Hislop (2015) “School leaders live with the reality of internal and external accountability every day” (p.5) as evidenced by the range of evaluations primary schools are engaged in. There are currently eight different types of external inspection models employed by the DES, each with the intention of assessing a different element of school life (Figure 2.2). These include Curriculum inspection, Evaluation of Provision for Pupils with Special Education Needs, Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS schools, Whole School Evaluation, Whole School Evaluation for Management, Leadership and Learning, COVID-19 compliance inspections, Follow through inspections and Incidental inspections (DES, 2016, p.6). It is interesting to note that leadership and management is evaluated regardless of the type of inspection, reflecting the importance the DES places on it.

Incidental visits are designed to evaluate the “normal conditions of a regular school day” (DES, 2011, 1.1) with no advance notice and no published reports. Teachers are observed and feedback given orally to the principal. With the exception of incidental inspections, schools are given advance notice of arrival and visits usually last between 2 and 5 school days, though the notice period given to school has been reduced. When completed the Inspectorate compile a report highlighting the strengths and areas of improvement identified from the combination of sources consulted, including plans, policies, observations, interviews, parent, and teacher questionnaires and focus groups. In the interest of

transparency, this report is released into the public forum, via the DES website. Although no individual teachers are named in the report the work of the board of management and principal is rated. According to the DES by making the report publicly available it is “intended to make a real contribution to the quality of schools and educational provision” and are it is considered “useful to parents” (Chief Inspector’s Report, 2018, pps. 36-37). It is not specified whether it is useful to the current parents or prospective parents when selecting a school for their child. Niesche (2013) argues that in addition to the pressures of standardised tests there is also the pressure “to be seen to perform in relation to other schools” (p.144). Currently Ireland does not have league tables as such. However, DES inspection reports are published online for transparency.

**Table 2. 2: External forms of evaluation**

<b>Type of Inspection</b>	<b>Evaluation Focus</b>	<b>Involvement of the Principal</b>
<p style="text-align: center;">Incidental</p> <p>Notice: No notice given</p> <p>Results unpublished.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching and Learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meets with the inspector before and after the classroom visits.</li> <li>• Communicates the feedback with the boards of management and staff</li> </ul>
<p>Curriculum Evaluation</p> <p>Notice: 5 working days</p> <p>Results published online.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of pupils’ learning</li> <li>• Supporting pupils’ learning through experiences and teachers’ practices</li> <li>• The effectiveness of school planning/SSE in progressing pupils’ learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal completes school information pack.</li> <li>• Meets with the inspector before and after the classroom visits.</li> <li>• Factual verification and school response needed.</li> </ul>

<b>Type of Inspection</b>	<b>Evaluation Focus</b>	<b>Involvement of the Principal</b>
<p>Evaluation of Provision for Pupils with Special Educational Needs</p> <p>Notice: 10 working days</p> <p>Results published online.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The quality of teaching and the quality of learning of pupils with SEN</li> <li>• The management and use of resources received to support pupils with SEN.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal completes school information pack.</li> <li>• Completes templates for school timetables and teacher caseloads.</li> <li>• Forwards on the SEN and Assessment policies</li> <li>• Distributes and collects parental questionnaires.</li> <li>• Meets with the inspector before and after visits.</li> <li>• Factual verification and school response needed.</li> </ul>
<p>Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS schools</p> <p>Notice: 10 working days</p> <p>Results published online.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action plan for the themes; attendance, retention, literacy, numeracy, partnership with parents and others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal completes school information pack.</li> <li>• Distributes and collects parental questionnaires.</li> <li>• Arranges focus group of parents and children.</li> <li>• Meets with the inspector before and after visits.</li> <li>• Factual verification as school responses needed.</li> </ul>
<p>Whole School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning</p> <p>Notice: 10 working days</p> <p>Results published online.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching and learning</li> <li>• Support for Pupil’s Wellbeing</li> <li>• School leadership and management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal completes school information pack.</li> <li>• Distributes and collects parental questionnaires.</li> <li>• Meets with the inspector before and after visits.</li> <li>• Factual verification and school response needed.</li> </ul>
<p>Whole School Evaluation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of leadership and management</li> <li>• Quality of school planning and school self-evaluation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal completes school information pack.</li> <li>• Distributes and collects parental questionnaires.</li> </ul>

Type of Inspection	Evaluation Focus	Involvement of the Principal
<p>Notice: 10 working days</p> <p>Results published online.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement.</li> <li>• Quality of support for pupils.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forwards on the Enrolment and Attendance policies</li> <li>• Forwards on the Teacher and Class Timetables</li> <li>• Meets with the inspector before and after visits.</li> <li>• Factual verification and school response needed.</li> </ul>
<p>Follow through inspections.</p> <p>Notice: 2 working days</p> <p>Results published.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of progress since the last inspection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principals prepares any documentation requested by the inspectorate.</li> <li>• Meets with the inspector before and after visits.</li> <li>• Factual verification and school response needed.</li> </ul>
<p>COVID-19 compliance inspections</p> <p>Notice: 24 hours</p> <p>Results unpublished.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compliance with COVID-19 health and safety advice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meets with the inspector before and after the classroom visits.</li> <li>• Communicates the feedback with the boards of management and staff</li> </ul>

A Guide to Inspections in Primary Schools (2016, pps. 16-29)

**2.4.4 The impact of COVID-19 on school leaders**

This last year has witnessed the reshaping of education provision both globally and nationally. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, primary schools in Ireland were instructed by the government to cease onsite teaching on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020, with less than 24

hours' notice. Although school closure was originally intended to be a short-term measure, schools did not physically reopen for the remainder of the academic year, with teaching and learning moving online. A second lockdown in January 2021 saw the reintroduction of remote learning for another period of three months. The sudden school closures and the later roadmap to reopen proved immensely challenging for school principals and still, over a year on, are causing difficulties.

Research carried out by Burke and Dempsey (2020) in the early stages of closures found principals were concerned about pressure on staff, practical technological restrictions, the lack of training available in online teaching, the engagement of children from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with additional needs and the widening of the gap between those who can and do engage with online learning and those who cannot or choose not to.

In the immediate aftermath of school closures guidance on remote teaching and learning from the DES was limited. Ó'Foghlú (2020) advised schools to “continue to plan lessons and, where possible, provide online resources for students or online lessons where schools are equipped to do so”. *Guidance on Continuity of School* was released in May 2020. Although this document encouraged daily engagement with children and increased communication with parents, these were recommendations rather than requirements. Ultimately the manner in which online learning is conducted falls to the individual school and in reality, the school principal. Decisions had to be made regarding the online platform to be used, the frequency (if any) of live teaching sessions and the management of feedback, while taking into account the technological skills of staff and infrastructure of the school. The lack of clarity provided by the DES led to an inconsistent approach across schools, with

many parents expressing anger and disappointment with their schools' approach (Devitt et al., 2020).

The reopening of schools was logistically challenging for school principals. Staggered opening and closing times, additional yard supervision, extra cleaning requirements, the creation and maintaining of pods, the reduction in Extra Personal Vacation days for teachers and the lack of availability of substitute teachers are some examples of the additional stresses added to the principals' workload. With the current COVID-19 situation, it is likely this will continue into the next academic year and possibly beyond. COVID-19 also tested Ireland's somewhat unique system of governance and management (Coolahan, 1981) as described in the next section. Conflicts arose between individual boards of management and the DES and Health Service Executive (HSE) advisors as to how to safely manage COVID-19 outbreaks in schools. On several occasions individual school boards made the decision to physically close schools, only to have their decision reversed by the DES, who compelled them to re-open immediately (O'Kelly, 2020). This raised the question as to whether board of managements, as employers, or the DES has or should have ultimate control over school closures, when it comes to the safety of the school community.

## **2.5 The structure of Irish primary schools**

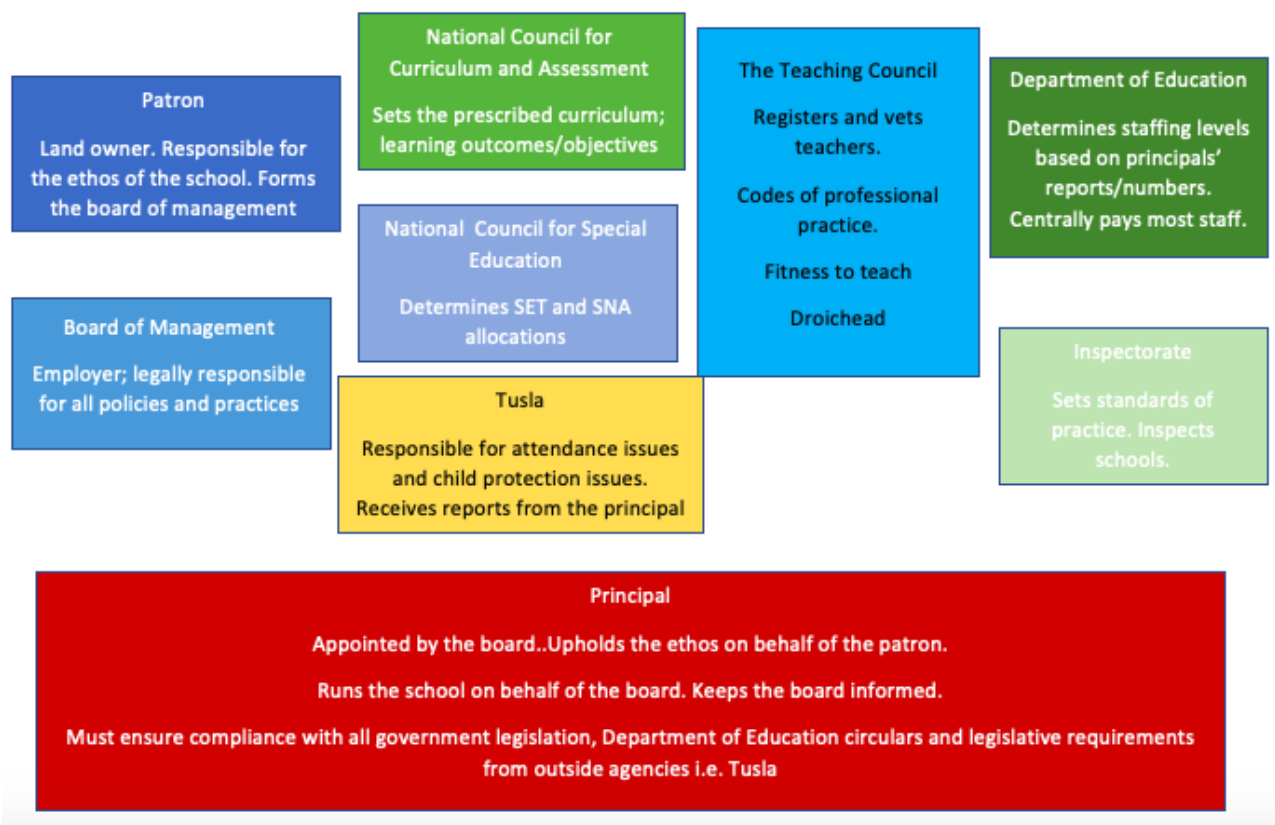
The governance system of Irish primary schools was shaped by a myriad of forces, such as the power of the Catholic church and the State (Coolahan, 1981). The primary system has evolved significantly from the state aided system dominated by the churches in the mid 1900s. While patrons retain a central role in providing and managing schools, the DES and other state agencies such as the Teaching Council and the NCCA, exercise a great deal of

influence within the system. Therefore, the Irish primary school system governance architecture is complex and impacts on the way in which principal navigate the role. It involves numerous actors, each with different roles, responsibilities and expectations contributing to the running of schools. Kelchterman et al., (2011) suggest that principals exist “at a crossroads of different interests and agendas from different actors in and around the school” (p. 96). They suggest that the principal is the gatekeeper, facing actors with agendas from both outside and inside the school.

**Table 2. 3: The principal as a gatekeeper**

<b>Outside</b>		<b>Inside</b>
Policymakers		Children
Board of management		Teaching staff
Parents’ Association	Principal	Special needs assistants
Individual parents		Ancillary staff
External agencies		
Community organisations		

Each actor has their own individual rules, regulations and accountability mechanisms which must be adhered to. In Ireland, although the DES determines staffing levels, pays staff and through the inspectorate monitors and evaluates overall school performance, officially it is the board of management that is the employer. The principal is the central figure in managing the interactions between the school and the various agencies.



**Figure 2. 1: The structure of the Irish education system**

The patron is responsible for establishing the schools. In recent decades Educate Together and the Education and Training Boards have become patrons. However, denominational patrons are still responsible for the majority of primary schools (90%). The patron determines the ethos of the school and appoints the board of management to run the school on their behalf. The Education Act (1998) sets into law the roles and responsibilities of a board of management. Boards consist of volunteers, nominated or elected, who act on behalf of the patron to manage the running of the school. They are subject to a term limit of four years, although members can be reappointed. Often principals are the only link between the old board and the new board. Boards must include the principal, Patron nominee(s), community



representatives, a member of the teaching staff (elected by their peers) and two parents (a mother and father) elected by the parents.

Principals are required to report to the board on issues relating to the day-to-day running of the school and are answerable to the board. The INTO (1991) noted the potential professional conflict this relationship poses. The principal as a member of the board shares responsibility for the decision making and must also implement these decisions at school level. In practice these decisions, in the case of teaching principals in particular, impact directly on their own working conditions.

The board has overall legal responsibility for the formation and implementation of policies, as directed by DES curriculars and government legislation, school planning, the quality of teaching and learning and staffing appointments. Although enshrined in legislation, the IPPN (2014) cited a lack of clarity in relation to the roles and responsibilities of boards of management and principal as a “significant challenge for school leaders” (p.26). This echoes Cottrell’s (2008) suggestion that the line between the duties of the board and that of the principal are blurred. He argues that “management cannot be delivered by remote control” and “in reality it is the principal who manages the school” (p.4).

Board members often have no educational qualifications or experience. Therefore, in the majority of cases the principal is the most knowledgeable member of the board in the field of education. This lack of curricular specific knowledge may result in the board relying on the principal to make decisions relating to school planning and teaching and learning, thus increasing the workload of the principal and their input into the decision-making process. The board is also required to “hold the school leader to account” (Hislop, 2018, p. 103). This

can be an unrealistic expectation given that the “school Principal and the Chairperson of the Board are the main source of information for other board members” (Governance Manual, 2015, p. 11) and the principals largely controls the information the board receives through the statements and reports presented at meetings.

Grummel et al. (2006) argued that schools are finding it increasingly difficult to rely on volunteers as board members, noting “tensions” between “voluntarism and the increased formalisation required by legislation” (p.333). Ten years later the INTO (2016) again highlighted the difficulty in recruiting and maintaining volunteers in some local areas and questioned the “the capacity of boards to oversee complex legal, building and personnel issues” (p.4). In an attempt to overcome the shortfall in volunteers a pilot programme for a shared governance arrangement was introduced, whereby two or more schools under the same patronage have the same board of management. However, as the schools must remain as separate legal entities with separate and distinct financial records, board meetings and administrative records, the workload on volunteer members increases. The IPPN (2005) also questioned the procedure for holding underperforming boards accountable, given the voluntary nature of the role.

Hislop (2015) while commending the work completed by board members questioned the suitability of relying on volunteers to carry out such important tasks, particularly as board members are not required to have any experience within the field of education or any significant training. As successive government policies claim to increase the autonomy of the individual schools, in addition to the ever-increasing legal obligations, the breadth and depth of the responsibility of boards is increasing. Hislop (2018) highlighted concerns that

“voluntary boards may not be adequately equipped to carry out all the complex and growing range of responsibilities” (p.19). With the demands of school management likely to continue increasing, particularly in light of COVID-19, the report suggests increasing technical support available to boards and moving some tasks to external agencies.

## **2.6 The role of the principal**

The role of the school principal is in flux as the landscape in which schools operate continually shift. Chaplain (2001) believes the increase in pressure on principals is a result of a new legislation and changes in the relationship with stakeholders, and while the role was always multidimensional, policy changes in recent years have increased the scope and complexity of the role. Although in 2019 Leithwood et al., revised their 2008 claim that “school leadership was second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning” they and other researchers (Grissom et al., 2021) still recognise the direct and indirect influence school leadership can have on student achievement. This section explores the role of the primary school principal internationally and in Ireland. It is presented thematically, structured using the domains in the LAOS (2016) guidelines.

### ***2.6.1 The role of the primary school principal internationally and in Ireland***

The role of primary the school principal has evolved over the past few decades, from one primarily concerned with administrative duties to a role that encompasses a wide range of responsibilities under the term of leadership and management. The Wallace Foundation (2000, 2013, p. 6) list five key responsibilities for principals. These include, shaping a vision for the school, creating a safe and inviting climate for all stakeholders, cultivating leadership, improving instruction, and managing people, information, and processes. Principals are

expected to engage with stakeholders to create a shared vision, inspire, motivate and empower others, reflect and set targets for improvement, all while implementing national and local policies (Ganon-Shilon and Schechter, 2019). The differing demands of leadership and management activities can be difficult to balance. Hallinger and Murphy (2012) describe the principal's workday as "a continuous stream of brief, fragmented, problem-oriented interactions, most of which are initiated by others" (p.10). Pollock et al., (2016) demonstrated in their study the complexity of the role, as principals attempt to balance leadership and management requirements. Although conducted in Canada, much of the findings have a wider relevance. Similarly, Heffernan and Pierpoint's (2020) study in Australia, concluded that Principalship has "increased in scope and complexity" (p.8) in recent years.

As previously discussed, international perspectives on school leadership, societal and attitudinal changes and the numerous legislative acts enacted in the 1990s are considered contributing factors to the significant change in the functions of the school principal in Ireland (Quinn, 2014, p. 5). No one document comprehensively outlines the duties of the principal. Instead, the role is pieced together from various circulars and legislative acts. Few formal documents or commissioned research reports exist which discuss the role of the principal, even though a Centre for School Leadership was established in 2016. The following tables provide an overview of the key legislative pieces and research reports into the role of the principal.

**Table 2. 4: Key legislative acts and circulars which contribute to the role of the principal.**

Year	Act
2019	Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019
2018	Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018
2016	Looking at our Schools A Quality Framework for Primary Schools
2015	Teaching Council (Amendment) Act 2015, 2006, 2001
2015	Education (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2015
2011	Literacy and Numeracy for learning and life
2004	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
2000	Education (Welfare) Act
1998	The Education Act 1998
1973	Circular 16/73
1965	Rules for National Schools

**Table 2. 5: Key research reports commissioned on the role of the principal**

Year	Report	Author	Commissioned by
2018	School Leadership in Ireland and the Centre for School Leadership: Research and Evaluation	Fitzpatrick Association Economic Consultation	CSL, DES, IPPN, NAPD
2015	Irish Principals and Deputy Principals Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Executive Summary	Riley	IPPN, NAPD
2009	School Leadership Matters: An empirical assessment of the attractiveness of principalship in the North and South of Ireland	Price Waterhouse Coopers	Leadership Development for Schools
2002	Defining the Role of the Primary Principal in Ireland	HayGroup Management Consultations	IPPN

The functions of the school principal are enshrined within the Education Act 1998. Sections 22 and 23 refer to the dual aspect of the role of the principal: manager and leader. In addition to managing the day to day running of the school, the principal must also be a leader of

teaching and learning (Flood, 2011). The INTO (1991) highlighted the necessary skills and knowledge needed to effectively fulfil the expanding role of principal. Amongst these were leadership skills, to guide staff through the significant philosophical and practical changes resulting from the new curriculum and to manage these changes with limited resources and funding. Interpersonal skills were needed to communicate and co-operate with parents who were now considered partners in the education process. In addition to the delegation of tasks and evaluation of the performance of teachers with posts of responsibility, principals also needed to support their staff, requiring principals to have good human resource management skills. The expansion of the role of the principal was not met with an increase in training or resources and many principals struggled to adapt to the added demands of the role, particularly teaching principals who also had the pressures of teaching to contend with. Fullan, in his analysis of leadership in Irish schools, found that the role was “hampered or rendered less effective because of role overload or lack of role clarity” (2006, p. 13) and recommended “major attention be focused on reforming the role of principal” (p.17). However, the suggested improvements, for the most part, did not materialise, prompting the IPPN to produce the ‘Priorities for Principal Teachers’ document (2014). In the Foreword to the document, Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn acknowledged the significant changes to the role of principal, the need to prioritise the many aspects of school life and makes reference to the risk of “overloaded principal” losing focus.

**Table 2. 6: The Role of the Principal as determined by three different studies**

<b>HayGroup Report 2002</b>	<b>PDST Profile of Leadership (Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.)</b>	<b>Priorities for Principal Teachers (2014, Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.)</b>
Human Resource Management	Leading People	Staff
Leadership	Leading Change	Children
Teaching and Learning	Leading Community	Parents
Policy Implementation/Formation	Managing the Organisation	Patrons/Boards of Management
Managing External Relationships	Managing Self	External Agencies
Administration		
Resource Management		

The most recent guidelines *Looking at our Schools A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* (2016) identified four domains for principalship: Leading Teaching and Learning, Managing the Organisation, Leading School Development, Developing Leadership Capacity. Each domain is then subdivided into ‘standards’ with statements of effective and highly effective practices. (DES Circular 0063/2017)

Each domain is then subdivided into ‘standards’ with statements of effective and highly effective practices. Circular 0063/2017 (p.5)

**Table 2. 7: *The Looking at our schools A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* (2016): domains**

<b>Domain 1: Leading Teaching and Learning</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote a culture of improvement, collaboration, innovation and creativity in learning, teaching and assessment</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster a commitment to inclusion, equality of opportunity and the holistic development of each pupil</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage the planning and implementation of the school curriculum</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster teacher professional development that enriches teachers’ and pupils’ learning</li> </ul>

<b>Domain 2: Managing the organisation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish an orderly, secure and healthy learning environment, and maintain it through effective communication</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage the school’s human, physical and financial resources so as to create and maintain a learning organisation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage challenging and complex situations in a manner that demonstrates equality, fairness and justice</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and implement a system to promote professional responsibility and accountability</li> </ul>

<b>Domain 3: Leading school development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate the guiding vision for the school and lead its realisation in the context of the school’s characteristic spirit</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lead the school’s engagement in a continuous process of self-evaluation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build and maintain relationships with parents, with other schools, and with the wider community</li> </ul>



- Manage, lead and mediate change to respond to the evolving needs of the school and to changes in education

**Domain 4: Developing leadership capacity**

- Critique their practice as leaders and develop their understanding of effective and sustainable leadership
- Empower staff to take on and carry out leadership roles
- Promote and facilitate the development of pupil voice, pupil participation and pupil leadership
- Build professional networks with other school leaders

The domains offer a framework within which the changing role of the principal is discussed.

***2.6.2 Domain 1: Leading Teaching and Learning***

Prior to the 1970s the role of the principal centred largely on school administration. The structure of the education system left principals with little power to influence the curriculum delivered, the methodologies teachers employed, the resources utilised, or the ethos promoted in individual schools (Flood, 2011). The highly detailed and specific content of the curriculum designed by the DES and the external inspection system of the time afforded principals little opportunity or power for creative practices and decision making (INTO Review 1991). This coupled with the autonomy of the individual teacher to run his/her class, which was viewed as “sacrosanct” (IPP, 2014, p. 9) meant the role of the principal teacher was limited.

The *Investment in Education Report* (1965) highlighted the need for increased government funding for state schools, while the introduction of a new curriculum, *Curacalm na Bunscoile* in 1971, significantly altered the philosophical principles underpinning the education system, from the passive transmission and receiving of information to a curriculum which promoted a child centred approach (Coolahan, 2017). *Curacalm na Bunscoile* “envisaged greater freedom for schools” (INTO, 1996, p. 1) by allowing teachers to select teaching methodologies and subject content relevant to their individual classes, thus increasing their professional autonomy. The extent to which the new curriculum was implemented varied in different schools. Factors impacting on its success included large class sizes, a lack of suitable resources, a lack of appropriate training for teachers and an unwillingness by some educators to adapt their teaching methodologies (Coolahan, 2017). These significant changes brought about by the introduction of the new curriculum, and the decentralising of decision making relevant to its implementation, necessitated an expansion in the role and autonomy of the principal.

*Curacalm na Bunscoile* (1971) was eventually replaced with the Revised Curriculum (1999) and the NCCA are in the process of designing a new curriculum, with the Primary Languages Curriculum (2019) already released to schools. Although schools have some autonomy over methodologies selected, the curriculum content remains highly prescribed. With the exception of general stakeholder consultations, principals have no real input into the content of the curriculum at national level. This was evident with the introduction and rollout of the Primary Languages Curriculum (2019). Learning objectives were replaced with learning outcomes, milestones, exemplars and sample lessons, including step by step video guides and lesson plans form support materials available from the NCCA and PDST. At local level

principals are required to devise school plans, which detail aspects of each curricular area and are encouraged to implement school wide planning templates and agree upon common curricular strategies. They have autonomy of initiatives and programmes implemented, textbooks and resources selected. Their involvement in the planning, implementation and development of the curriculum within their school mean principals need to have a good working knowledge of the content and recommended methodologies across all curricular areas, while remaining informed of best practice and new curricular initiatives. The mandatory setting of targets and action plans to improve outcomes, required by SSE demonstrates a move towards instructional leadership in Ireland. Hallinger and Wang (2015) describe instructional leadership as the principal setting goals for improvement, managing and coordinating the teaching and learning and encouraging a climate of improvement, with high standards for students and staff alike. Goldring et al. (2015) suggest that insufficient time and subject knowledge limit principals as instructional leaders.

## Domain 2: Managing the Organisation

In addition to being places of learning, schools are also employers and registered charities. As the legislative requirements on schools continues to expand, so do the challenges around leading and managing the organising. Managing the organisation includes both staffing and administrative duties. This increases the administrative burden on principals. Skerritt (2019) noted that a “striking feature” of the Irish education system is the absence of an “intermediate tier of administration” between the DES and individual schools (p.268). This results in the bulk of the administrative tasks landing on the principal’s desk. For this study, Kelchterman et al.’s (2011) definition of inside (internal) and outside (external) school forces is adopted.

## Internal human relations: staffing

Although almost 50 years old Circular 17/73 is still the only detailed descriptor of the role of principal. It encourages principals to observe teacher practices and offer praise, encouragement, or advice when appropriate. Principals are responsible for ensuring teachers produce long and short-term schemes of work, progress reports and assessment records. Tasks relating to ensuring the implementation of the curriculum and effectively teaching methodologies, which had previously been the responsibility of the inspectorate, are now also under the remit of the principal. The enactment of part 5 of the Teaching Council Act (2001) in July 2016 witnessed a further milestone in Ireland's move towards greater accountability within the education sector. The Fitness to Teach provision gives the Teaching Council powers to investigate registered teachers and if deemed necessary, apply disciplinary measures. Grounds for complaints can include professional misconduct, misconduct outside their profession, underperformance, medical grounds, and convictions (Teaching Council, 2016). Under Fitness to Teach, any member of the public, an employer, colleague, or the Teaching Council itself can make a formal complaint about a registered teacher. However, schools are required to invoke their internal investigation and disciplinary procedures before the Teaching Council becomes involved. It is the responsibility of the principal to initially investigate complaints regarding the professional competence and effectiveness of individual teachers. Hislop (2015) highlighted in a speech the challenges this poses for schools, both practically and culturally. Traditionally, teachers have a high level of autonomy within their individual classroom, with little opportunity or demand for peer observation or constructive criticism of practice. Creating a culture within a school that encourages and supports peer review, whether for accountability or professional development purposes, could be

challenging. Practically, principals need to have the time, skills, competence, and inclination to observe and make judgements on the professional competence of a colleague and apply sanctions if needed. This is particularly challenging for a teaching principal. Circular 0049/2018 encourages principals to address any suspicions of misconduct or competence issues through informal means prior to invoking formal disciplinary procedures. In the case of a principal or teaching principal, the responsibility lies with the Chairperson of the Board of Management to investigate any allegations, make recommendations, and devise appropriate supports. The difficulty with this scenario lies with the ability of a chairperson to recognise and address issues of professional incompetence, if their experience in the education field is limited. If a formal investigation concludes a teacher or principal is guilty of misconduct or professional incompetence a sanction may be applied. One such sanction available is the withdrawal of an increment, which echoes historical government policies of linking pay with performance.

The Teaching Council may become involved in the investigation at an earlier stage if they believe a child may be at risk. In contrast to the recommendations of the teaching unions, the Minister for Education and Skills Jan O’Sullivan (2014-2016), opted for the most part to hold disciplinary hearings in public, citing the need for transparency in investigations. This transparency is not called for in other sections of the public sector. If the complaint is upheld, the Disciplinary Committee may advise, censure the teacher, or apply restrictions to the teacher’s registration, suspend or remove permanently the teacher’s registration, thus removing their ability to teach in Irish public schools, subject to appeal to the High Court (The Teaching Council, July 2016).

Principals are now responsible for organising the induction experience of newly qualified teachers. Sections 7 (2) (f) and (g) of the Teaching Council Act (2001) which were commenced in 2012, transferred power and responsibility for the induction and probation of newly qualified teachers, from the Department of Education's Inspectorate Division to the Teaching Council. The traditional system of probation, which involved the Inspectorate assessing an NQT's work is slowly being replaced by a new professionally led model of probation, known as Droichead. Since its inception, Droichead has undergone a number of changes. Initially the Teaching Council envisaged devolving complete responsibility for the probation process to the school principal, arguing that principals were best placed to support and assess their own staff, as opposed to an external agency such as the Inspectorate (Teaching Council, 2012). However, the INTO (2013) expressed numerous concerns regarding the increased workload for both principals and staff and the potential impact on staff relations of placing one member of staff in an evaluative role, particularly if the NQT did not agree with the decision made. Many principals and teachers were unwilling to accept the responsibility of assessing a colleague, a role historically associated with the inspectorate without appropriate resources and additional remuneration. In March 2017, the Teaching Council published a revised Droichead document, *Droichead, An Integrated Professional Introduction Framework*, which heralded a significant change to the structure of the process. Acknowledging the changes in ITE and the extension of the School Placement element of the course, the revised guidelines removed the evaluative elements of the induction phase. Supervised lessons are now replaced with informal observation and professional conversations. As opposed to school colleagues or external panel members assessing an NQT, the induction period now draws to a conclusion when the NQT and Professional

Support Team submit a joint declaration confirming their engagement with the induction process. The joint declaration only confirms each party's engagement in the process and does not allow for evaluation, thus removing any evaluative component of the year. However, Harford and O'Doherty (2016) argue that it still "devolves decisions on teachers' full recognition and membership of the profession, to principals and colleagues" (p.37). Principals are responsible for forming and overseeing the Professional Support Teams but can choose to not to be a member of the PST.

The role of the principal in initial teacher education has also expanded, as placement have been almost doubled in length. Student teachers are required to spend approximately 20 weeks in a school setting, with a ten-week placement in the final year. The traditional terminology of 'teaching practice' was replaced with 'school placement' to reflect the wider range of activities expected from students during their time in schools. Class teachers, known as 'co-operating teachers' have a more structured role to play in the student's placement. The extension to the length of placement and the increase in the role and responsibilities of partner schools in the education of student teachers was highlighted by the INTO's president Sean McMahon who noted members' concerns regarding the potential practical difficulties in managing extended placements and the worry "about the responsibility of taking teachers in formation and being accountable for their work" (McMahon, 2014). As colleges of education rely on schools and teachers to voluntarily accommodate student teachers, increasing the demands on both could negatively impact on the numbers willing to accept student teachers, with Harford and O'Doherty (2016) suggesting the "capacity and 'good will' within the system are now under threat" (p.44).

## Administration

The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 was enacted to replace the School Attendance Acts of 1926 and 1967. This legislation is primarily concerned with school attendance and participation rates and places statutory responsibilities on boards of managements, principals and parents in the areas of attendance and behaviour. The Act places a statutory obligation on boards of managements, in consultation with the principal, teachers and parents to foster good attendance and participation rates in schools through the implementation of a number of agreed strategies. Under Section 22 (1) of the Act, following the consultation process, a Statement of Strategy for School Attendance should be prepared by the board of management and submitted to the Education Welfare Board for review. It should detail challenges to attendance, proposed reward systems for good attendance records and activities to encourage improved attendance. However, as there are presently no sanctions in place for schools that fail to submit this document, only 66% of primary schools returned their attendance strategy for the academic year 2017/18 by the end of 2017 (Intouch, 2018).

The principal is responsible for maintaining accurate school attendance registers. Principals must register children on their first day of school and are responsible for ensuring attendance is recorded every day of their school life. The amount of and reasons for school absences must be kept and reported back to the NEWB in two formats. Firstly, school principals must complete reports on individual student absences, when 20 or more absences are recorded. The individual Student Absent Reports are submitted twice a year. In addition to this, schools must complete an Annual Attendance Report at the end of the academic year, detailing the



absence rates in the school. These individual and annual reports contribute significantly to the administrative responsibility of the principal.

Circulars 0031/2016 and 0072/2017 place statutory obligations on school authorities to obtain vetting disclosures and retrospective vetting disclosures for all current staff and volunteers employed in schools. With the exception of certain limited circumstances, it is a criminal offence for schools to hire employees or engage the services of volunteers without first obtaining a vetting disclosure from the Vetting Bureau. School authorities who fail to abide by these regulations face fines of up to €10000 and/or a custodial sentence of up to 5 years. This places increased administrative responsibility on the principal to ensure all employees and volunteers meet the necessary requirements.

### Domain 3: Leading School Development

Evident in Circular 16/73 saw the first indications of a move towards increased parental involvement in schools, with principal teachers directed to “seek to win the confidence, co-operation and good will” of the parents in addition to discussing with them anything relating to their child (Circular 16/73, p. 15). In addition to planning, curriculum development and implementation, principals were now required to actively build and maintain positive relationships with the wider community. The *Student and Parent Bill 2019* further cements in law the rights of the parent and child and the responsibility of principals to actively engage with home. Parents’ Associations and student councils are encouraged to provide a stronger voice for parents and children in the running of the school. This places a greater onus on the principal to engage with the Parents Association and Student Council when making school wide decisions.

Another example of parental consultation in policy making is evidenced in the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. Schools are instructed to devise, in consultation with parents a Code of Behaviour. This document outlines the expected standard of behaviour in the school and the procedures to be followed in the event of student misbehaviour. The document should be given to parents on enrolment and regularly reviewed and amended in line with the needs of the school. Under this Act, schools intending to expel a student must alert the Education Welfare Officer 20 days in advance of the expulsion. Failure on the part of the principal to follow the procedures, as detailed in their Code of Behaviour may result in parents successfully challenging the school's decision under Section 29 of the Education Act.

Circular 0093/2012 requires all schools to participate in a school self-evaluation process (SSE). With the purpose of improving the “overall quality of education” and “pupil learning outcomes” through a “collaborative, reflective process of internal school review”, SSE requires schools to gather evidence relating to their practice and analyse their findings. These areas of “strengths and weaknesses”, in conjunction with an improvement plan are then compiled into a SSE report, which is circulated to the wider school community. The *School Self Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020* detail the manner in which SSE should be organised. It highlighted the need to include all members of the school community i.e., parents and pupils in the consultation process. Principals are tasked with selecting areas within the school for improvement, gathering data during the consultation process, identifying specific targets and designing and implementing interventions to reach the targets.

Domain 4: Developing leadership capacity

Recognising the increased workload for the principal, the Department of Education detailed duties that could be delegated to a vice-principal or a teacher with special posts of responsibility, forming a middle management system for larger schools (Circular 16/73) which potentially introduced a distributed leadership model. However, following the economic recession, from 2008, the government placed a moratorium on posts of responsibilities affecting wiping out middle management posts in many primary schools. Circular 0044/2019 offered some alleviation to the moratorium and schools are slowly starting to return to pre-recession middle management numbers.

## **2.7 The effect of the role on principal well-being**

As illustrated above, the role of the principal has evolved greatly over the past two decades. The expansion of the role, the increase in responsibility and accountability are “unintended consequences” of recent reform agendas (such as the Global Education Reform Movement, see Chapter 3) and are “making the job more stressful and less attractive to potential school leaders” (Ray, Pijanowski and Lasater, 2020, p. 436). Sharp increases in workload and responsibilities takes a physical and emotional toll on the health of the principal (Riley, 2017; Pollock et al., 2020). The pace and scope of the intensification of the workload has “serious ramifications for the attraction and retention of principals, their well-being, and the quality of their working lives” (Heffernan and Pierspoint, 2020, p. 10). Currently there is a limited but growing international body of research investigating the impact of the role on the occupational health and well-being of the principal, though Pollock (2017) argues that when it comes to supporting well-being “principals tend to be an afterthought” (p.25).

The term well-being itself is difficult to conceptualise. Some theorists link well-being with burnout and work engagement (Schaufel, 2003; Nthebe et al., 2016), happiness and joy (Marks and Shah, 2004) and stress and resilience (WHO, 2001). Juniper et al., (2011) defined workplace well-being as the overall health of the individual “determined primarily by work and can be influenced by workplace interventions” (p. 347). The DES’s *Well-being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (2019) states “well-being does not necessarily mean the absence of stress or negative emotions in life or the absence of mental health difficulties” (p.10). It adopts Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development, noting the impact of the wider community on the well-being of the individual. Well-being can be influenced by a myriad of micro, meso and macro factors from the personal circumstances of the individual to school factors and the wider social and political structures. It can be linked to job satisfaction, though those experiencing stress and burnout can also still enjoy their job (Pollock 2017). This is evident in Darmody and Smyth’s (2011) study where 93% of Irish principals were satisfied in the role despite 70% of them feeling stressed.

Studies conducted in Australia (Riley and See, 2020), New Zealand (Riley, 2017) and Ireland (Riley, 2015) report that principals experience significantly higher levels of stress than other professions. Compared with the general population New Zealand principals, particularly females, reported feeling higher rates of burnout (1.7 times), stress (1.8 times), sleeping issues (2.4 times), depressive symptoms (1.4 times) somatic stress (1.4 times) and cognitive stress (1.8 times) (Riley, 2017, p. 53). Similarly, principals in the Irish study scored significantly lower in terms of well-being than the general population. Teaching principals in particular reported the highest levels of stress prompting the researcher to question if the role is in fact “becoming impossible to carry out effectively” (Riley, 2015, p. 7). This was

similar to findings by Darmody and Symth (2015) who attribute this to role overload, as they are “combining teaching commitments with school leadership and administrative duties” (p. 124). Australian and Irish principals reported threats of violence, offensive behaviours and bullying in schools as factors impacting on their well-being.

Similarly, research by Ray et al., (2020) found principals in Arkansas in the United States experienced difficulty sleeping far above the national average, reported frequently missing lunch breaks due to work and struggling to create a healthy work-life balance. Similar results were found in studies conducted with principals in Sweden (Persson et al., 2021), Australia (Beusaert et al., 2016) and Belgium (Yildirim et al., 2019).

Evidence suggests that the intensification of the role is negatively impacting on the health and well-being of the principals, with their physical and mental health suffering. This in turn affects the recruitment and retention of principals. In this study well-being relates to the individuals’ perception of their general physical and mental health.

## **2.8 Challenges in attracting and retaining principals**

When discussing sustainability, Bottery (2016) claims that it is the “sheer volume of principals’ work” (p. 98), much of which is completed outside of the prescribed school hours combined with a low trust culture of accountability, that is making the role of principal unsustainable. Principals must attempt to balance the rights and needs of the individual with the rights and needs of various other groups, which can often be contrasting (Husbands, 2001). Research conducted by Price Waterhouse Cooper (2009) noted an international trend in the decrease in applications for principalship, linking the decline with perceptions that the role is both “stressful and challenging” (p.8), while McGuinness and Cunningham (2015)

refer to it as an “impending global educational recruitment crisis” (p. 207). Niesche (2012, p. 457) describes a principal’s daily tasks as “numerous, complex and increasing seen as unmanageable”, which have made the role of principal less attractive to potential applications in Western countries, such as the UK, US and Australia. Sugrue (2005) argues that while educational researchers are preoccupied with documenting effective school leadership practices, principals are struggling on a daily basis to implement the ever-expanding list of initiatives “handed down to principals” to address emerging societal issues, in a “climate of negativity towards the public sector” (p.4).

The context of the school can play a role in attracting principals, with disadvantaged schools finding it more difficult to recruit and retain principals (Loeb et al., 2010; Lee and Mao, 2020). Research conducted by Lupton in the UK (2005) found that principals in disadvantaged schools are more likely to experience attendance problems, behavioural issues, “a charged emotional environment” and “an unpredictable working environment” (p.596), which takes a toll on the physical and mental health of the individual. Similarly, Fleming and Harford (2021) concluded that DEIS schools can experience high levels of disruption due to emotional and behavioural outbursts. The time dedicated to supporting the emotional needs of the students impacts on the time available for teaching and learning.

## **2.9 Preparations and supports**

Currently, principals in Ireland do not need to have any formal leadership qualifications, though participants in Murphy’s study (2020) believed that “it would be almost impossible to secure a senior leadership role without engaging in formal leadership preparation” (p. 3). The only requirement for the role is that a principal should be a qualified, probated teacher

with a minimum of five years teaching experience (Circular 02/02). Interestingly, principals who are teaching principals and are effectively completing two roles, are only required to have been probated and technically could be appointed to the role of principal with just one year teaching experience. Although a formal leadership qualification is not essential for appointment to the role, recent years has witnessed a push towards encouraging professional learning, with principals in Murphy's study (2020) believing that engagement with formal leadership training was beneficial and eased their transition into the role. The CSL was established as a partnership between the DES, the IPPN and the National Associations of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) to develop leadership programmes across the leadership continuum to support teachers at all stages of their career. Although the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) was established in 2015, research still shows that principals do not feel adequately prepared for the role (Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants, 2018, King and Stevenson, 2017).

## **2.10 Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the national context in which primary school principals in Ireland work. It illustrated how Ireland's history and culture still shapes and informs education policy and practice, in particular Ireland's distinctive governance system, which combines a significant role for patrons in providing and managing schools with a high level of interventionism and control over policy and curricular issues by the Department of Education and state agencies. The next chapter examines the global context and its influence on education policy on a national level.





## **Chapter 3: Literature review: the global context and influences on Irish education policy**

### **3.1. Introduction**

Recent decades have witnessed a global trend aimed at reforming education systems through changes in policies, provision and practices. These ‘reforms’ typically begin by identifying apparent shortfalls in the current system and advocate the use of testing, measurement and accountability to raise standards. The push towards these reforms is evident in educational systems worldwide, prompting Levin (1998) to describe the spread as a “policy epidemic” and to caution policy makers against the adoption of policies without careful consideration of the context in which they are implemented. Irish educational policy remains heavily influenced by external organisations such as the OECD, through its publication of yearly documents such as *Education at a Glance*. The results from the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) allows for comparisons in education achievement at national and international levels and significantly influences Irish policy makers (Grek, 2009; Fleming and Harford, 2021). The results of PISA have for decades shaped and guided education policy and provision in Ireland (O’Doherty, 2014). Due to the indirect nature of its influence Sellar and Lingard (2014) refer to the OECD as a “sculpture” of education policy agendas that uses “soft power” to exert its influence through mechanisms such as “peer pressure” and “review” (p. 919).

This chapter is divided into two sections. Firstly, it examines how major international policy trends, such as New Public Management (NPM) and Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) are shaping educational policies and practices nationally and internationally.

Secondly the impact of neoliberal policies on the role of the principal is discussed. Keddie (2016) argued that neoliberal, market-oriented ideologies are particularly significant when considering principal autonomy and accountability. National and international sources are drawn upon to present how the role of the principals is expanding and the autonomy and accountability measures are changing.

### **3.2 Globalisation and Irish educational policy**

Policymakers look outward to seek examples of best practice and make comparisons across school systems. Terms such as ‘policy borrowing,’ ‘policy referencing’ and ‘policy learning’ describe the ways in which countries can adopt, adapt, and apply international policies and practices to their individual contexts (Phillips and Oches 2003, Steiner-Kamsi 2002, Raffe and Spours 2007, Sellar and Lingard 2013, Forestier et al. 2016). Fleming (2016) suggests that Ireland’s history with external influences may make us more likely to look outward for policy inspiration. Although beneficial in many ways, policy borrowing can be problematic if practices are merely transplanted from one system to another without sufficient consideration of the cultural and contextual differences across systems. This can also be true when applying blanket policies to all schools regardless of individual school contexts.

Apple (2013) argues that recognising globalisation in educational policy is crucial to understanding policy formation, as nearly all systems are “influenced by an increasingly integrated international economy” (p.118). Burndett and O’Donnell (2016) caution against

policy changes based on political and socio-political agendas as opposed to sound educational reasoning, arguing that governments are influenced by a range of factors and are not simply driven by a desire to increase educational attainment. When analysing the trajectory of Irish education policy, it is necessary to consider the context in which policy changes were implemented.

Policy borrowing and policy referencing have been features of Irish policy formation since the 1950s, when a poor economic climate prompted the government to rethink its economic policies and they looked to the international and European examples for inspiration. Or in some cases legitimisation of policy changes already under consideration (Walsh, 2009). Ireland's attendance at the Washington Policy Conference led to its participation in the OECD's pilot study in investment in education in the 1960s resulted in a "paradigm shift" (Murray, 2012, p.67) in Irish education policy, forging a connection between education, employment and economic prosperity which continues to this day. It led to the adoption of the human capital theory, linking investment in education with economic prosperity (O'Connor, 2014). Recommendations made by Investment in Education (1965) informed government policies for the expansion of education provision for decades to follow (Fleming and Hartford, 2014). As discussed in Chapter 2 policy borrowing is not new to Irish educational policy.

### **3.3 The impact of a neoliberal agenda on educational policy**

The economic downturn experienced in the mid-1970s, following the global oil shocks resulted in high levels of unemployment, a decline in economic investment and economic growth throughout the Western world (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). The economic decline

was associated with an “unfocused approach to educational progressivism” and education providers were criticised by politicians, the business community and the general public (Hargreaves, 2009, p. 91) with calls for widespread reforms. In addition to an economic recession, the UK experienced changes across its social and political landscape (Ball, 2007), which resulted in criticism of the dominant Keynesian economic model and associated National Welfare State and its ability to effectively manage the economy. Previous government policies that advocated the benefits of financial investment in public services such as education and health now came under scrutiny for its apparent inefficient use of public funding. The need for, and advantages of, high state involvement in the provision and management of public services was questioned. In contrast to the Keynesian model, neoliberal economics advocate for the deregulation and privatisation of markets, and the reduction of the welfare state (Harvey 2005, Venugopal, 2015). Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a “theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (p. 2). By opening up the markets and introducing competition, the government aimed to increase efficiency and decrease expenditure in the public sector. Institutions that were in receipt of public funding should be cost effective and demonstrate an economic return on the financial investment (Apple, 1998). Neoliberalism links increased efficiency with increased accountability, achieved through the publication of performance reports and data (Shepard, 2018) with the general public becoming a tool in the monitoring and measuring of efficiency in the public sector. The British government under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher adopted the principles of neoliberalism, directly affecting the provision

of education in England and Wales and indirectly influencing educational policies in other European countries and the United States of America (Sugrue, 2015). These educational changes or ‘reforms’ as a result of the neoliberal agenda were evident from the 1980s onwards. In order to increase economic productivity successive policies aimed at ‘transforming education into a product that can be bought or sold like anything else’ (Davies and Bansel, 2007, p. 254) were implemented. As education was viewed as a product, parents were viewed as the consumers. As such, competition between schools and consumer choice was promoted (Conway and Murphy, 2013) weakening the embedded public perception that education was linked to welfare provision (Ball, 2017). Conway and Murphy (2013) argue that a neoliberal perspective has “played a leading, and an enormously influential role in extending the reach of accountability systems” (p.11) in education systems globally for decades. In the UK, the introduction of the Education Reform Act 1988 had a significant impact on education provision. The Act introduced a number of measures to increase accountability, such as the National Curriculum and educational objectives, known as Key Stages. The National Curriculum standardised teaching content across the UK, allowing for standardised assessments, the results of which are compiled and published in league table format, for the general public. It increased school autonomy by transferring financial control to school head teachers, as opposed to local authorities. Individual school head teachers and governors were now directly responsible and accountable for their own spending. The Education (Schools) Act 1992 saw the introduction of a national system of inspectors, charged with inspecting and publishing reports on all publicly funded schools, under the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). These reports can influence parents’ decisions to enrol their children in particular schools.

Similar to the United Kingdom, the United States of America suffered an economic downturn in the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in high levels of unemployment and high rates of inflation. Public attention turned to the education system, with public schools criticised for poor student achievement levels which were perceived by critics as negatively impacting on America's industry and business development, disadvantaging the USA compared to their international counterparts (A Nation at Risk, 1983). A study commissioned to investigate public schooling resulted in the publication of the document *A Nation at Risk: An Imperative for Educational Reform* in 1983. This document recommended a number of changes be implemented to public schooling such as: revising the curriculum to ensure that graduating students were proficient in five basic subjects, increasing more measurable standards such as testing, lengthening the school day or year, changes to teacher education and increased emphasis on school leadership. This document served as a foundation for the increased state involvement in education, which the following years witnessed, culminating in the No Child Left Behind Act 2001 (NCLB), which was signed into law in 2002. The principles of the NCLB Act were to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children through a series of measures linked to federal government oversight and funding. Increased accountability for teachers and schools was one such measure. Under the legislation, schools were required to measure student attainment through annual standardised tests in reading and maths, administered in grades 3-8 and in high school. It was the responsibility of each state to decide what constitutes proficiency in these subject areas. Schools that did not meet the required proficiency standards could have sanctions applied, such as a reduction in funding. Schools were also required to complete Adequate Yearly Progress reports, detailing their objectives for the year. Schools who consistency failed to

reach their pre-set targets were obliged to allow students to transfer to ‘achieving’ schools or offer free additional tuition to students (Hayes, 2008). This publication of ‘successful and unsuccessful’ schools in each district mirrored the practice of publishing league tables in the United Kingdom. Ireland has not, to date, adopted the more extreme elements of neoliberal policies in the UK, such as league tables. However, neoliberal policy trends are evident in Ireland and the impact of neoliberal measures on the role of the principal is explored further on.

Critics of the NCLB Act argued that there appeared to be no direct evidence of an increase in standards as a result of the new measures. However, the standardised testing as a key means of assessment resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum as teachers taught to the test (Ladd, 2017). In addition, the process allowed individual states to determine proficiency standards, making comparisons between schools’ achievement and determining the impact of the measures impossible (Hamilton, Stretcher and Marsh, 2007).

### **3.4 New Public Management or New Managerialism and Irish education**

Managerialism, according to Shepherd (2018) focuses on the role of the manager in improving the performance of an organisation, whether private or public. Effective management skills can be learned and an individual manager, when afforded the appropriate level of autonomy, can be instrumental in improving outcomes. Public sector organisations are encouraged to adopt private sector management styles in an effort to increase efficiency. Shepherd (2018) argues that although quite similar in appearance, neoliberalism and managerialism are in fact separate and distinct entities, and together form the principles that underpin New Public Management (NPM) or as it is also referred to, New Managerialism.

Lynch (2014) argues that new managerialism is the “organisational arm of neoliberalism” (p. 968). In contrast to managerialism, which is largely concerned with management and the role of the manager, new managerialism “redefines what counts as knowledge, who are the bearers of such knowledge and who is empowered to act- all within a legitimate framework of public choice and market accountability” (Lynch, Grummel and Devine, 2012, p.4). Brown et al., (2016) argued that although these NPM was originally conceived because of a lack of trust in the public sector, it does also aim to reduce bureaucracy and decentralise decision making to local bodies.

Although NPM is a broad term to describe the changing government policies, Hood (1991, p. 3) identified four key common trends:

1. attempts to *slow down or reverse government growth* in terms of overt public spending and staffing
2. the shift toward *privatization and quasi-privatization* and away from core government institutions,
3. the development of *automation*
4. the development of a more *international* agenda

NPM is concerned with improving the efficiency of public sector services by attempting to apply the principles used in private sector management, though Bottery (1996) suggests that the various elements characterising NPM will feature differently depending on each area of the public sector. Generally, the emphasis in public sector ‘reform’ waves based on NPM is placed on targets and outcomes, value for money and public service accountability (Ferlie, Musselin and Andresani, 2008). Emphasis is placed on the continual need to reform the



structure of the public sector, resulting in constant new initiatives, performance targets and accountability measures (Roberts, 2014). In education, parents and students are encouraged to act as customers availing of a public service, rather than citizens of a country (Anderson and Cohen, 2015). Critics of NPM argue that the centralisation of policy decisions resulted in an increase in bureaucracy, which is an apparent contradiction of the neoliberal principle of reducing state involvement (Roberts, 2014, p. 63). McNamara and O'Hara (2009) also argue that the move towards increased autonomy at local level actually results in "greater government regulation and scrutiny" (p.15) through performance measurement and inspections.

**Table 3. 1: Manifestations of NPM reform and their ideological roots**

Neoliberalism	New Public Managerialism
The introduction of market-type mechanisms and competition	The adoption of a more business-like approach and  private sector practices
The commodification of services	The establishment of a management culture
A focus on value for money and doing more with less (i.e., efficiency)	A rational approach to management (e.g., strategic planning and objective setting)
Central regulation and/or control	A strengthening of the line management function (e.g., performance management)
The adoption of an entrepreneurial culture	Adoption of human resource management techniques to secure employee commitment
A shift of priorities from universalism to individualism	A shift from inputs and processes to outputs and outcomes
An emphasis on service quality and consumer orientation and choice	More measurement and quantification of outputs (e.g., performance indicators)
Greater flexibility of pay and conditions	
The growth of contractual relationships (e.g., purchaser-provider)	
A blurring of public-private sector boundaries and increased scope for private sector provision	

Table adapted from: Shepherd (2018, p.1669)

### 3.5 The Global Education Reform Movement

The Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) is a broad term used to describe a series of initiatives and practices, which have impacted on education on a global scale. It operates on the assumption that school systems worldwide experience similar problems, so therefore have similar priorities and implement similar policies to combat these (Skerritt, 2019). Tracing its origins back to the 1980s, GERM can be attributed to three main sources (Sahlberg, 2015). Firstly, education reforms which moved the focus from teaching to

learning. A constructivist approach to learning is adopted, shifting the focus of learning from the memorisation of facts to the development of problem-solving skills, particularly in the core subjects. Secondly, a move towards ensuring that inclusive education is available for all children. Thirdly, it seeks to increase education standards, by encouraging competition between schools. Greater operational autonomy is devolved to schools and teachers are held accountable for their students' learning outcomes. Standardised testing and learning outcomes are used to measure school performance. According to Sahlberg (2015) "education has become a commodity where the efficiency of service delivery ultimately determines performance" (p.144).

Sahlberg's direct influence on the Irish education system can be seen in the changes made in recent years to the provision of initial teacher education (ITE) in Ireland. Commissioned by the Department of Education in 2012 to examine ITE, Sahlberg's *Report of the International Review Panel on the Structure of Initial Teacher Education in Ireland* (2012) and later *the Structure of Teacher Education in Ireland: Review of Progress in Implementing Reform* (2019) saw the amalgamation and streamlining of ITE colleges, changes to school placement and a drive towards a more research based approach for student teachers.

### **3.6 Neoliberalism in Irish education policy**

The period, from the 1990s until 2007, saw successive government budgets lowering taxes while increasing spending on public services, though spending on education during this period was lower than the OCED average (Drudy, 2011). However, the economic growth achieved during the Celtic Tiger proved unsustainable. A global downturn in the economy, coupled with the collapse in the property market, resulted in the Irish government issuing a

guarantee for all banking and financial institutions and ultimately being obliged to agree a European Union-International Monetary Fund bailout of the Irish state.

The economic recessions had immediate repercussions for the education sector, which was evidenced in the publication of two ‘emergency’ budgets in a six-month period in October 2008 and April 2009. These cost saving measures included increasing class sizes, restricting the appointment of certain categories of teachers and decreasing grants and funding to the tune of €26.6 million (Government of Ireland, 2009). These “wide ranging and Draconian cutbacks” to education were still insufficient to balance the government books (Lynch, 2009, p. 37). Increased government debt, as a result of the banking liabilities and a renewed economic recession led Ireland to seek financial assistance from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund in November 2010. Unsurprisingly assistance of €85 billion came with conditions. One such condition was the reform of the public sector, resulting in the government entering into negotiations with public service unions, in an effort to increase efficiency and lower spending. Following negotiations with representations from various trade unions, the Public Services Agreement 2010-2014 was reached in 2010. Known as the Croke Park Agreement, in reference to the location of the talks, this agreement aimed to create a “leaner and more effective” service, which “focuses more on the needs of the citizen” (Government of Ireland, 2010, p.2). The agreement focused on reducing public service numbers, increasing performance and restructuring public service pay and pension schemes. Mooney Simmie (2012) argues that the conditions forced upon Ireland by external organisations such as the EU, IMF and ECB sparked a new national discourse “which pitted the public against all aspects of the public sector” (p. 488).

Policy changes in education were also influenced by international benchmarking of standards through the PISA process. The results from PISA's 2009 study contributed to a "perfect storm" in Irish education policy. An apparent drop in educational standards in literacy and numeracy, resulting in negative external results combined with the economic downturn and a "reform-orientated Minister for Education" in Ruairí Quinn, prompted widespread educational 'reform' over the last two decades (Conway, 2013, p.53). Elements of GERM are evident in the "intent and intensity of accountability mechanisms" characterising Irish education policy (Conway and Murphy, 2013, p.29). The following (Figure 2.6) applies Sahlberg's understanding of GERM to an Irish context

**Table 3. 2: Global trends in educational development to improve student learning since the early 1980s Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) in Salhberg (2011, p. 180)**

<i>Features of GERM</i>	<i>Impact on Teaching</i>	<i>GERM in relation to Ireland</i>
<p><b>Standardizing Teaching and Learning</b></p> <p>Setting clear, high, centrally prescribed performance standards for all schools, teachers, and students to improve the quality and equity of outcomes. Standardizing teaching and curriculum in order to have coherence and common criteria for measurement and data.</p>	<p>Changes the nature of teaching from an open- ended, non-linear process of mutual inquiry and exploration to a linear process with causal outcomes. May also be harmful for creativity and innovation in teaching and learning.</p>	<p>Centralised prescribed curriculum from the DES with a recommended minimum weekly time for each subject, introduced in 1999.</p> <p>Emphasis on standardised approach to teaching and learning</p>
<p><b>Focus on Literacy and Numeracy</b></p> <p>Basic knowledge and skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and the natural sciences serve as prime targets of education reform</p>	<p>When educational performance is determined according to students' test scores in reading and mathematics, it has a reduced focus on other subjects, especially art, music, drama, and sports.</p>	<p>The Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (2011) increased the time allocation for literacy and numeracy.</p> <p>At the discretion of the school, time can be re-allocated from non-core subjects to facilitate this.</p>
<p><b>Teaching for Pre-determined Results</b></p> <p>Reaching higher standards as criterion for success and good performance. Outcomes of teaching are predictable and described in a uniform way.</p>	<p>This minimizes risk-taking in teaching and learning and, therefore, reduces creativity. Often narrows teaching to the desired content only and promotes the use of teaching methods beneficial to attaining pre-set results.</p>	<p>The 1999 Revised Curriculum is presented using learning objectives.</p> <p>The 2015 Primary Languages Curriculum contains learning</p>

<i>Features of GERM</i>	<i>Impact on Teaching</i>	<i>GERM in relation to Ireland</i>
		outcomes, progression steps and continua.
<p><b>Renting Market-oriented Reform Ideas</b></p> <p>Sources of educational change are external innovations brought to schools from the corporate world through legislation or national programs.</p>	<p>Distances teachers from the moral purpose of their profession. Competition, efficiency, and productivity may demoralize teachers and may jeopardize attractiveness of the teaching profession.</p>	<p>Increase in the number of Department of Education backed initiatives.</p> <p>Corporate sponsored resources used in schools (e.g., Food Dudes)</p>
<p><b>Test-based Accountability</b></p> <p>School performance and raising student achievement are closely tied to processes of promotion, inspection, and ultimately rewarding schools and teachers. Winners normally gain fiscal rewards whereas struggling schools and individuals are punished.</p>	<p>Increases teaching to the test when stakes of accountability are high. May also increase malpractices in testing and reporting if the stakes include rewards or sanctions for teachers or the school.</p>	<p>In 2011 mandatory Literacy and Numeracy testing for children in 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> classes.</p> <p>Results reported to the DES. Combined with other factors, the results determine the staffing levels.</p> <p>School Self Evaluation practices to focus on increasing attainment in standardised testing.</p> <p>No fiscal reward for high achieving schools or punishments for low achieving schools.</p>

<i>Features of GERM</i>	<i>Impact on Teaching</i>	<i>GERM in relation to Ireland</i>
<p><b>Control</b></p> <p>In tandem with increased choice and local autonomy, schools are more frequently controlled by data collected from various aspects of the teaching and learning process. Continuous reporting, evaluations, and inspections are diminishing the actual autonomy of teachers and the degrees of freedom of schools.</p>	<p>Increases bureaucracy in the school as the management of data requires more resources. May increase teaching that aims to showcase good practices rather than helping students to learn. This narrows the focus on pedagogy and encourages standardized behaviors.</p>	<p>Increased choice of school patronage for parents.</p> <p>Increased school inspections. Publication of school inspection reports.</p> <p>School self-evaluation.</p> <p>Increased types of external school evaluations.</p> <p>Increase in reporting.</p>



### **3.7 The impact of policy changes on the role of the principal**

The role of the school principal is constantly in flux as the landscape in which schools operate continually shift. Principals, as school leaders engage in policy enactment, which Ball et al. (2015) describe as an “ambiguous and messy process” (p. 485) of decoding policies and enacting them within their individual contexts. While Bush (2009) argues that the role of the school principal has expanded in recent years, as education is increasingly viewed as a tool for economic prosperity. He attributes the expansion in the role of the principal to an increase in societal expectations placed on schools, in which principals are held accountable for their perceived successes or failures and to a devolution of some power to school level. Whether it is a devolution of power or merely the devolution for responsibility in the Irish context is unclear and will be investigated further in this study. Either way, research suggests principals are finding the role “increasingly more complex” (Agostino, 2018, p. 279) due to the pressures of reform and it may indeed “exceed the capacity of a single individual” (Benoliel et al., 2019, p. 167).

The scholarship highlights that schools are complex settings which often impose conflicting demands on principals as they attempt to balance the needs of the children, parents, staff and community, while adhering to government statutory requirements and the expectations of the entire school community (Sebastian et al., 2018). Goldring et al. (2007) define the role as “an array of short, fragmented activities often conducted through brief personal interactions that are unrelated to teaching and learning” (p. 332). The expansion of the role, with new and competing responsibilities in different domains, has impacted on the way in which principals can allocate their time. The role of the principal can include curriculum and instructional work, building maintenance, finances, discipline, attendance, human resource

management, community work, external stakeholders and administration. Research in Canada (Pollock et al., 2014) found a tension between leadership and management with principals forced to spend more time on building maintenance issues than curriculum instruction.

### ***3.7.1 The autonomy and accountability of the principal***

The issue of principal autonomy is one of considerable debate within the educational field. Many researchers believe that increased school autonomy is necessary for school improvement, as it allows schools to make informed decisions on the basis on their individual needs (Hoig and Rainey, 2012; Cheng et al., 2015; Han, 2018) and unleashes “the potential of the principal to achieve the highest levels of student outcomes” (Eacott, 2015, p. 420). However, there is limited evidence available to prove that school autonomy contributes to school improvement (Court and O’Neill, 2011, Grattan Institute, 2013). Cheng et al. (2015) argue that the differing levels of school autonomy, in addition to other variations in school structures and accountability mechanisms across different school systems make comparisons impossible. However, even with the absence of strong evidence to support the benefits of school autonomy, many countries, such as Australia, the UK and Ireland have implemented increases in school autonomy in the past two decades (Salokangas and Ainscow, 2017).

Heffernan (2018) defined autonomy in Australia as “principals and schools have more local decision-making power over staffing, budgeting and resourcing of their schools” (p. 380), while Skerritt (2018) described it as more freedom over staffing, finances and the curriculum. Though definitions vary from region to region, autonomy is concerned with devolving more power to individual schools, in the belief that better decisions will be made by those who

know the school context. The difficulty arises in determining the amount of power devolved and way autonomy is implemented. Peck and Lewis-Durham (2021) refer to autonomy as the “Goldilocks dilemma: principal power is almost inevitably too hot or too cold, but never just right” (p.1).

Reforms inspired by neoliberal ideologies link increased autonomy with an increased need for accountability to counterbalance one another (Brown et al., 2016). Accountability can be defined in many ways. Anderson (2005) described it as “compliance with regulations, adherence to professional norms and results driven” (p. 6), while Smith and Beanpot (2019) define it as “external monitoring and an emphasis on outcomes or results” (p. 193). Weiner and Woulding (2016) argued that the linking of autonomy with heightened accountability measures leave school leaders feelings “they are simultaneously being micromanaged and hung out to dry”, creating a situation of “controlled autonomy” rather than true autonomy (p. 35). Conway and Murphy (2013) argue that although the “scope, intensity and intent of accountability have increased significantly” (p. 16) in recent years, Ireland still maintains a more “restrained approach” to neoliberalism by not attaching any high stakes consequences to school evaluations or standardised testing (p.17).

Originally developed by Stone et al. (1989) for public policy and later used in the field of education (Darling-Hammond, 1989; Firestone and Ships, 2007), Pollock and Winton (2015, p. 326) outline seven types of accountabilities evident in school systems. These are presented in the table below and related to the Irish context.

**Table 3. 3: Seven types of accountabilities evident in school systems applied to an Irish context**

Accountability	Description	Applied to an Irish context
Legal	Compliance with legislative requirement	Numerous Acts, circulars, and guidelines to be followed.
Political	Accountability to elected officials	Not applicable in an Irish context.
Professional	Adherence to professional norms, standards	Registration with the Teaching Council and adherence to their standards of professional practice.
Moral	Commitment to the values of the school and the principal's individual morals/values	Upholding the ethos of the school, religious or multi-denominational.  Adherence to Codes of Professional Conduct (2005, 2012) as set by the Teaching Council.
Market	Competition between schools for students and staff	Competition to increase student numbers in some schools to avoid amalgamation.  Competition to secure staff, due to staff shortages.  Engagement with different initiatives e.g., Green School, Digital School to attract students and increase numbers.
Administrative (bureaucratic)	Implementation of state mandated policies and procedures	Numerous policy and planning requirements e.g., Child Protection, Anti-bullying, Enrolment, Code of Behaviour which must be produced during school inspections.
Performance based	Measuring and comparing student performance on standardised testing	Standardised testing results in numeracy and literacy returned annually to the DES.  Schools engage in the setting of targets and measuring of performance through School Self-Evaluation. The results of SSE must be published for parents.

Adapted from Pollock and Winton (2015 p. 326)

### **3.8 Conclusion**

This chapter examined the influences of international policy trends such as new public management, global education reform movement and neoliberalism on the role of the principal in Ireland and internationally. The changes to the autonomy and accountability of the principal was discussed. Although the last decade has produced some research into primary school leadership in an Irish context (Murphy, 2019; Stynes and McNamara, 2019; Sugrue, 2009, 2011, 2015; Brennan and O’Ruairc, 2011; Mooney Simmie, 2014; Cuneen and Harford, 2016; Ummanel et al., 2016; Faas et al., 2018.) principalship has been somewhat neglected, with little focus on the role itself. Instead research has focused on teacher leadership practices, in-school management teams or the principals’ role in implementing specific policy areas, such as inclusion. The expansion of the role, responsibilities, and remit of the principal, combined with varying perceptions of principalship by different stakeholders, merits a deeper examination of the role and individual experiences within it. Chapter 4 outlines the research approach and design adopted for this study.



## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This study is concerned with investigating the role of the Irish primary school principal in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. An interpretivist theoretical perspective underpinned this study with a relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology adopted. A qualitative, single-case study approach was employed, with two data collection methods utilised: documentary analysis and interviews. This chapter is concerned with outlining and justifying the methodology selected. The sampling technique chosen, and participant information is presented. Issues relating to validity, ethical considerations, data analysis and the limitations of the study are also addressed.

### **4.2 Research Aim**

The overall aim of this study was to explore the evolution of the role of the Irish primary school principal in the period since 2000. Through documentary analysis of official government policies, changes in education policy over the past two decades (2000-2020) were traced, to examine whether, and to what extent, policy and regulatory changes implemented in this time frame, have impacted on the role of the primary school principal. By seeking the perspectives of 31 principals, this study sought to explore how primary school principals in Ireland perceive and experience their role and to investigate the extent to which their perceptions of the role is consistent with public policy statements.

### 4.2.1 Research Questions

The formulation of research questions is the most crucial element of the research process and is central to determining the future direction of the project. Cohen et al (2018) argue that a clearly defined research question is critical as it “focuses, centres, shapes, steers and drives the entire research” (p. 165) while Yin (2014) refers to it as “probably the most important step to be taken in a research study” (p. 11). It was imperative that a broad aim was narrowed down to more specific, answerable questions and a clear link was evident between the overall aim of the research and the research questions presented (Cohen et al, 2018), as poorly constructed research questions inevitably result in poor research (Bryman, 2012). Following critical engagement with the literature presented in Chapters 2 and 3, the following research questions and sub questions emerged.

**Table 4. 1: Research questions**

Research Questions
Based on legislative and policy statements, what is the role of the principal? How do principals perceive their role?
What are the main challenges principals associate with the role?
What impact, if any, has the nature of the role on the well-being on the principal?
What support is available and of the supports available which are utilised by principals and why?
What are principals’ perceptions of the levels of autonomy and accountability present in their individual school contexts?



### **4.3 Research Design**

A research design can be described as a “plan or strategy” constructed by the researcher develop a rigorous set of approaches in order to answer the research questions in a logical and comprehensive manner (Cohen et al, (2018). Bryman (2012) defines the research design as a “framework for the collection and analysis of data” (p. 46), while Creswell (2014) considers them “types of inquiry within qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches that provide specific direction for procedures” (p.12).

A case study, employing qualitative research methods, was selected for this study, as this afforded the researcher the opportunity to examine how “participants explore their social world” (Bryman, 2014, p. 40). A case study approach was well suited to this research, which sought to gain an in-depth insight into the individual experiences and perceptions of a number of principals. It allowed the researcher to examine the complex nature of school leadership in times of unprecedented regulatory and policy changes by exploring the principals’ individual stories. The researcher was interested in exploring how principals “make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriman,1998, p. 6).

Critics of the qualitative research methods highlight the difficulty in generalising or replicating any findings, due to the small number of participants included in the study (Bryman, 2004). In response to this criticism, Creswell (2014) notes that quantitative researchers are focused instead on developing a broader overview for a particular problem or issue through “reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation” (p.186). In contrast qualitative studies involve fewer participants and rely heavily on the involvement of the researcher in the “construction of the data” (Denscombe, 2014, p.

245). According to Berg (2009) qualitative research refers to “meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions” (p.3). Creswell (2014, pps. 185-186) notes some common characteristics of qualitative research such as:

- the data gathering usually occurs in a ‘natural setting’ i.e., direct contact between the research and the participants in a setting relating to the study
- the researcher is a “key instrument” in the collection of the data
- multiple sources are used e.g., documents, interviews, observations

#### ***4.3.1 Ontological and epistemological stance***

The practice of research is influenced by the underlying philosophical assumptions held by the researcher (Creswell, 2014). These philosophical assumptions or ‘worldviews’, which can arise from a combination of internal and external factors such as the natural inclination of the student or previous research experience, influence the research approach selected (Creswell, 2014, p.6). Guba (1990) refers to these philosophical assumptions as ‘research paradigms’, which he defines as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” and in the case of research that “guides disciplined inquiry” (pps 17-18). As the researcher’s philosophical stance impacts on the methodological approach selected, it is necessary for the researcher to demonstrate a clear understanding of the basic philosophical assumptions underpinning their research. According to Cohen et al (2018) these philosophical assumptions can be laid out ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically.

Ontology is the study of the structure of reality or ‘being’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). Ontological assumptions relate to “the very nature or essence of the social phenomena being investigated” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 5) and from which a researcher’s “epistemological

and methodological positions logically follow” (Grix, 2002, p. 177). A relativist position is adopted for this research, which views reality as subjective and influenced by the perceptions of the individual (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Relativist ontology acknowledges the existence of “multiple realities” and seeks to illustrate these different perspectives through the use of “multiple quotes” for various participants (Creswell, 2007, p.18).

Epistemology relates to “theory of knowledge” (Grix, 2002, p.177). According to Crotty epistemology is concerned with “the nature of knowledge” or “how we know what we know” (1998, p. 8). The epistemological assumptions for this study are informed by constructivism. In contrast to an objective epistemology, which maintains that reality exists independent of the individual, constructivism acknowledges that meaning is a construct of the individual consciousness and that individuals construct their own realities through their engagement with the world (Crotty, 1998).

#### ***4.3.2 The theoretical perspective***

A theoretical perspective can be defined as the “philosophical stance lying behind a methodology” (Crotty, 1998, p.66). As the ontological and epistemological stances of this study allude to the existence of multiple realities and perspectives, which are created by individuals through their own interpretations of the world around them, it is natural that an interpretivist theoretical perspective underpinned this study.

Interpretivism, in contrast to positivism, views reality as “subjectively constructed by people’s thoughts and actions” (Denscombe, 2014, p.2) and researchers seek to examine their participants’ views and experiences (Creswell, 2014). Interpretivism acknowledges that the

social world is different from the natural world and therefore cannot be studied using the same approaches (Creswell, 2007).

#### **4.4 Conceptual Framework**

Recent decades have witnessed unprecedented changes on a global and national stage, which have altered all aspects of society, including education. From the literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, it is evident that the changing educational landscape in which principals operate is expanding their remit, increasing their duties, and intensifying the pressures of their role. Principals are expected to juggle multiple and sometimes conflicting priorities simultaneously, while operating within very defined legal and policy constraints. The publication of circulars and frameworks such as School Self Evaluation (Circular 0039/2016) and the *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality framework for Primary Schools* document have all significantly altered the role of the principal. Therefore, historical and traditional perceptions of the principal as the “day-to-day manager” of a school (Education Act, 1998) no longer accurately represents the tasks, responsibilities and expectations placed on them.

The role of the principal is multidimensional, requiring principals to balance a range of leadership and management tasks. The principal, as an actor, is directed in their role by a combination of internal and external forces, such as boards of management, Department of Education policies and parental and societal expectations. The numerous and sometimes contradictory demands from different stakeholders, impact on how principals experience their job and can create tensions. The conceptual framework which underpins this study is based on role theory and the interrelated concepts of role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload and role strain. Major (2003) argues that roles are personalised to the individual

and, as such, principals are subject to different expectations based on their school context, thereby experiencing and enacting their role differently, consonant with the literature on the relationship between educational leadership and context, observed by others in the field of educational leadership literature (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017 ; Hallinger, 2018) Role theory (Biddle and Thomas, 1966) and its interrelated concepts (role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, role strain, role stress) offered a structure by which to examine how principals in different school contexts, with varying levels of experience and training perceive and experience their role. The tensions which can exist within the role have the potential to give rise to role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload or role stress and lead to role strain. Hardy (1978) highlighted the relationship between these concepts, with role overload potentially resulting in role stress and then role strain.

#### ***4.4.1 Role theory: role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, role strain and role stress***

Role theory, initially developed in the 1930s (Hindin, 2007) is applied in the fields of business, psychology, counselling, sociology and cultural anthropology (Beezer, 1974). It also appears in literature in the field of education (Schmidt, 2000; Harris, 2004; Ang et. al, 2020 Berkovich and Benoliel, 2021; Drew and Gonzalez, 2021) though mostly focused on the role of the teacher (Mellor et. al, 2020; Steubing, 1968; Twyman and Biddle, 1962). Role theory is concerned with examining patterns of behaviour which are common to particular groups, and the underlying internal and external forces which affect these behaviours (Beezer, 1974). Biddle and Thomas (1966), drawing on a dramatological metaphor, explained role theory by comparing it to actors with set scripts and stage directions to follow stating that, “individuals in a society occupy positions, and their role performance in these positions is determined by social norms, demands, and rules” (p. 4). Similarly, Turner (1978)

described it as the attitudes and beliefs that accompany a role. Although the social norms, attitudes, demands and rules may change over time, Biddle (1968) argues that our own role expectations and the expectations of others, influence our behaviours and reactions. Michalec and Hafferty (2015) suggest that role behaviour can change depending on the situation the individual is in or the individual with whom they are interacting. Given that principals operate in different school contexts, such as rural/urban, DEIS, non-DEIS, small or large schools, their behaviours and reactions may be different. Roles are not set, but rather are negotiated by the individual and by those around them, with these interactions shaping the role (Merton, 1975). Within the structure of the Irish school system, the role of the principal or the in-school management team is not fixed. The practice of distributed leadership means the principal negotiates roles with their in-school management teams.

Principals adopt many distinct roles such as teacher, leader, manager, administrator and interact with dozens of different stakeholders even within the course of a day, each of whom have diverse cultural and attitudinal expectations of a role (Zaii, 2014).

### **Role stress and role strain**

Teaching and principalship can be stressful jobs which involve multiple interactions with various stakeholders every day (Papastylianou et al., 2005). *Role stress* occurs when an individual struggles to meet the requirements or expectations of the role due to the volume of the workload or lack of clarity. Hardy (1978) argues that role stress is caused by external forces creating “difficult, conflicting or impossible demands” (p. 73) for the individual and can, in turn, lead to *role strain*. Role strain is where the individual feels negative emotions such as stress, frustration, or anxiety as a result of their work. Role strain can impact on the

well-being of the individual and their ability to, as they themselves or others may perceive, successfully fulfil their role. Role strain can be mitigated by reducing role stress through the delegation of tasks or distribution of leadership. However, although delegation and distribution can decrease one person's workload, it inevitably adds to another person's role. Although Hardy's research (1978) focused on health care, it is applicable to education. Principals are somewhat limited by several factors in their ability to delegate tasks or distribute leadership, to reduce role strain. Schools, depending on their size, are limited in the level of middle leadership management available to them. The DES guidelines on the duties associated with a MLM is vague, meaning principals are unsure how much responsibilities or how many tasks are suitable to delegate to match a weekly remuneration of €77 (Assistant Principal 2) or €174 (Assistant Principal 1).

### **Role Conflict**

There is also a risk of *role conflict*, which can arise from various stakeholders having differing expectations of the role or from conflicts within the role, as the individual attempts to juggle multiple roles with contradictory expectations attached to them (Kahn et al., 1964; Winkler, 2009). Major (2003) suggests that role conflict can occur when fulfilling the expectations of one group means the expectations of another group cannot be met. Numerous situations may give rise to this type of role conflict within schools. Conflict can occur between the principal and staff members, parents or external stakeholders. Loder and Spillane (2005) argue that role conflict can also arise when "commitment and attachment to roles do not match up" (p. 266) and suggest that individuals moving from teaching to administrative principalship may experience role conflict, adjusting to new priorities and

responsibilities which may appear far removed from teaching. Inter-role conflict can also arise if the principal is juggling multiple roles, such as that of a teaching principal. The characteristics and expectations of a highly effective teacher do not necessarily match those of a highly effective principal, leading to competing expectations and priorities.

### **Role Overload**

*Role overload*, as a form of role conflict, occurs when an individual is unable to meet the expectations placed on them because of time constraints or limited resources (Brookes et. al (2007). The individual is capable of performing all the required tasks but not within the time frame they have.

### **Role Ambiguity**

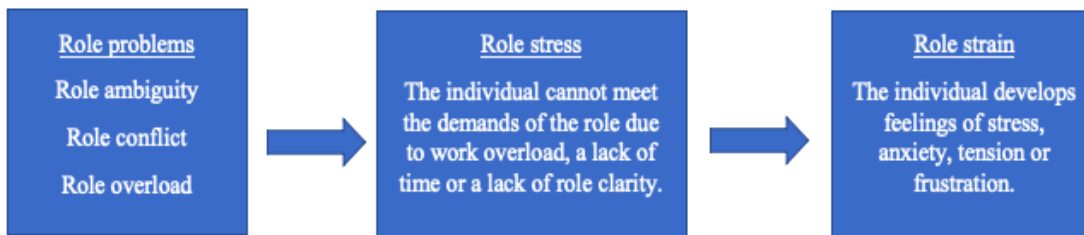
According to Biddle (1986) a lack of clarity or shared understanding of the duties, responsibilities or boundaries of the role can lead to *role ambiguity*. This can occur if the role is vague, ill-defined or has changed over time (Srivastav, 2007) A lack of certainty around the role can be confusing and stressful, potentially leading to role stress and strain (Sana and Aslam, 2018). Principals can experience role ambiguity on several fronts, with staff, parents, students and board of managements. Confusion can exist about the functions and tasks of each individual, which could result in task conflict (Ebbers and Wijnberg, 2017).



**Table 4. 2: Examples of principals' role conflicts applied to a primary school setting**

<p>1. Conflict between the person's values and the role expectations</p>	<p>This can occur when</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- principals' values and ethics differ from those reflected in the ethos of the school.</li> <li>- principals' values contrast with a policy requirement of the role or a decision from the Department of Education or board of management</li> </ul>
<p>2. Conflict between the resources, time, competence of the person and the role expectations</p>	<p>This can arise when</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- principals have insufficient time to adequately address all aspects of the role</li> <li>- principals lack the necessary resources (e.g. cognitive, affective, material) to fulfil the expectations of the role</li> <li>- Principals are not sufficiently developed or possess the subject specific knowledge needed to complete the role</li> </ul>
<p>3. Conflict resulting from managing multiple roles, with numerous or contrasting role expectations (role overload)</p>	<p>This can occur when</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- principals are required to adopt two or more roles simultaneously (e.g. teacher/principal/manager/research)</li> <li>- stakeholders have contrasting wants or needs (e.g., parent/teacher)</li> <li>- The role is too broad, and principals' feel overloaded</li> </ul>
<p>4. Conflict arising from different policy demands or different standards of evaluation</p>	<p>This can arise when</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- policy requirements differ from various agencies or competing educational policy priorities</li> <li>- standards of evaluation are dependent of individual inspectors</li> </ul>

Role ambiguity, conflict and stress can have a negative impact on job satisfaction, productivity and well-being and can contribute to high levels of work-family conflict (Sana and Aslam, 2018).



**Figure 4. 1: The relationship between role problems, role stress and role strain**

Adapted from Brookes et al. (2007 p. 152)

#### **4.5 Research Approach: A single case study**

Case studies are a widely used research approach in the field of social studies as they allow the researcher to “delve deeply into the intricacies of the situation in order to describe things in detail, compare alternatives or, perhaps, provide an account that explores particular aspects of the situation” (Denscombe, 2014, p.56). Case study research allows the researcher to explore an issue in a real-world context, in considerable depth (Yin, 2018) and are valuable for “adding to existing experience and humanistic understanding” (Stake, 2002, p. 24).

Creswell (2013) outlines some defining features of case study research. Firstly, it is necessary for the researcher to outline the specifics of the ‘case’. A single case or multiple cases can be studied. However, as Hammersley and Gomm (2000) note, selecting fewer cases can result in a greater depth of information gathered. Cases must have clear, distinct parameters and usually rely on more than one source for data gathering such as a combination of interviews, observation and documents. According to Stake (2002) it is vital to the success of the research that the “boundaries are kept in focus” (p. 23). Creswell (2013) suggests there

are three types of case study research: the intrinsic case study, the instrumental case study and the collective case study. In the instrumental case study, one issue is studied, and one bounded case is chosen to illustrate the concern. In contrast to this is the collective case study, in which numerous cases are selected to illustrate the issue. Finally, the intrinsic case study focuses on the case itself, as opposed to an issue with a case or cases, due to the unique nature of the case.

Denscombe (2014) argues that case studies can have one or more purposes, such as the discovery of information or the testing of the theory.

**Table 4. 3: The purpose of a case study: six possibilities**

<i>Discovery led</i>	
Description	Describes what is happening in a case study setting (e.g. events, processes and relationships)
Exploration	Explores the key issues affecting those in a case study setting (e.g. problems or opportunities)
Comparison	Compares settings to learn from the similarities and differences between them
Explanation	Explains the causes of events, processes or relationships within a setting
<i>Theory-led</i>	
Illustration	Uses a case study as an illustration of how a particular theory applies in a real-life setting
Experiment	Uses a case study as a test-bed for experimenting with changes to specific factors (or variables)

Adapted from Denscombe, 2014, p. 57

#### ***4.5.1 Criticisms of the case study approach***

Critics of the case study approach question the rigour of the research process and the involvement of the researchers in defining the boundaries of a case i.e., what warrants inclusion/exclusion in the study (Yin, 2018). Case study research is often focused on presenting an in-depth understanding of an issue rather than producing statistically valid data which can be compared and contrasted. This lack of generalisation of findings is often cited as a disadvantage of the approach. However, Hammersley and Gomm (2000) argue that generalisation is not the aim of case study research, rather it is to “capture cases in their uniqueness” (p.3).

#### ***4.5.2 Selection of the research approach***

Prior to selecting the case study approach, the researcher considered the five main research approaches used in qualitative research, as described by Creswell (2007). Having critically evaluated each research approach, a case study was considered most appropriate for this stud

**Table 4. 4: The relationship between the four elements that inform the research process**

<b>Research Approach</b>	<b>Defining Features</b>	<b>Limitations in the context of this study</b>
Narrative	Explores the life of an individual or a small number of individuals through the collection of detailed stories about their life experiences.	This research requires an extensive knowledge and understanding of the individual's background in order to set a context for their stories. The larger sample size of this research would not allow for an in-depth biography of the participants. A smaller sample size would not sufficiently represent principals from different school settings i.e., patronage, school size etc.
Phenomenological	Concerned with exploring how a group of individuals have experienced a shared phenomenon.	As indicated by the research questions, this study is concerned with tracing the changes in the role of the principals from a policy perspective, in addition to experiences of the individual principal.
Grounded Theory	Intention is to move beyond describing an individual or their common experience to creating or generating a theory based on the data gathered.	This research is concerned with exploring the experiences of a number of principals. It is not the primary intention of this study to generate new theories.
Ethnography	Concerned with describing the behaviours, beliefs and values of a culture-sharing group. Ethnographical studies usually involve an extensive and prolonged data gathering phase.	Extended observations of principals may prove difficult.
Case Study	Intention is to provide an in-depth description and understanding of a particular issue or problem.	It is difficult to generalise the findings

Adapted from Creswell, 2013 pps. 70-105

A phenomenological approach is concerned with exploring the shared experience of a group of individuals. Merriam (1998) describes case studies as “inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p.27). This study was concerned with investigating the phenomenon of school leadership reform and the extent of its impact on school leadership practices in the context of individual schools and individual principals. A case study approach was selected as it was the most suitable approach for answering the research questions.

## **4.6 Research Methods**

### ***4.6.1 Documentary Research***

Documentary analysis contributed to this research project in various ways. As noted by Yin (2014) “documents play an explicit role” in data collection for case study research, as they offer an additional source of data, which can corroborate or contradict information from various sources” (p. 107). Denscombe’s (2014) understanding of documentary analysis was adopted and the selected documents were considered “evidence” and “interpreting” (p. 225) was necessary or as Yin (2014) suggests, inferences can be made from documents.

### ***4.6.2 Official government publications***

Firstly, in order to examine the developments in Irish education policy it was necessary to examine and analyse a selection of official government publications. All official government circulars and policies were collated (Appendix 1) and reviewed. This allowed the researcher to track developments in education policy and explore the current policy landscape for Irish education. An analysis of the documentation set the current context in which school leaders are operating and contributed to the line of questioning employed during the interviews.

Only government publications, which were available in the public domain were selected for this study. The information was available free of charge, without the need to acquire special permission and was sourced from the internet. As the documents came from the official Department of Education website there was no issue regarding the authoritativeness or trustworthiness of the site itself (Denscombe, 2014). The process of downloading documents was time efficient and cost effective.

#### ***4.6.3 Limitations of documentary analysis***

Denscombe (2014) notes that government publications are often initially viewed as credible, objective and factual, due in part to the “expert professionals” (p. 266) usually hired to complete such research on behalf of the government. However, Yin (2014) cautions that researchers should question all documentation rather than accept it at face value, arguing that the government may have their own objectives for the publication of such documents and that statistics provided need to be examined within context. Denscombe (2014) also questions the credibility of government documents, questioning whether those who produced the report have a vested interest in the outcome, as they were not published for the purposes of the research project. He argues “documents can owe more to the interpretations of those who produce them than to an objective picture of reality” (2014, p. 240). Yin (2014) also warns against the potential for bias in the selection of the documents analysed and urges inclusion of multiple documents to combat this.

#### ***4.6.4 Documents selected for analysis***

The documents selected for analysis relate to the changing nature of education policy and in particular the role of the primary school principal over the past two decades (2000-2020).



The Croke Park Agreement (Circular 008/2011) was the first document to directly link the economic recession with changes in working conditions for principals. This circular was quickly followed by The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Young People 2011-2020 (Circular 0056/2011), which introduced significant policy and curriculum changes as a result of Ireland's apparent poor academic performance on an international stage. These changes included increasing the time allocation to core subjects, increasing a school's autonomy over time/subject allocation and emphasising the importance of standardised testing. The Haddington Road Agreement (Circular 0052/2014) devolved decision-making authority regarding the use of the Croke Park hours to individual schools. The Teaching Council Act (2001), particularly the enactment of the Fitness to Teach section in July 2016 was also explored. This relates to the investigation of complaints regarding a teacher's professional competence or professional misconduct and allows the public to make a complaint against a teacher. Following on from this was Circular 0049/2018 in which the principal is acknowledged as best placed to identify and remedy issues of individual teacher professional competency.

Policy documents that added significantly to the role and responsibilities of the principal were also selected. These included the School Self Evaluation Guidelines (2012) which places responsibility for leading and managing school self-assessment with the principal, the *Looking at our Schools 2016 A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* which attempts to detail a list of tasks necessary to be considered an effective principal and the Special Education Teacher Model (Circular 0013/2017) which increases the autonomy of the principal in allocating school staff.

#### **4.7 Research instrument: interviews**

The interview is a widely used, flexible tool for gathering data, as it allows the interviewee to discuss their personal experiences and understanding of specific issues (Cohen et al, 2011). These conversations can yield rich insights into the opinions and experiences of participants (May, 2011).

Denscombe (2014) and May (2011) note three different formats for interviewing: structured, unstructured or semi-structured. However, rather than thinking of each format as separate from one another, Brinkmann (2013) argues they should be considered part of the same continuum. Structured interviews involve each participant answering exactly the same questions, in the same order and are often compared to questionnaires or surveys. This allows for ease of comparison between the answers received. The researcher does not prompt the interviewee for further information or clarification. May (2011) argues that this form of interview does not afford the participants sufficient scope to express their opinions or describe their experiences. In contrast, unstructured interviews allow the interviewee to determine the course of the interview through open-ended questioning. Brinkmann (2013) argues however, that no interview is truly unstructured as the researcher is guided by their research aim and leads the conversation in some manner to achieve it. Semi-structured interviews are a combination of both structured and unstructured interviews, as the researcher is usually guided by prescribed questions, but has the freedom to seek clarification or elaboration on answers given. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study. At the beginning of the interview participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire, as included in the Appendices.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) and Rubin and Rubin (2012) advocate the use of a seven-step approach to qualitative interviews, though Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) allow for a more flexible approach to the order of steps (Creswell, 2013).

**Table 4. 5: Interview sequence in relation to this study**

The research questions	Based on the research questions a schedule of interview questions was drawn up on 7 <sup>th</sup> October 2019
The type of interview	One- on- one, semi structured interviews were selected.
Pilot testing	Two pilot interviews were conducted with principals on 20 <sup>th</sup> and 21 <sup>st</sup> October 2019. Pilot interviews were transcribed, analysed and reflected upon.
Recording procedures	A recording device was used
Interviewees	31 primary school principals agreed to be participants
The place for conducting interview	20 interviews took place in the participants own schools and 11 interviews were conducted remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions
Interview protocol	A Plain Language Statement and Consent Form was distributed to participants on prior to the interview being conducted.
Informed Consent	Participants considered and signed an informed consent sheet prior to the commencement of the interview
Good interview procedures	The researcher was respectful, polite and endeavoured to keep within the suggested timeframe.

Adapted from Creswell, 2013, pps. 163-166

#### ***4.7.1 Disadvantages of using interviews***

There are also disadvantages to using interviews as a data gathering tool and it is important that the researcher is aware of these potential limitations. According to Brinkmann (2013, p. 5) “the analysis of the interviews is generally limited to what takes place during the concrete interaction phase with its questions and responses”. This raises concerns about the validity of the data collected. As Denscombe (2014) cautions “what people say they do, what they say they prefer and what they say they think cannot automatically be assumed to reflect the truth” (p. 202). Interviews are also time consuming as the transcribing and coding process can be a lengthy task for the researcher.

In keeping with COVID-19 restrictions, 11 interviews were conducted remotely using a telephone. Creswell (2013) notes that the researcher not having “direct contact” (p. 241) with the participant may impact on the communication process. Also, a disadvantage of using telephone interviews for this study was the quality of some recordings, though the overall quality of the recordings was adequate for transcribing.

#### **4.8 Data collection: sampling**

This single case study was concerned with examining the perceptions and experiences of principals working within primary schools in Ireland. During the school year 2019/2020 there were 3106 primary school principals employed in mainstream primary schools in Ireland ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)). As this project was concerned with gaining an insight into individual principals’ experiences, an exploratory sample was selected. The intention of this study was not to generalise the findings but rather to select a sample, which allowed for the exploration of opinions and experiences among a representative body of principals.

**Table 4. 6: Key Statistics for Mainstream Public Primary Education in Ireland (2019/2020)**

Total number of teaching posts in mainstream primary schools	37,839
Average class sizes	24.1
Schools with fewer than 50 pupils	578
Schools with 50-99 pupils	673
Schools with 100-199 pupils	742
Schools with 200-299 pupils	546
Schools with 300-499 pupils	429
Schools with 500 or more pupils	138
<b>Total number of mainstream primary schools</b>	<b>3106</b>

**Table 4. 7: Key Statistics on Ethos in Public Primary Schools in Ireland (2019/2020)**

<b>Ethos</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>
Quaker	1
Jewish	1
Methodist	1
Muslim	2
Presbyterian	16
Inter Denominational	17
Multi denominational	136
Church of Ireland	172
Catholic	2760

**Table 4. 8: Key Statistics on Disadvantage in Public Primary Schools in Ireland (2019/2020)**

<b>Level of Disadvantage</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>
DEIS 1	232
DEIS 2	107
Rural DEIS	362
<b>Total</b>	<b>701</b>

#### ***4.8.1 Non-probability: purposive sampling***

In order to compare and contrast the experiences of principals in different settings and with varying years of experience, non-probability sampling was chosen to select the participants of this study. Cohen et al (2018) note that purposive sampling allows a researcher to select participants who may have “in-depth knowledge about particular issues” (p. 219). For the purposes of this study, in order to gather rich, in-depth data from the case study research, participants who had varying levels of principalship experience were needed. In addition to their level of experience, it was necessary to have a balance of gender, patronage, geographical location, school size and educational disadvantage status. Initially a sample size of 40 primary principals was considered. However, saturation was reached after 31 principals were interviewed.

Participants were sourced using a combination of convenience sampling, snowball sampling and quota sampling. Schools were divided into two categories: disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged status. To ensure the views of one group was not over-represented it was envisaged that 50% of participants would be from each group. Subgroups within those categories included gender, school size and administrative/teaching principal status.

One participant was known to the researcher, three participants were referrals from a principal colleague, one participant contacted the researcher having heard of the study and the remaining 26 participants volunteered when contacted by the researcher. 265 schools were contacted via email using the email address listed on the DES website and 28 principals responded positively to the request. Three principals responded that they were unable to take part due to workload issues and no response was received from 234 principals. Four

interviews were postponed due to nationwide restrictions in March 2020. Upon attempting to reschedule the interviews, two principals withdrew from the study. 11 interviews were then conducted remotely.

#### ***4.8.2 Participant details***

Participants consisted of 31 serving primary school principals from a variety of school contexts across 10 different counties in Ireland. 16 were principals of schools representing the three bands of disadvantage and 15 were principals of non-disadvantaged schools. Nine principals identified as male and 22 as female. Experience levels within the role ranged from less than 1 year to 22 years. School size ranged from a 25-pupil school to a 671-pupil school. 23 schools were under the patronage of the Catholic church, 4 were Educate Together, 3 were Church of Ireland, and 1 was a Community National School.

**Table 4. 9: Participant Details**

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Experience as a principal	Current Status	DEIS	Patronage	School	School Size (Pupil)
Andrew	M	14	Teaching* Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Vertical Mixed	107
Seán	M	11	Admin. Principal	No	Catholic	Vertical Mixed Gaelscoil	228
Conor	M	3	Admin. Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Infant Mixed	146
Amy	F	10	Admin.** Principal	No	Catholic	Infant Mixed	302



Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Experience as a principal	Current Status	DEIS	Patronage	School	School Size (Pupil)
Beth	F	6	Admin. ** Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Vertical Mixed	157
Ciara	F	9	Admin. Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Vertical Mixed	197
Diana	F	22	Admin. Principal	X	Catholic	Infant Mixed	272
Emma	F	Less than 1 year	Admin. Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Vertical Girls'	174
Grace	F	5	Teaching Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Vertical Mixed	42
Hannah	F	11	Admin. Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Infant Mixed Senior Girls	281
Isla	F	11	Admin. Principal	No	Educate Together	Vertical Mixed	236
Jessica	F	4	Admin. Principal	No	Educate Together	Vertical	114

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Experience as a principal	Current Status	DEIS	Patronage	School	School Size (Pupil)
						Mixed	
David	M	21	Admin. Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Senior Boys'	56
Edward	M	7	Admin. Principal	Band 2	Catholic	Vertical Mixed	214
Lucy	F	17	Admin. ** Principal	No	Catholic	Vertical Mixed	671
Maria	F	6	Admin. Principal	No	Church of Ireland	Vertical Mixed	215
Nicola	F	3	Admin. Principal	No	Church of Ireland	Vertical Mixed	214
Orla	F	3	Teaching Principal	No	Educate Together	Vertical Mixed	55
Rebecca	F	18	Admin. Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Vertical Mixed	359

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Experience as a principal	Current Status	DEIS	Patronage	School	School Size (Pupil)
Sarah	F	3	Admin. Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Senior Mixed	265
Judith	F	5	Admin. Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Junior Mixed	260
Matthew	M	12	Admin. Principal	Band 2	Educate Together	Vertical Mixed	361
Niamh	F	1	Admin. Principal	No	Comm. NS	Vertical Mixed	90
Jessica	F	7	Admin. Principal	Band 1	Catholic	Senior Girls	244
Edel	F	1.5	Teaching Principal	No	Church of Ireland	Vertical Mixed	114
Brian	M	2	Admin. Principal	No	Catholic	Vertical Mixed	158
Aoife	F	10	Teaching Principal	No	Catholic	Vertical Mixed	109
Liam	M	10	Admin. Principal	No	Catholic	Boys	228

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Experience as a principal	Current Status	DEIS	Patronage	School	School Size (Pupil)
						Vertical	
Patrick	M	17	Teaching Principal	No	Catholic	Mixed Vertical	139
Helen	F	2	Teaching Principal	Rural DEIS	Catholic	Mixed Vertical	120
Lisa	F	9	Teaching Principal	Rural DEIS	Catholic	Mixed Vertical	25

\*prior experience as an administrative principal

\*\*prior experience as a teaching principal

#### **4.9 Ethical considerations**

To safeguard the rights of the participants and to protect the integrity and validity of the research, this research study adhered to a strong ethical framework, during all stages of the research process. The British Educational Research Guidelines (BERA, 2018) were followed. Grix (2004) and Bryman (2012) agree that the main areas requiring ethical considerations are harm to the participants, informed consent, confidentiality and the presence of deception. Research that can potentially ‘harm’ participants is deemed unacceptable. Harm includes psychological, emotional and physical harm (Bryman, 2012) or any conduct which causes “damage as result of their participation” (Silverman, 2010, p.156).

Cohen et al (2011) note the importance of obtaining informed consent from all research participants and list four essential elements for the research to address: competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension. Informed consent ensures that participants have sufficient information about the research to make an informed decision regarding their participation. Denscombe (2014) recommends seeking written consent where possible, as a method of formally recording informed consent.

It is imperative that the researcher protects the participants’ rights to confidentiality and anonymity, if they have not relinquished their right to anonymity. According to Cohen et al (2011) “the essence of anonymity is that information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identify” (p. 91). The onus is on the researcher to ensure that data gathered is accurate, stored in a secure manner, used only for the purposes initially stated and kept until the completion of the project (Denscombe, 2014).

#### ***4.9.1 Ethical issues relating to this study***

In March 2019, the researcher received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee in the School of Education at Trinity College to conduct this study. This approval was amended in June 2020 to allow for telephone interviews.

In line with the ethical considerations listed above, all the principal teachers who took part in this research were volunteers. Prior to the interview stage, each participant was supplied with a Plain Language Statement, outlining the nature and purpose of the study. The researcher ensured that no pressure or coercion was applied at any point during the process and that participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without giving a reason and without prejudice. Attached to the Plain Language Statement was a letter seeking the participants' written consent. This written consent was collected on the day of the interview. Participants who were interviewed remotely were emailed a copy of the consent form days in advance of the interview. A scanned, signed copy was returned to the researcher prior to the interview. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, their names and places of employment were omitted from the study, with pseudonyms used to prevent identification.

An Olympus WS-852 recording device was used to record the interview. Onsite interviews were conducted in the participants' schools at a time of their choosing. Remote interviews were conducted over the telephone and recorded using the same digital recorder. The voice recordings and transcripts were stored securely on a password protected google drive and the hardcopies were sorted in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher. Data gathered will be destroyed after 10 years. Scanned signed consent forms from all participants were

uploaded to the Research Methods module on Blackboard and the hard copies shredded, in line with the ethics policy of the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

#### **4.10 Data analysis**

The literature identifies numerous different approaches to the analysis of qualitative data, such as grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative analysis and thematic analysis. According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996) “many analyses of qualitative data begin with the identification of key themes and patterns” (p. 26). Thematic analysis, according to Gibson and Brown (2009) is the process of “analysing data according to commonalities, relationships and differences across data sets”, whereby the researcher seeks to examine the “commonality”, the “differences” and the “relationships” between various aspects of the study (p. 127).

The researcher considered using a qualitative analysis software (NVIVO) to identify themes but opted to manually analyse the data in order to ensure all themes and patterns were fully explored. A thematic analysis approach was selected with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six step approach adopted. In keeping with Braun and Clarke’s framework all interviews were transcribed by the researcher verbatim.

**Table 4. 10: The application of Braun and Clarke’s framework (2006)**

	<b>Steps</b>	<b>Implementation</b>
1	Familiarisation with the data	Interview transcripts were read and re-read to allow the researcher to become familiar with the content. Notes, detailing the researcher’s initial impressions were made on hardcopies of the interview transcripts.
2	Generate initial codes	Having annotated the interviews, initial codes were generated using highlighter pens.  A concept map was developed to allow the researcher to visualise the themes emerging.
3	Search for themes	Similar topics were clustered together under appropriate headings: Policy and Regulatory Change, The Power of the Principal and The Sustainability of the Role. Abbreviated codes were assigned.
4	Review themes	Themes were reviewed. Some subthemes were combined, and others were discarded.
5	Define and name themes	Themes and subthemes were named
6	Write up the findings	The Findings chapter was completed.

Braun and Clarke (2006) Framework for thematic analysis

#### **4.10.1 Coding**

Creswell (2014) describes coding as the “process of organising the data by bracketing chunks” (p. 197) and naming these topics. Creswell (2014) argues there are three different methods of coding: emerging, predetermined and a combination of emerging and predetermined. For this study, a combination of emerging and predetermined coding was used, as it allowed the researcher to base codes on the information gained from the literature previously analysed.



**Table 4. 11: Research Questions and Themes**

<b>Research Question</b>				
<b>How do Irish primary school principals perceive their role?</b>				
Sub question 1 <b>Policy and regulatory changes impacting on the role</b>	Sub question 2 <b>The Power of the Principal</b>		Sub question 3 <b>The Sustainability of the role</b>	
Category 1 <b>Aspects of the role</b> (Leadership, Management, workload)	Category 2 <b>Autonomy and Accountability</b> (Governance, Decision Making, Accountability measures)		Category 3 <b>Individual School Context</b> (School Setting, Training, Support, Well-being)	
<i>Theme</i> <b>Multidimensionality of the role</b>	<i>Theme</i> <b>Autonomy</b>	<i>Theme</i> <b>Accountability</b>	<i>Theme</i> <b>School Context</b>	<i>Theme</i> <b>Principal</b>
<i>Sub theme</i>	<i>Sub theme</i>	<i>Sub theme</i>	<i>Sub theme</i>	<i>Sub theme</i>
Duties of the principal	Boards of Management	Legislative	Teaching Principal	Training
Perceptions of their role	Decision Making	Inspectorate	Disadvantaged schools	Support
Changes to the role	Responsibilities	Fitness to Teach	Patronage	Impact on well-being
Relationship with External agencies	Increase in autonomy	External stakeholders		

#### **4.11 Validity of the study**

In order to ensure the validity of this qualitative research, numerous validity strategies, as recommended by Creswell (2014) were incorporated into this study. A combination of

methods, involving documentary analysis and interviews was used to gather information from different sources. This use of triangulation provides a more in-depth insight into the context of the study. Respondent validation, as suggested by Descombe (2014) was used to ensure the data gathered was accurate. Each participant received a copy of their transcribed interview and “confirmed or amended” (p. 298) their perceptions and experiences.

As a teacher working in a primary school, it was necessary to acknowledge any possible bias this might bring to the interview process and later to the analysis of the data collected. According to Denscombe (2014) “no research is ever free from the influence of those who conduct it” (p. 300) as qualitative research is the product of the researcher’s interpretation of the data. Reflexivity was built into the study as the researcher reflected on how their personal background and experiences might impact on the research design and interpretation of the findings gathered. The researcher excluded their own school from the study.

As this study was concerned with principals’ experiences and perceptions of their role, conflicting opinions were included in the findings. As Creswell (2014) notes “by presenting this contradictory evidence, the account becomes more realistic and more valid” (p. 202).

#### **4.12 Limitations of the study**

While every effort was made to ensure impartiality in the research it is likely the background, experience, ontological and epistemological perspectives of the researcher impacted on this study. As a qualified teacher working in a primary school, personal philosophical assumptions, which Creswell (2014) notes are “deeply rooted in our training and reinforced by the scholarly community in which we work” undoubtedly influenced the research

questions and methodology (p. 19). The researcher attempted to minimise any bias by highlighting personal background and philosophical assumptions.

Although the aim of this research was not to generalise findings, the relatively small number of participants is another limitation of this study. This research focused only on principals' experiences of policy changes and their role and did not take into account other stakeholders' perceptions or experiences.

It was not possible to include the perspectives of every school ethos in Ireland in this study. Although invited to participate principals from Islamic and Jewish ethos schools declined to take part.

#### **4.13 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the theoretical and practical considerations of the research conducted. Key issues such as the research approach, research instrument, data collection tools, ethics and validity of the study are addressed. The following chapter presents the findings from the documentary analysis.



## **Chapter 5: Findings: documentary analysis of national policy documents**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Chapter 4 discussed the benefits and limitations of documentary analysis and the steps which were taken in the selection of the documents for analysis. This chapter presents a critical analysis of national policy documents published by the Government of Ireland over the past two decades (2000-2020), which illustrate significant changes in the structure of educational provision at primary level. The following documents, listed by date of publication, were analysed.

**Table 5. 1: Official government documents selected for analysis**

2011	The Croke Agreement (Circular 008/2011)
2011	The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Young People 2011-2020 (Circular 0056/2011)
2012	School Self-Evaluation Guidelines
2014	The Haddington Road Agreement (Circular 0052/2014)
2016	Fitness to Teach section of the Teaching Council Act (2001)
2016	Looking at our Schools 2016; A Quality Framework for Primary Schools
2017	Special Education Teacher Model (Circular 2213/2017)
2018	Circular 0049/2018

Findings from the documentary analysis show that the role and remit of the principal is expanding. In recent years the role has evolved to a multidimensional one, with more complex demands on the principal. Not only are principals expected to operate in, but they

also must demonstrate an expertise in multiple domains, such as managerial, administrative, pedagogical, inclusion and leadership.

The findings, based on the documentary analysis of the selected documents are presented under the following themes: (i) increased school autonomy, (ii) the intensification in principals' workload and responsibilities and (iii) changes in accountability practices.

## **5.2 Changes in the autonomy of the principal**

The DES (2015) define autonomy as “the freeing of schools from centralised and bureaucratic control or, put simply, the decentralising of decision-making to schools” (p. 4). In this document they envisaged devolving decision making to local level in the areas of governance, management, ethos, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and budgeting. Drawing on published literature and international perspectives, the DES acknowledged that while there is no direct correlation between increased school autonomy and increased student achievement, but also argued that increased school autonomy would improve the overall quality of the education provided, as decisions and processes can be adapted to suit individual school needs. In the Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System (DES, 2015) research paper, they described how increased autonomy could present in an Irish setting under 3 distinct headings: (i) Governance, management and ethos (ii) Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (iii) Budget and funding. While not all suggestions outlined in the document have been adopted to date, clear increases in the devolution of responsibility to school level are apparent, such as autonomy over the allocation of special education resources, while the promised reduction in bureaucratic control is less evident. In the following sections the areas of increased school autonomy are discussed in more detail.

### ***5.2.1 Autonomy over governance, management and ethos***

Under the terms of the Croke Park agreement, in order to increase performance, primary school teachers and principals are required to work an additional 36 hours in a school year. These additional hours are intended for the completion of activities, which in previous years may have necessitated a school closure. Except for the previously agreed termly half in/half out staff meetings (Circular 14/04) schools should complete full teaching days, thus increasing teacher/pupil contact time and in turn decreasing the need for working parents to arrange childcare for school closures.

The Croke Park Agreement (2010) allows individual school managements to use their own discretion, to a certain extent, when allocating activities for these additional ‘Croke Park’ hours (p. 23). Schools may select activities such as Continuous Professional Development, policy formation, planning and/or supervision. Following negotiations with unions in the years that followed, amendments were made to the agreement. Circular 0052/2014 and later Circular 0042/16 direct that up to 10 of the 36 Croke Park hours can be used for teacher planning or development work, on an individual as opposed to whole school basis. However, again, this is at the discretion of each school. Therefore, some managements direct their teachers to complete the full 36 hours on a whole school basis, while others require only 26 onsite hours. Circular 0008/2011, envisaged that teachers would be consulted regarding the usage of these additional hours. However, no practical guidelines were issued as to how this might be achieved or to what constitutes a “consensus among school staff”, or the procedure to evoke if a “consensus” is not reached (2011, p.2). Principals, therefore, have autonomy over the time and the manner in which these hours are utilised.

Although staffing levels are centrally controlled by the DES, primary schools have traditionally held high levels of autonomy over the hiring of their teachers and special needs assistants. While the introduction of panels for the redeployment of permanent and surplus teachers eroded some of this freedom of choice, schools still maintain high levels of control over the selection of their personnel. Recent Department circulars have sought to increase the autonomy of the school over the allocation and deployment of staffing. Circular 0013/2017 combined and replaced Circular 02/2005, the General Allocation Model and English as an Additional Language Scheme (GAM/EAL). As opposed to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) determining the level of support a child with additional needs receives, schools are now allocated Special Education Teaching posts based on their unique school profiles. Schools now have greater autonomy in selecting which children receive these additional teaching supports and ultimately which children do not. While once guaranteed additional support, children with diagnosed Low Incidence special education needs may not autonomously receive SET time, should the school feel other children have more significant needs.

Furthermore, in December 2019 the DES began introducing a new 'frontloading model' for the allocation of Special Needs Assistants in a mainstream setting. As with the Special Education Teaching Allocation model, schools will be assigned a set number of SNAs based on their profile. Whereas previously an independent assessment of needs was conducted by the Special Education Needs Coordinator, now, it is the school which determines the deployment of the SNA. The only option for parents, if dissatisfied with the level of SET support their child is receiving, is to follow the school's complaints process. Originally scheduled for implementation in the academic year 2020/21, the impact of COVID-19 forced



the DES to delay the new allocation system until 2021/22. Both new models of allocation provide schools with greater autonomy and flexibility over staffing issues within the overall allocation to the school.

### ***5.2.2 Autonomy over curriculum, pedagogy and assessment***

In relation to curriculum provision, the Primary School Curriculum Introduction (1999, p.70) provided schools with a clear ‘Suggested minimum weekly time framework’ for the teaching of each subject area. This framework endeavored to ensure consistency of provision across school settings. However, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Circular 0056/2011) instructed schools to increase the amount of time spent on core subjects, without increasing the length of a school day. Schools have discretion as to how this additional time is provided. Schools can either prioritise some curricular objectives over others, reallocate time from other subject areas to the teaching of literacy and numeracy or allocate their discretionary time to literacy and numeracy. Again, the subject areas from which to transfer time is at the discretion of the individual school. Building on this new curricular flexibility, the Advancing School Autonomy Research document (2015) suggested that a curriculum framework could be adopted, as opposed to the current detailed prescriptive curriculum. This would allow individual schools to decide which subjects to teach and the time allocated to them. It is unclear from the document which members of the school community would be consulted and ultimately responsible for the decision. This power of choice could result in a narrowing of the curriculum as schools or individual teachers select one subject area over another. The INTO (2016) was resistant to the proposed change noting that this level of school autonomy would completely eliminate any attempt at standardisation or consistency of learning. However, the DES maintain more autonomy is needed at school level to address the priorities

for improvements identified during the individual School Self-Evaluation process. In order to satisfy the INTO's concern regarding the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum, the NCCA in their Draft Primary Curriculum Framework for Consultation suggested allocating specific time to the teaching of a 'Minimum State Curriculum' and allocating 'Flexible Time' for additional subjects (NCCA, 2020, p.15). The NCCA had previously acknowledged the significance of time allocations, as the subject areas selected "represent values and priorities" (2018, p. 12) of individual schools. This document fails to elaborate on the way this 'Flexible Time' will be decided or by whom. Therefore, it is unclear who in the school community will have the autonomy to select the school's values and priorities, which will greatly impact on the children's education for years to come.

Historically, Irish primary schools have always had high levels of autonomy over the methodologies and approaches used to deliver the curriculum, but not over the curriculum itself (Coolahan, 1981). With the increased focus on raising literacy and numeracy standards following the apparently disastrous PISA results of 2009, schools, particularly those with a disadvantaged status are inundated with new initiatives aiming to improve outcomes. Examples of such initiatives include Write to Read, First Steps, Literacy Lift Off, Reading Recovery and Maths Recovery and focus on improving outcomes and standards. Individual schools have the autonomy to decide, which programmes, if any they implement.

### ***5.2.3 Autonomy over budgeting and funding***

Although teachers are employed by individual Boards of Management, teacher salary scales are determined and paid directly by the Department of Education and Skills. Individual schools receive a variety of grants under different headings from the DES. Some grants are

for day-to-day expenses, while others are for capital expenditure. Schools must budget and effectively manage their finances. Money allocated under the Grant Scheme for Minor Works (Circular 0062/2013) must be spent on physical infrastructure, while money received under Circular 0031/2020 must be spent on improving the ICT infrastructure. Schools have the autonomy to decide how this will be spent and which company will be employed to carry out any required work. Schools must keep written records of the tendering process, quotations, invoices and payments. Capitation grants (Circular 0038/2020) are issued to schools for everyday expenses and resources, while the Ancillary Services Grant is for secretarial, caretaking or cleaning services. Schools have the autonomy to decide how this grant is spent with some schools opting for part-time or no secretarial support in order to have a full-time caretaker or vice versa. The lack of a full complement of ancillary staff impacts on the workload of the principal, as secretarial support is vital to the running of a school.

Schools can also apply for a Major Capital Works grant for a school extension or new build. Even though the majority of boards of management members have no architectural, engineering or building expertise, they retain full autonomy and responsibility for these building projects, which can reach costs in excess of €1million. This involves a board member, usually the principal, liaising and coordinating with architects, engineers, builders, contractors, and local councils, in addition to leading and managing their school. Principals need to have high levels of budgeting and finance skills, in addition to knowledge of the tendering process and a familiarity with the building process.

### **5.3 The intensification of principals' workload and responsibility**

The duties of the school principal have significantly expanded since laid out in Circular 16/73 with the role evolving into a multifaceted one, where the principal is expected to have expertise in multiple fields and juggle numerous pressures simultaneously. Government legislation, circulars and guidelines released over the past two decades aim to increase the autonomy of the school by decentralising decision making to school management. However, most decisions devolved to school management are, in practice, devolved to the school principal, rather than the Board of Management.

Although approaching 50 years old, the duties and responsibilities of the principal, as outlined in Circular 16/73, are still valid. However, they must now be read in conjunction with an ever-increasing volume of policy documents or statutory requirements, which place statutory obligations on the principal and intensifies their workload. *The Looking at our Schools A Quality Framework for Primary Schools 2016* document outlines the expectations for principals under four different domains. These domains include teaching and learning responsibilities, management duties, effective school development and promoting leadership capacity in others. This wide-ranging list of aspirational practices expected from effective principals serves to illustrate the challenging nature of this multi-dimensional role.

#### ***5.3.1 The principal as a legal expert scope at the end to focus on legal implications***

To effectively run a school, the principal must successfully navigate the ever-changing legal landscape. The last two decades have seen unprecedented legislative changes relating to equality, inclusion, child protection and employment practices. These Acts include but are not limited to enactments of sections of the Education Act 1998, the Education (Welfare)

Act 2000, the Equal Status Act 2000, the Teaching Council Act 2001, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, the Disability Act 2005, the Children First Act 2015 and the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018. In addition, in the last 20 years the DES has released over 250 circulars to primary schools, ranging in topics from curriculum implementation (Circular 0061/2015- Primary Languages Curriculum), to financial issues (Circular 0038/2020- Revision of Capitation Grants) and to the practical management of a school (Circular 0031/2012-Switchover from Analogue to Digital TV Network). As secretary to the Board of Management (BOM), the principal must keep apprised of all developments, inform the BOM and ensure all changes are implemented in line with best practice.

As the BOM is a legal entity, failure to comply with legislative requirements can result in legal action. This is particularly relevant if the principal does not follow the school's policy in relation to admissions, suspensions or expulsions. Legal difficulties may also arise if the policies created and ratified by the BOM are not legally sound. Under Section 29 of the Education Act 1998, guardians can challenge school decisions in these areas. Difficulties can arise for principals when attempting to balance the rights of the child to a full education while also fulfilling their obligations as an employer to provide a safe working environment for their employees under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act (2005). The majority of BOMs do not have a member with legal expertise and the principal, as the only board member present in schools on a continuous basis, is often left to make key decisions which could have serious legal ramifications for other members of the board.

### ***5.3.2 The Principal as an expert in inclusive education***

*Looking at Our Schools; A Quality Framework for Primary Schools 2016* charges the principal with not simply developing and implementing inclusive school policies but with actively promoting an inclusive whole school community which ‘challenges discrimination’ and champions ‘social justice’ issues (p.22). They must ensure equality of opportunity and equality of participation in all aspects of school life. As the principal is “responsible for the day-to-day management of the school” (Education Act, 1998, 23, 2 (b)) decisions around staffing allocation for special education teaching (Circular 007/2013) and possibly SNA provision will now fall to the principal. In addition, under Circular 0052/2019 it is now the principal’s responsibility to process and either grant or refuse an application by a parent for an exemption from the study of Irish for their child. Despite not requiring any additional qualifications in the area of inclusive education, the principal is now responsible for key decisions which were previously made by qualified Education Psychologists or Special Educational Needs Coordinators.

In conjunction with this increased responsibility is an increase in the principals’ workload. Meetings must be held with the child’s guardians, teacher and the school’s Special Needs Coordinator. Detailed written records must be maintained to document the procedures and to justify decisions made. For example, a *Checklist for Processing Applications for the Exemption of the Study of Irish*, (DES, 2020, Appendix 4) must be completed and stored securely by the principal for all applications for exemptions. The principal is then required to communicate this statistical data to the DES on an annual basis, through updating the Primary Online Database (DES, 2020) regarding all exemptions applications, the status granted and the grounds on which the decision was made. Similarly, children are required to

complete standardised literacy and numeracy assessments at three stages in primary school. Under Circular 0056/2011 the principal can grant exemptions on the basis of special educational needs. Both Circular 0052/2019 and Circular 0056/2011 are clear in placing the responsibility for these decisions with the principal, not with the board of management.

### ***5.3.3 The Principal as an expert in the continuum of teacher education***

Prior to 2013 the responsibility for student teachers lay entirely with higher education institutes and universities where teacher education took place. Although teachers facilitated students in their classrooms, schools had no real input into student practices. However, the Teaching Council promoted schools to “partners” in the School Placement process of Initial Teacher Education. In their *Guidelines on School Placement 2013* principals are required to arrange and facilitate classroom observations, professional conversations and structured student support over an extended 10-week school placement. Although not directly involved in the evaluation of the student, principals need to be “available to student teachers for professional support and advice” and “advise HEIs in a timely manner” of any competence or conduct concerns (2013, p. 20). The selection of a co-operating teacher, orientation of a student teacher, the facilitation of a range of learning activities and provision of ongoing support adds significantly to the principal’s workload.

The Teaching Council’s recognition of the importance of the school in the continuum of teacher education culminated in the development of the Droichead programme. Droichead replaces the traditional system of probation, which involved the Inspectorate assessing an NQT’s work, with a school based professionally led model of probation. During the pilot phase, schools voluntarily participated in the scheme, which worked alongside the traditional

system of probation. However, by 2021 Droichead will be the only means of probation for NQTs. Since its inception, Droichead has undergone a number of changes. Initially the Teaching Council envisaged devolving complete responsibility for the probation process to the school principal, arguing that principals were best placed to support and assess their own staff, as opposed to an external agency such as the Inspectorate (Career Entry Professional Programme, 2012). However, the INTO (2013) expressed numerous concerns regarding the increased workload for both principals and staff and the potential impact on staff relations of placing one member of staff in an evaluative role, particularly if the NQT did not agree with the decision made. Many principals and teachers were unwilling to accept the responsibility of assessing a colleague, a role historically associated with the Inspectorate without appropriate resources and additional remuneration.

In March 2017, the Teaching Council published a revised Droichead document, *Droichead, An Integrated Professional Introduction Framework*, which heralded a significant change to the structure of the process. Acknowledging the changes in ITE and the extension of the School Placement element of the course, the revised guidelines removed the evaluative elements of the induction phase. As opposed to school colleagues or external panel members assessing an NQT, the induction period now draws to a conclusion when the NQT and Professional Support Team submit a joint declaration confirming their engagement with the induction process. The joint declaration only confirms each party's engagement in the process and does not allow for evaluation. The Droichead process now comprises of two distinct strands: School Based Induction and Professional Learning Activities. The School Based Induction strand requires that schools form a Professional Support Team or Teams, depending on the size of the individual school. Although principals may choose not to be a



member of the PST, they retain oversight over the process. Observations, lesson demonstrations, co-teaching and professional conversations are some of the recommended activities the school and the NQT should engage in. The sourcing of substitute teachers to allow for initial PST training, the organisation of SBI activities, the timetabling of supervision to facilitate them and the administrative work associated with them adds hugely to the workload of the principal.

The DES has always demanded the principals maintain an oversight over the work of their teachers to ensure they “carry out their duties” as outlined in the *Rules for National Schools* (DES, 1973, p.14). Classroom visits, demonstrations, advice and encouragement are suggested as the means by which the quality of a teacher’s work can be improved. Inspections and evaluations, however, were the remit of the Inspectorate. Policy changes in the past two decades have seen the role of the principal expand into one where they are expected to adopt some of the duties previously held by the inspectorate. Section 24 of the Education Act, 1998 directs principals to investigate any complaints relating to a teacher’s competence or conduct in a school setting. Circular 0049/2018 states that it is the principal, and not the Board of Management who is best placed to investigate professional competence issues and make appropriate recommendations. This informal approach should be adopted before a Board of Management is informed. The formal stage of investigation, if sufficient grounds are identified by the BOM, involves the principal identifying shortfalls in the teacher’s work, developing an improvement plan, monitoring its implementation and reporting back to the Board on its success. It is only after all aspects of Stages 1 and 2 have been fully exhausted that the Inspectorate may become involved. In terms of the workload principals may have to complete multiple observations, devise an improvement plan, oversee its implementation and

assess its success. The *Looking at our Schools A Quality Framework for Primary Schools 2016* (2016, p. 25) document builds on this by stating that ‘highly effective’ schools have a culture of principals and teachers engaging in an annual ‘collaborative review’ of the teacher’s work and professional development. The practicalities of this responsibility for principals, particularly teaching principals and principals in large schools, are not considered. In addition to the workload, the impact it would inevitably have on staff relations is not considered in the document or guidelines.

#### **5.4 Changes in accountability practices**

High accountability measures have long been a significant feature of Irish education policy, although they have varied in scope over time. Traditionally, school accountability at primary level was ensured through external inspections conducted by the Inspectorate division of the DES. The last two decades have given rise to a diversification in the way schools are held accountable, with multiple mechanisms by which schools are held to account emerging.

##### ***5.4.1 Transparency and standardisation as a mechanism for increased accountability***

In order to demonstrate compliance with government legislation and regulations, schools are obligated to create, implement and publish various school plans and policies. Section 21 of the Education Act, 1998 requires that copies of a detailed school plan are circulated to stakeholders. The DES recommends that more recent statutory policies such as an Anti-Bullying Policy, a Code of Behaviour, a Child Safeguarding Statement, an Enrolment Policy, a Substance Use Policy, a Health and Safety Statement are published on a school’s website for the wider community to view. Failing these, the policies should be readily available and

easily accessible. Inspectors, during school visits, can also request copies. Templates for these policies are available through the DES website.

Schools are also required to publish their school self-evaluation reports and school improvement plans ‘for the whole school community’ (School Self Evaluation Guidelines, 2016, p. 41). In keeping with the increased call for transparency, reports written by the Inspectorate following school evaluations are also published on the Department of Education’s website. Although no staff are identifiable, the school’s name and roll number are published. The publication of all the required policies, in conjunction with the Teaching Council’s open search feature means the principal is easily identifiable.

According to the *Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2019-2023*, Boards of Management must formally meet at least once a term and no less than five times in an academic year. Boards of Management previously had autonomy over matters which were discussed at meetings. However, to ensure Boards cannot claim ignorance of key school issues, there is now a set agenda including mandatory items for discussion at Board meetings. A Child Protection report must then be provided by the principal and an account of any allegations of or investigations into bullying incidences related. The vetting and Teaching Council registration status of substitute teachers employed between Board meetings must also be stated. Principals are required to provide a report to members on matters arising since the previous meeting, the detail and contents of which is at the discretion of the principal. Minutes of these meetings must be carefully maintained and a suitably redacted version shared with stakeholders.

#### ***5.4.2 Parents as a mechanism for increased accountability***

Parents play both a direct and indirect role in holding schools to account. Although formal structures such as the Irish Constitution legally enshrined the rights of the parent as the primary educator as far back as 1937, no legislative or executive action was taken by the Department of Education to give substance to parental rights in education until the late 1900s. The Education Act, 1998 provided for their statutory inclusion of parents on Boards of Management and the power of the parent as a stakeholder in education has grown exponentially in the last two decades. This is evident in both the changes made and the language used in educational policies.

The Foreword to the *Looking at our Schools A Quality Framework for Primary Schools 2016* document by the Minister for Education and Skills begins by acknowledging how ‘fortunate’ Ireland is to ‘have an education system that is held in high regard by parents, pupils and teachers’ (2016, p.5) and confirms that the quality framework for school inspections was made publicly available to ‘help parents and others to understand the evaluative judgments in inspection reports’ (p.6). Parents are ‘important stakeholders’ and the Inspectorate ‘values their views on the quality of provision’ (DES, 2016, p. 8) which is why a selection of parents are surveyed during external inspections and expected to make contributions to a school’s self-evaluation process. Circular 008/2011 also places parents as overseers of the Croke Park hours. Although parents have no input into how the hours are allocated schools must communicate the usage of the Croke Park hours to parents.

Schools previously enjoyed autonomy over the manner and frequency in which they communicated a child’s progress with parents. However, Circular 0056/2011 now requires

schools to provide two formal reports annually, one of which must be a written end of year report. The report must follow an NCCA template, include key elements of the child's progress, contain their standardised test results and be issued with sufficient time for parents to arrange follow up meetings.

Initially governments sought to encourage schools to consult with Parents' Associations prior to policy formation and outlined procedures for addressing parental complaints (Education Act, 1998). Now, with the newly proposed Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019, the government seeks to compel rather than encourage schools to engage with parents on everyday issues. In addition to simply responding to grievances, schools would now have to create, publish and implement a Student and Parent Charter. This Charter should outline the steps schools take to actively consult parents and children on all school matters and detail the manner in which schools will foster positive relations with the wider school community.

#### ***5.4.3 Competition as a mechanism for increased accountability***

Traditionally parents selected their child's school based on location or religious ethos. Unlike other countries they were not limited to catchment areas and had the right of choice, although this was limited in terms of ethos by the overwhelming predominance of Catholic patronage schools. In areas of oversubscription, schools allocated places based on their enrolment policies, which usually consisted of factors such as family connections, religion and location. The Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 further strengthened parents right to choose schools by removing some indirect barriers to admission. In areas of oversubscription, sound admission policies are instrumental in avoiding legal action. The parents' right to choose also

impacts on less appealing schools who may be competing for students to avoid closures or forced amalgamations.

To date, the state has not sought to encourage competition between schools, with the Education Act, 1998 banning the official publication of league tables. Therefore, there is limited official information available to parents on schools' academic attainment. The only official publications regarding school performance released to the public are Inspectorate reports on the DES website, which do not provide statistical information on a school's academic performance.

While every school follows the state curriculum, Government departments have developed an array of curricular initiatives which schools can opt to take part in. These programmes usually involve the formation of a dedicated committee, whole school participation and evidenced parental involvement, finishing with an external inspection. Examples of these programmes include, The Green Flag, The Amber Flag, The Yellow Flag, The Active Flag, The Blue Star and The Digital School of Distinction award. The status conferred on schools from winning these awards can boost the public profile of a school. These learning attainments are often showcased on school websites and social media profiles and form part of a school's public profile.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter critically examined a range of national policies, published over the past two decades, which significantly altered and expanded the role and responsibility of the primary school principal.

## Chapter 6: Findings: Semi-structured interviews

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings that arose from semi-structured interviews conducted with 31 primary school principals. Like the findings from the documentary analysis, the findings from the interviews highlight the multidimensionality of the role of principal. Three major themes emerged in data analysis: Perceptions of Principalship, Autonomy and Accountability and Well-being and Sustainability. The remainder of the chapter is thus structured under subheadings relating to each of these three major themes.

**Table 6. 1: Major themes which emerged from the interviews**

Principals' perceptions of Principalship		
Perceptions of their role	Autonomy and Accountability	Well-being and Sustainability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining their role</li> <li>• Duties of the principal</li> <li>• Changes to the role</li> <li>• Challenges of the role</li> <li>• Impact of the individual school context</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy</li> <li>• Accountability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The impact of the role on health and well-being</li> <li>• Sustainability of the role</li> <li>• Support</li> <li>• Training</li> </ul>

## **6.2 Theme 1: Perceptions of their role**

Principals spent a significant amount of time discussing their perceptions of their role. There was a sense of frustration and exasperation when describing the role, which Andrew referred to as “Pandora’s box”. Therefore, based on this metaphor, perceptions of principalship became a central theme, with five distinct subthemes: defining the role, the duties of the principal, changes to the role, challenges of the role and the impact of the individual school context on the role of principal. Drawing on role theory, this section demonstrates the simultaneous ambiguity, and expansion of the role of the principal, resonating closely with two of the central concepts from role theory: role expansion and role ambiguity.

### ***6.2.1 Defining the role of principal***

Several principals commented on the absence of a formal role descriptor. They believed this was a deliberate action on the part of the government to prevent claims of demarcation. Andrew, Conor and Aoife argued that a lack of a specific, defined contract suits Boards of Management and the government as it allows the DES to “*add to our workload*” without principals having appropriate grounds to complain or refuse. There was no distinction made between the government or their board of management, rather both were presented as outside bodies who could add to their role without consultation. Amy maintained that it was ignorance about the principal’s role which prevented the DES from accurately defining it because they were “*completely and utterly unaware of the vast complexity and breadth and range of the role*”. While Beth believed that a list of duties would further perpetuate the unattractiveness of the role, leading to more difficulties in recruiting principals. Ciara asserted that principals themselves instinctively know their role but external parties, such as parents, would benefit from defined boundaries. Seán insisted that it was “*immaterial what’s*



written in a circular, the role of the principal is what happens in the next 10 minutes”. This idea of the unpredictable nature of the role came through in all participant responses, with the comparison to “*firefighting*” made several times.

The sense of the sheer breadth and expansion of the role was echoed by most of the other participants, with Ciara describing it as “*all encompassing...my remit is everything*”. Hannah likened the role to that of a plate spinner in a circus saying “*that’s what it feels like, spinning plates. And you see some crashing to the ground, you do. Always. Invariably you will lose some delph*”. While David compared it with the captain steering a ship through “*sometimes calm, sometimes choppy waters*”. It was described as “*multi-dimensional*” and “*multi-faceted*” with the principal acting as “*facilitator*”, a “*problem solver*” and a “*mediator of policy*” and a “*jack of all trades*”.

Numerous principals responded with two answers; what they felt was the expected answer and then the reality of their situation, highlighting a disconnection between the theory of school leadership and the reality of practice. For example, Matthew responded with “*I know what I should say to that question, which is the leader of teaching and learning. But I feel it’s much bigger than that...my job is to keep everyone happy*”. Diana stated “*What I think it should be and what it actually is are two very different things. What I think it should be is a leader...what’s actually happening is a lot different to that*”. Beth believed the role should be to “*lead the organisation and stand over the quality of the teaching and learning*” but “*the reality of it is that half the time that plays a definite second fiddle to the actual management of the school*”. Similarly, Nicola commented that “*Teaching and learning is meant to be at the forefront of everything that we do, but actually it comes so far down the*

*pecking order it's not even funny*". This was echoed by a teaching principal (Patrick) who said *"my most important role as principal is leading teaching and learning. It's the one I can spend least time at."* There was evidence of role conflict here as principals were aware of the importance the DES place instructional leadership but felt unable to dedicate sufficient time to it, due to the competing demands of the role. Other managerial obligations take precedence over leading teaching and learning.

Principals were asked to define how they perceive their role. Teaching principals immediately identified themselves as a teacher first and principal second, with teaching and learning their priority. However, in relation to teaching and learning, Lisa commented *"it doesn't always get the proper attention it needs or that it deserves because sometimes someone comes to the door or someone rings or you're trying to chase up such and such a person or such and such an office. And you've no choice but to go and do these things"*. Most administrative principals found the task quite difficult with a sense of frustration evident. Andrew acknowledged that it's *"a hard job to describe"*, while Ciara commented that it was *"very hard to pinpoint exactly what your true role is"*. Orla described it as *"a series of continuous minor interruptions"* where everybody needs some of her time. Several principals compared the role with that of a company CEO; leading, organising, and managing numerous departments all at once with Amy referring to it as *"the education business"* and Ciara saying, *"it's managing a business"*. Comparing schools with businesses echoed the language of managerialism.

### *6.2.2 The duties of the principal*

Prior to the interview principals were asked to complete a short questionnaire indicating which aspect of the role they viewed as most important and which received the most time. The aspects included on the questionnaires were based on the domains from the LAOS framework (2016). Two principals found the task too difficult to complete and two principals did not return the online questionnaire.

Of the 27 completed forms, there were variations as to what principals believed was the most important aspect of their role. Leading the teaching and learning in the school and leading the ethos and vision of the school were the two most common choices. However, two principals felt leading internal relations was the most important aspect of the role, while one principal believed administration, such as policies, plans and paperwork, was the most important dimension of his role. Nearly all principals felt that managing the physical building was the least important aspect of the role and yet received a significant proportion of their time.

Very few principals reported a match between area of importance and time allocated to the task. The majority of principals indicated that most of their time was spent on administration, with only one principal selecting leadership. Managing the physical building featured far higher in terms of time allocation than importance.

There was a general consensus from the interviews that in terms of time and energy, the management of the school far outweighed the leadership of the school. Much of the time was spent on administrative work such as grants applications and on building maintenance. Tasks listed ranged from teaching, yard supervision, meeting with external agencies, school self-

evaluation, inducting new staff, painting walls, shoveling snow, negotiating school lunch prices, fundraising, to unblocking toilets. Principals in small and medium-sized schools in particular, reported less access to full or part time caretakers, resulting in maintenance duties falling to them. Most principals believed these tasks were essential and they felt compelled to complete them. Seán described it as a “*natural obligation*” to take on additional roles. Grace recalled a time when “*there was really bad snow and 5 months pregnant and I was digging a path, you know, because we had no caretaker. People say you shouldn’t do that, but if you don’t do it then who does it, you know?*” Principals, particularly those in small and medium sized schools described being expected to carry out multiple duties including, but not limited to, those of an “accountant”, “taxi driver”, “architect”, “counsellor”, “solicitor” and “educational psychologist”, in addition to their role as principal.

### ***6.2.3 Changes in the role of the principal***

There was a strong feeling of role overload, as all participants unanimously agreed that the workload was enormous and those in the role more than 5 years believed the duties and responsibilities had expanded exponentially since their appointment. Patrick said the role had “*changed beyond all recognition*” since his appointment 17 years ago. The role was described by Niamh as “*endless*” and by Sarah as “*absolutely relentless. You never catch up. You never even get close to catching up. It is nearly unimaginable.*”

The administrative element was noted as growing year on year. David commented that the last decade has seen paperwork “*creeping...to ridiculous proportions.*” Similarly, Matthew noted that while the role was difficult 10 years ago “*creeping bureaucracy*” has resulted in simple administrative tasks increasing in complexity. He continued “*every year there’s a*

*new kind of thing. So, you almost don't seem to notice it happening...I definitely wouldn't do the job now. I wouldn't apply for a principal job now."* This was echoed by Hannah who likened the increase in the workload to *"a frog being warmed in water, in the sense that it's happening so gradually...there was always work but there is just more and more being added to it."*

The rate of change was another issue that arose, with numerous participants commenting on the amount and speed with which new circulars and initiatives are released. Hannah described it as *"circular after circular. It's a drip feed."* While Lucy claimed the DES *"keep foisting circular after circular after circular and expecting people to be able to respond to that change immediately."* Several principals expressed a lack of faith in the DES and questioned their motivation for, and competence in, rolling out new initiatives, with Seán using the Primary Languages Curriculum as an example of *"something they threw at us."* There was a sense of frustration and anger at the apparent lack of consultation with principals before the introduction of new initiatives.

With regards to new initiatives Seán believed the DES *"keep piling on the pressure"*, while Beth said principals are *"used to initiatives coming down and battering you the whole time."* Grace argued that many of the initiatives being *"fired out"* by the DES are in direct response to *"whatever's in the media at the time"* and curricular decisions are being influenced by *"whichever Irish Times journalist shouts the loudest"*. The ever-increasing and changing focus of DES initiatives drew criticism for several principals, with Beth saying, *"you sort of say to yourself, has the government got some grand plan for the future?."* Hannah questioned the input of the constantly changing Minister for Education into education policy and called

instead for “*a long-term policy in education. We need policy based on numbers, figures, not just kind of speculation.*”

The introduction of Droichead received mixed responses. Some principals welcomed the apparent “*trust*” from the DES and viewed it as an opportunity to “*empower*” staff (David) or considered that it “*legitimises*” the principals’ role in teaching and learning (Judith) or was a way of “*distributing the leadership*” (Nicola). Others felt schools and NQTs were “*abandoned*” by the inspectorate (Amy) and it was contributing to the “*de-professionalisation*” of the role (Matthew). Approximately three quarters of the principals interviewed had engaged with the process, though Seán had “*side stepped it so far.*” There was some confusion among principals regarding the changes to the Droichead programme, with many still referring to the evaluative element, which had been recently removed. Some principals spoke of Droichead as “*pitting one staff member against another*” (Seán) or being “*mentor, colleague, judge, executioner*” (Amy). There was some apprehension about the impact on relationships within schools (Liam) or NQTs feeling pressured to engage in extracurricular activities (Sarah) to impress principals. Concerns were expressed about the legality of not signing off an NQT’s engagement with the programme (Amy) while Jessica worried about her own “*reputation*” if signing off for an underperforming teacher.

While most principals were happy to support newly qualified teachers through mentoring and supported in theory an induction method similar to Droichead, they were all concerned about the additional work for schools, which added “*a whole other layer of work*” to the role (Hannah). There was a sense of anger and disbelief at another responsibility being devolved to schools without additional posts of responsibility or funding (Diana). Seán believed the

DES had “*packaged it up in a way that makes it look as if it’s really progressive and I don’t think that any teacher or principal really thinks this is the way.*” Brian viewed it as a way of reducing the workload of the inspectorate to increase inspections. At the time of the interview Droichead was not mandatory for all schools, Diana committed her school to the programme as she felt an indirect pressure to be involved, saying “*our backs were to the wall.*” She argued that newly qualified teachers would choose to apply to Droichead schools before non-Droichead schools to avoid the stress of the Inspectorate, exacerbating teacher shortages from a recruitment perspective.

#### ***6.2.4 Challenges of the role of principal***

When asked about the main challenges of the role, three distinct themes emerged: Special needs education, internal human relations, such as fostering and maintaining relationships with and between staff and children and engaging with external agencies.

##### ***6.2.4.1 Special educational needs***

Changes in the area of special education provision were unanimously selected as the biggest challenge currently facing school principals. Nearly every principal believed that SEN accounted for the largest portion of their time, with Rebecca estimating it accounts for approximately 30-40% of her time. Brian described having 3 ASD specific classes as “*an extremely challenging part of the job because of the amount of administration work that’s involved*”.

30 principals recounted some negative experience of working with the NCSE and DES in relation to special education needs. Some principals questioned the government’s motivations around SEN provision, with Isla accusing the government of misrepresenting

the facts to the public, stating *“because they’re selling one model that they’re increasing staff. That’s true. But they are not increasing staff to the level of need that has increased.”* Similarly, Lucy commented on the DES’s *“media blurb”* but lack of follow through with promises of support. One principal recalled receiving a letter on the 28th of June compelling her to open an ASD specific class for the coming September, despite having no physical space within the school grounds to safely accommodate another class or sufficient notice to upskill staff. Sarah believed that the lack of consultation and engagement with schools prior to the public announcement of these new classes has resulted in principals *“suffering ill health as a result of the stress.”* In contrast Patrick requested permission to open an ASD specific class in his school to accommodate three local children. However, his application was rejected by the SENO on the grounds of limited physical space within the school and the existence of a special school 10 miles away. He commented *“the SENO in our area is notorious for being a refuser for everything basically...we were all left a bit deflated. I felt a sour taste in my mouth that after all the work and effort we put in and all these headlines about schools refusing to open special classes, that when we offered, we were refused.”*

Cuts to Special Educational Needs Assistants and Special Education Teacher hours or an inability to access much needed services was the main source of contention for principals, with Hannah arguing *“I think the biggest tragedy of all has been special ed....we’re in the middle of I think, destroying a whole generation of children with additional needs through the various policies that are happening. In front of my eyes, I’ve seen children that could have succeeded falling down the cracks.”* Amy recalled how 57 children in her school are currently on an *“emergency list”* for Speech and Language Therapy for the past 2 years, while Rebecca spoke of waiting 2 months for a response to an emergency request for help.



During this time, her staff were assaulted daily. She recalled feeling “*there was absolutely no help.*” Nicola argued that the supports and structures for real inclusion are not there and that although parents are upset with agencies, it is the principal who is “*getting the brunt*” of the anger.

Grace spoke of a “*distrust*” on the part of the NCSE towards the principal. She described spending days compiling behavioural reports, observations and plans as evidence to support an application for additional support which was then rejected by the NCSE. The opinion of the principal was insufficient to support the application. Jessica described the process of SEN provision as “*disheartening*” as applications were unsuccessful without adequate explanation.

The changes around the Gaeilge exemptions and allocations of SEN supports were discussed. Although most principals were comfortable in granting exemptions from Gaeilge, the general consensus was that it increased the workload of the principal. Several principals in DEIS schools referred to the previous exemption system as two-tiered; families who could afford an educational psychologists’ report and those who could not. They believed this new school-based system was fairer for all.

The introduction of clearer guidelines for granting Gaeilge exemptions were praised, as principals felt they provided clearer grounds for exemptions or refusal. Prior to this, Nicola found it difficult to refuse exemptions saying “*I was caught out a couple of times. I did give exemptions when I didn’t truly believe the child should really have gotten it but another ologist had their name beside it*”.

Some principals spoke of pressure from parents to grant the exemption and pressure around the allocation of SEN support, none of which they felt could not be delegated to other staff members. The majority of principals were unhappy with the government's proposal to devolve the responsibility for SNA allocation to the principal. Some spoke of feeling uncomfortable shouldering this responsibility and communicating the decision to parents. There was a sense of relief at being able to attribute unpopular decisions to outside, unknown agencies as opposed to shouldering the responsibility themselves. Patrick described SEN provision as trying to *"balance the needs of the needy with the needs of the needy"* as *"you cannot give everybody what they want with the limited resources you have."* He described having to tell parents of children with additional needs to *"stop roaring at me and stop trying to bully me"* and to *"live in Mr. Reality Land. I can offer you this. I can't offer you this."* Similarly, Sarah spoke of *"doubling our paperwork to justify the decisions we are making in terms of allocating time to a child"* and how relying on an *"external, objective agency"* offered *"protection"* to the school when communicating decisions to parents.

#### **6.2.4.2 Internal human relations, staffing and students**

Every principal mentioned some aspect of staffing, spanning recruitment, retention, performance or attitude, as significant challenges of the role. For most, the issue of recruitment and retention of staff was paramount. Numerous principals were operating with part time or no secretarial and caretaker support due to a lack of DES funding for ancillary staff. This was an issue for both teaching and administrative principals across all bands of disadvantage. Hannah commented *"I put in a few years there without secretarial support being organised. That was horrific. Beyond all you could imagine."*

The difficulty in securing substitute teachers for short- and medium-term absences was common to all school contexts, but particularly those in Dublin. It was described as a "constant *headache*" (Seán) and "*nightmare*" (Hannah). Maria, who could not fill a maternity leave vacancy for several months offered positions to almost qualified 4<sup>th</sup> year students on placement saying "*I basically had to go to the both of them and go do you want a job when you're finished? Because I'm so stuck and one of them was very nonchalant. And I just went oh my God I can't believe that I've offered her a job.*" In the absence of a substitute, most principals described having no option but to reallocate SETs to teach mainstream classes for short-to-medium term absences, meaning children with additional needs lost out on valuable teaching time. Nicola spoke of supervising classes herself or "*being full of apologies all the time*" "*begging teachers*" to cover mainstream classes for the day.

One principal spoke of the Board of Management denying staff approval to attend professional development courses unless a substitute teacher had been confirmed and another principal refused to attend Professional Support Team training unless the DES provided substitute cover. Andrew believed blame for the substitute shortage should lie with the Teaching Council, who have responsibility for teacher vetting and registration, stating "*I would point fingers fairly and squarely at the Teaching Council and say guys you're in charge.*"

Staff relations were viewed as vital to the running of a school. Seán described staff relations as "*the one thing that if they go wrong then that can cause you the most amount of grief because unfortunately, you're looking at teachers all day every day, whereas parents come*

*and go*". This was echoed by Edward, who noted that in his seven years as principal all the frustrating elements of the role have been related to staff. Numerous principals commented on how an issue with one staff member can negatively impact upon the entire school atmosphere. Issues included inter staff conflict, unreasonable expectations of management and negative attitudes towards others. Edward recalled a difficult relationship with a staff member returning from career break saying, *"I'd heard about this person before I'd ever came here. I couldn't believe it when it happened. I went oh my God, it's just unreal how one person can have a negative effect on other people"*. Similarly, Seán stated *"One person could change and that could poison the whole atmosphere. The dynamic can change so quickly."* Even though Helen had been Deputy Principal in her school for 18 years and Acting Principal for 1 year, appointment to principalship altered staff dynamics. She stated *"it's totally different to when you're acting up as opposed to when you're actually in situ. People's perceptions are different. Everybody's behind you when you're acting up.... Once I signed that contract everything changed overnight."*

Several principals commented on the patience needed to maintain good working relationships with staff. In relation to decision making, Maria said *"if they want to come in about a worry you have to show them, even though you don't care and you want to go, get a life or pick it up yourself or surely this is something you can take on, I have to sit there, and I have to give them my time.... I can't sort of go; my God make a decision yourself."* Edward commented on a negative interaction he had when questioning a staff member, *"I went my God, I can't believe what I did for you all year and then the way they reacted at a meeting because I had to challenge them on something they said."* Seán argued that previous generations of teachers were *"more flexible,"* willing to accept changes to their role and

*“more resilient”* to principal feedback. He questioned if newer teachers were as career orientated as more experienced teachers. He also questioned whether courses such as the Professional Masters in Education, which opened up the teaching profession to people who had not selected teaching as their first choice, was beneficial.

The Fitness to Teach process and the principals’ role in monitoring teacher performance generated different responses. Most principals were confident that they had a good idea of teacher competence and practices within classrooms without ever engaging in formal observations. The majority cited using informal visits to classrooms and team-teaching opportunities to unofficially observe teaching and learning. Emma cited *“a lack of parental complaints,”* Lucy using *“cuntas míosuils”* and Hannah seeing the results of *“a lot of testing”* as their way of monitoring standards. Niamh was the only principal who engaged in a formal professional conversation with her staff. Each staff member was asked to complete a *“coaching sheet”* where they listed a positive aspect of their practice and one area for improvement. She recalled having positive conversations with the experienced members of staff, with one saying, *“I have never been asked in my entire career of teaching for my opinion on the school.”* However, she described the three newly qualified teachers as having *“fixed mindsets,”* with one only focusing on the negative reflections.

Prior to beginning in the role, Conor believed in the value of teacher observations, provided it was a *“positive, affirming”* experience for the teacher. However, his decision to introduce them was influenced by how he believed staff would perceive him, stating *“I didn’t want people to think I was going to be that kind of principal, who was going to be looking over their shoulder watching what they’re doing.”* Instead of him observing teachers, he

suggested that teachers observe one another and share practices, which have yet to be implemented. Liam, although in favour of some formal space for teacher/principal conversations, cautioned against emulating the UK's approach of observation or of Sweden's policy of linking performance with pay. He worried that formalising teacher appraisals or yearly reviews was "*a slippery slope*" and "*a recipe for disaster*." Matthew agreed that professional conversations are important but formalising the process would change the relationship dynamics. Emma believed that principals engaging in a formal feedback or staff appraisal would be "*dangerous*" and preferred a "*low key approach*" to observation. Similarly, Judith favoured a "*community of practice*" approach. Jessica felt as a younger and less experienced teacher than many of her staff, formal observations would need to be managed carefully to avoid offending experienced staff. Andrew, who qualified in 1979, was cognisant of the changing nature of the curriculum and methodologies and questioned his ability to evaluate other teachers without additional training to do so.

In contrast, Lucy who does "*go in and out of classes regularly and sit at the back*" believed that there should be a "*mechanism*" to support teachers in accessing further training. Similarly, Orla, stated that she would be open to observation or peer mentoring. Matthew also offers feedback to staff. Maria's main objection was the increased workload that formal observation would place on the principals, with Rebecca citing a lack of time to introduce or undertake observations. Edel felt that formal observations were not appropriate in a small school with a "*family approach*" to its structure.

The lack of support available for principals in addressing human resource issues was noted by several principals. Amy commented on the "*convoluted nature*" of helping a teacher who

a principal may deem as in need of support. According to Amy, the DES's six-stage process may irreparably damage the working relationship. Matthew noted the complete lack of HR training principals have and how "*vulnerable*" this makes them. He argued that everything HR related in schools, good, bad or indifferent happens by accident "*with everyone keeping their fingers crossed*". Andrews believed that a single trade union was insufficient to represent both a teacher and principal in a conflict saying that in the "*event of a confrontation between a teacher and a principal, the INTO has in the past, favoured the teacher.*"

In school management (ISM) differed from school to school, in terms of size and their role. No two schools operated their in-school management team the same way. Several principals commented on the negative impact the budgetary cuts during the economic crisis had on schools and the moratorium on promotion had on the ISM team and felt they were not back to pre-crisis levels, with Diana losing half of her posts of responsibility. Most principals delegated a subject area, such as Music or Literacy, with some principals allowing post holders to choose their own area of interest, rather than focusing on the needs of the school. There was a sense that in the majority of cases that the tasks delegated to the ISM were organisational and managerial in nature, as opposed to leadership-focused ones. There was mixed reaction to the ISM team with Diana describing them as "*helpful as they can be*" and Edward recalling times when the postholder did not carry out their duties and Brian referring to them as "*an extra helper.*" Smaller schools had very few post holders while larger schools allocated a post holder as a mentor for a class stream, with the post holder facilitating stream specific planning sessions and meetings. There was a lack of clarity over what and how many tasks could be delegated to the ISM. Beth argued it was not the role of ISM to "*pick up the slack from things I physically can't get to*" and was reluctant to delegate what she viewed as

a lot of work to already overwhelmed teachers. Similarly, Lisa was reluctant to delegate due to the age of the teacher acting as a post holder and not wanting to “*put pressure on her.*” Nicola felt that regardless of what she delegated she had to “*over see it...because the buck lands with me.*” While Rebecca doesn’t get involved in a post “*except when it comes back to me...they’ve made decisions, or they want to make decisions.*”

#### **6.2.4.3 Engagement with external agencies**

A significant change in the role identified by principals, which many also found challenging, was the ever increasing need to engage with external agencies and how these “*various agencies have upped what they expect from you little by little*” (Matthew). Tusla, in particular, was identified as a challenging organisation to work with due to the volume of paperwork needed and the perceived lack of support from them, with numerous principals recounting negative experiences. David stated, “*The more Tusla get involved the more dysfunctional these services become.*” He recalled how in previous years the Education Welfare Officer would visit the school to discuss attendance and flag any child at risk. However, in recent years Tusla have changed their system to one of referrals. He explained the system as a series of pre-referrals and referrals amounting to “*pages and pages and pages*” of information, resulting in him choosing not to engage with the process and manage the situation himself. He justified his decision by saying “*am I going to get further right ok, spending half an hour filling out this stupid form and sending it back to this, this agency who’s going to do nothing about it or send it back to me because oh you didn’t fill out box 3 on page 4. Or sitting down and talking to that Mam or getting the Home School links to go and see what the craic is at home.*”



Patrick recalled reporting an 8-year-old child who had threatened suicide to Tusla as an urgent child protection issue. Tusla, citing a heavy workload, asked the principal to visit the home instead to ensure the child was safe, as no social worker was available that day. He recalled reluctantly agreeing to visit “*simply because my conscience wouldn’t allow me to do otherwise*”. Amy described how she had a dangerous encounter with an aggressive parent, prompting the school to install panic buttons in all classrooms. The parent entered the school undetected, blocked the principal leaving her office and verbally abused her after receiving a formal letter from Tusla identifying her as the person who had referred his child to them on child protection grounds. No warning had been given to the school prior to the parent receiving the letter.

Interaction with the NCSE was also mentioned as a challenge, with Helen arguing that the new frontloading model means the “*principal will actually do the job of the SENO.*” Patrick felt that the NCSE served no function and was merely a puppet of the DES, allowing them to “*refuse responsibility for everything,*” such as special education provision. Lucy also felt “*let down by the NCSE*” who cut the school’s SNA allocation by 3, without so much as a site visit, deciding on the basis of numbers on a form.

### ***6.2.5 The individual school context***

A common perception was that the role of the principal is very much shaped by the context in which they work. As no two schools are exactly the same, the challenges faced by principals tend to be largely unique to their individual setting. There are numerous factors which contribute to the individual school context, such as the size of the school, disadvantaged status and the teaching or administrative status of the principal. However,

principals reported that the DES does not appreciate these differences when issuing circulars or conducting inspections and operates mainly on a one size fits all approach.

Seán described schools as “*niches*” and acknowledged that his workload is vastly reduced compared with colleagues in other settings. As the principal of a Gaelscoil in an affluent area he recognised that the challenges faced by many of his colleagues relating to special education needs, behaviour management and funding, do not impact significantly on his role.

While many administrative principals report little to no contact time with the children, others are able to schedule activities with children and supervise classes. Generally, principals in medium sized schools, with single stream classes, are more able to actively partake in teaching and learning. Those in larger schools report this as impossible due to time constraints. In general, principals of larger schools have a more established in-school management team, which allows them to delegate more effectively, though many are reportedly still suffering from the aftereffects of the cuts, such as the reduction in posts, implemented during the period of austerity.

Principals in DEIS schools commented on the emotional toll it can take on them in their role. Sarah recalled some of the incidents experienced saying “*some things you’d be shocked and scandalised at, we’ve forgotten because they’re just so common place.*” Issues such as neglect, abuse, drug use and drug dealing were mentioned. This was echoed by Ciara who felt disadvantaged schools experienced more tragedy in the community, such as family deaths, which eventually negatively affects the principal. Principals of disadvantaged schools spoke of a lack of confidence or motivation on the part of the parents to fight for the resources

their child needs. Even with the Gaeilge exemption at the discretion of the principal, parents in DEIS schools were less likely to know this and ask for it. Grace described how, in these settings, *“the parent voice is not as vocal”* resulting in the DES being more likely to make cuts in disadvantaged areas, in her view. She spoke of the responsibility of pushing for supports and resources falling back onto the school. David cautioned against the vast array of *“worthy interventions, initiatives”* aimed at alleviating disadvantage and the agenda these organisations may have.

### **6.3 Theme 2: Autonomy and Accountability**

Autonomy and accountability measures emerged from the interviews as a prominent theme. This section is divided into the subthemes of autonomy, accountability, accountability mechanisms, and is doing so is loosely guided by two central concepts associated with role theory: role expansion and role strain.

#### **6.3.1 Autonomy**

The majority of principals interviewed, particularly those appointed within the last decade, were content with their perceived levels of autonomy over decision making about minor issues in their school. These include policy changes within their school and initiative selection. However, they felt they had little control over the direction of their work. Several principals spoke of how the unpredictable and reactive nature of the role diminished their sense of control over their time. Andrew argued *“I’ve no control over my work. It just comes at you from different angles...I am being pushed around,”* while Seán commented *“a lot of the time, days will just dictate where your time goes.”* Similarly, in relation to the role, Conor stated, *“it’s definitely impacted by other people because most days you’ll have a plan of what*

*I want to do but rarely get to it.” Matthew believed the evolving and expanding nature of the role in the last decade has resulted in principals being unable to exercise control over their day saying, “you spend a lot of your time sorting out things that happen and things that come at you from different angles and that’s usually from outside agencies.”*

Several principals noted that the changes in DES policy, such as the introduction of redeployment panels and school cluster panels reduced their autonomy over staffing. Aoife recalled offering a teacher a position in her school by selecting a name from a list, saying “*I hadn’t seen her face, her CV, nothing. So, we’ve no autonomy when it comes to picking our own people.*” Similarly, Beth felt uncomfortable being part of substitute panels saying, “*I’m not so sure about hiring 3 teachers who I have no say over*”. Although substitute panels were deemed necessary, there was a sense that principals wanted full autonomy over the selection of their staff.

### **6.3.1.1 Principal Autonomy and the board of management**

Most of the principals were pleased with their level of control over decision making on day-to-day issues in their schools. Almost all of the principals believe that they, rather than the board of management, make the decisions in the school. Jessica claimed her Chairperson gave her “*free rein.*” Orla felt “*a lot of it would fall to me*” and Ciara would “*generally try not to make any massive decisions without telling the Board,*” as opposed to asking the board for approval. While Conor stated, “*Since I’ve started...no decisions have really been made by the Board.*”

Hannah expressed concern at having too much control saying, “*as principal one is afraid of one’s own power in the sense that you want to make sure that you’re not imposing on*

*anybody*”, while Aoife, Matthew and Sarah referred to their schools as their own “*fiefdom*” In contrast to Hannah, who was concerned about the level of power, Aoife recounted a time she removed a key element from the School's Enrolment Policy without the knowledge or permission of the Board of Management saying, “*I took out the bit about having to be a Catholic and that Catholics get priority. I didn't make a big thing about anything. I said nothing to anyone. I never said anything to the parish priest who is the Chairperson...nobody noticed.*”

Various explanations were offered as to why decisions generally fall to the principal, as opposed to the board. The most popular reason being the voluntary nature of the Boards, which Patrick believes gives principals “*a considerable amount of control over what goes on*” and that a more formalised system of governance may diminish that control. Described as “*ridiculous*” by Amy and “*thankless*” by Conor, principals agreed that this model of management is no longer fit for purpose. While acknowledging the positives of having “*vested*” and “*loyal*” (Ciara) members, the challenges presented by voluntary boards far outweighed the benefits. Andrew suggested that Board members were either “*coerced into coming onto the Board*” or “*they are on the way to something else and want to blaze a bit of a trail and use principals.*” This notion that volunteers might have personal agendas was repeated by Nicola and Orla.

As many Board members are employed, time constraints were a challenge identified. Several principals expressed a reluctant to contact their Board or Chairperson, fearing adding to their workload, with Liam saying, “*you're always very conscious, cognisant of the fact that it is a voluntary body, and these people have their own families and their own jobs to attend to.*”

Similarly, Hannah commented “*they do their best, they attend meetings...so you can’t ask any more of them than that.*” Some principals commented that the nature of school life required decisions to be made on the spot, making contacting Board members for advice impractical.

A lack of subject specific knowledge was another challenge for Board members. Often only two Board members; the principal and teacher representative, are versed in education practices. This impacts on the confidence and competence of Board members to contribute to the decision-making process. The lack of an educational background resulted in principals believing that the Board depended on them for decisions, particularly curricular ones. Beth said, “*I’m not saying I get my way all the time, but they respect my opinion very much so*” and likened a report on setting percentile targets on the DEIS plan to “*showing them Sanskrit*”. Conor described his Board meetings as “*the principal gives a report on the school, and they basically just nod along and say how happy they are that everything’s going well.*” Edward recounted the difficulties faced in running meetings after being instructed by his Chairperson to keep meetings to under one hour “*as anything over that was waffle.*” This was particularly challenging as one parent representative had little English.

A third challenge identified was a lack of clarity around roles on a Board. Orla spoke of forming a new Board for a developing Educate Together school. She said “*Some of the parents in the school had a very odd understanding of what an Educate Together school was...they thought basically that they would be running the school. So, my first Board was quite tricky because two of the parents who got elected were very tricky to manage.*” Almost

all of the principals took responsibility for the budgeting and school finances, even though the Board has an appointed Treasurer.

Although formation of the Board is considered to be within the remit of the Patron, most experienced principals had played an active role in the selection and recruitment of Board members, including the Chairperson. David suggested there is “*an art*” to forming a Board, while several principals expressed concern at this process. In addition to being hugely time-consuming, it has proven difficult for principals to recruit Board members with sufficient expertise. Principals, in DEIS schools, found the task of recruiting volunteers extremely difficult, especially when looking for volunteers with expertise in building, legislation or finance. Principals were conscious of the enormous legal responsibility placed on Boards and questioned how effective Boards would be if sued.

More experienced principals perceived the increase in standardisation and administrative requirements as a means of reducing autonomy saying, “*The balance here is, is between, between having enough structure that the school or the system is functional but not so much that’s its smothering.*” Andrew denied wanting “*full autonomy,*” instead wishing for greater “*flexibility to move things around.*” Liam believed the mandatory inclusion of certain topics in the Board of Management report was evidence of both the expansion of the role and a reduction in autonomy stating, “*the amount of things you have to report to the Board of Management now that I wouldn’t have had to do 10 years ago is quite telling*”. Similarly, David argued against the push towards uniformity and standardisation of schools stating “*you can literally just like tick all the boxes, follow all the rules, join the dots. There’s so much stuff out there.*” This was echoed by Patrick who felt that the level of control over the day-

to-day decisions had been eroded by the increase in formal processes since his appointment. He referenced being unable to make the decision to employ casual staff to complete maintenance work as all staff must be registered with Revenue and all payments verified by the accountant.

### **6.3.2 Accountability**

The majority of, but not all principals, felt accountable to others in their role. Multiple participants believed that despite efforts by the DES to delegate leadership tasks and responsibility to the in-school management team, accountability is not shared. Rather “*the bucks stops*” with them (Seán, Ciara) and that ultimately any mistakes “*become all your fault*” (Seán). This diminishes the desire and the ability of the principal to delegate complete responsibility for certain tasks to their in-school management team.

There were vast differences in participants' responses as to whom they felt accountable. Some principals felt accountable to multiple different stakeholders simultaneously, whereas others were less sure, “*mm you would be accountable to the Board I suppose*” (Lisa). Most principals felt accountable to those they interact with on a regular basis such as the children, parents, staff and boards of management. They felt less accountable to those stakeholders more removed from everyday life, such as the inspectorate, the Department of Education, or the patron. According to Beth the Archbishop is a “*rough note in a book*” and the Minister for Education “*will come and go along with the rest of them.*” The lack of one direct managerial figure resulted in one newly appointed principal not feeling accountable to anyone on a day-to-day basis. However, the following main accountabilities emerged from the data: legal, administrative, market and moral.



In terms of legal accountabilities, all principals commented on the huge amount of legislation in which they have to navigate daily. Legislation relating to child protection, enrolment, special education needs, and data protection were all listed. Financial legislation proved a challenge. Many principals commented on feeling underprepared for the budgetary requirements and financial record keeping requirements of the role, with Andrew stating, *“if somebody knocked on my door, tapped on my door today and said by the way do you have blah blah, I’d probably be fined some money.”* Similarly, Aoife stated due to the workload and time constraints, *“there’s lots of policies that I haven’t done that I’m probably supposed to have done...and if an inspector came in, I’d be going yeah you know what it’s not done.”*

In terms of administrative accountabilities, increased paperwork was repeatedly cited as an accountability mechanism with responses like *“box-ticking”* (Andrew) frequently given. Judith argued that box -ticking and report writing are becoming more prevalent and questioned whether schools are judged *“on how you report on what you do or what you actually do?”* Like paperwork, the principals' report to the Board of Management was viewed by some as an accountability measure. However, again the flow of information presented to the Board is controlled by the principal. Although many principals did feel accountable to the Department of Education, there were multiple examples of non-compliance with regulations and requirements. David spoke of openly not using grants for the purposes for which they were allocated and threatening to approach the media to *“publicly debate”* the issue, should the DES pursue it. Aoife described herself as *“a law unto myself”* whose priorities are the children and community, rather than the Department. She said, *“I know if I’m not doing what I’m supposed to do then, I’m very quiet about it and I hope I’ll get away with it”*. Similarly, Emma who is knowingly allocating SETs outside of

their recommended position commented, *“I’ve said to staff if we get an SET inspection, I’ll take the rap for that.”* Matthew claimed he *“tried boycotting lots of stuff that’s expected of you but in the end, at the end of the day, I have to do them.”*

Two principals who were appointed to the role within the last 3 years claimed that Croke Park hours were not completed prior to their appointment and that it fell to them to slowly introduce them. This meant 5 years of non-compliance with the Croke Park agreement in those schools. The principals managed their Croke Park hours differently. Some principals allowed staff to spend the full 10 hours on individual tasks, while others held weekly sessions in school, arguing that Croke Park meetings are needed to *“work collaboratively and effectively together”* (Liam).

Although principals reported a positive relationship with their individual school inspector, overall, most principals displayed a negative perception of the Inspectorate itself. The level and intensity of interactions between schools and inspectors varied hugely. Some principals reported recent Whole School Evaluations (WSEs) or subject evaluations while other schools had not had WSEs in over 15 years. Interactions with their inspector were limited to incidental inspections and the pre-Droichead probation of newly qualified teachers. Many principals commented that the removal of Droichead from the remit of the inspectorate, resulting in less contact with the inspector, has made forming a professional working relationship with them more difficult with inspector having less knowledge of the workings and culture of the individual school. In relation to an inspector Rebecca commented *“I have no relationship with her’* and there is a *‘chasm’* between inspectors and schools.

Principals whose schools had received good feedback tended to be more positive in their outlook about the work of the Inspectorate. Four principals recalled negative experiences with the Inspectorate while others referenced colleagues' negative experiences. Jessica referred to "*inspectors walking into a school and treating adults as if they were children*" and "*wagging the finger*" leaving experienced teachers in her school feeling disheartened. Edward recalled an experience whereby an inspector refused to look at his school's approach to self-evaluation as it did not directly follow the format required in the SSE guidelines, with the inspector saying, "*well you can be handing me loads of folders of stuff but I still want to see this, this and that*" and Andrew and Emma felt that the context of their schools were not taken into account when completing their evaluations.

The intensity of the negative perception of the Inspectorate varied among participants. Patrick described the current Chief Inspector as "*the greatest disaster that has ever happened to Irish education*" for his leadership of the Inspectorate in recent years, which he believed focuses too much on statistical measurement and not enough on supporting schools. In contrast Beth felt "*the inspectorate was getting more clued into the reality of life in schools*" though some are "*maybe a little bit more divorced from the reality of an Irish classroom.*" Aoife questioned the experience levels of inspectors saying, "*a lot of the inspectors have only done 3 or 4 years in the classroom*" and claimed they are hesitant to challenge her judgement after 37 years teaching. Brian asked the inspector to include a certain recommendation in her report so it would be easier for him to implement this change saying "*so, it was easy for me to implement that rotation then because it was the inspector who had put it in the report, instead of me*"

This apparent lack of balance between support and evaluation on the part of the Inspectorate was echoed by other participants. Emma, who had recently undergone a Child Safeguarding visit said *“they’re saying they’re coming in as more advisors. But I don’t think in reality that’s what’s happening”* echoing Andrew who said, *“I’m not convinced they are coming in to support teachers.”* Seán commented that inspectors should engage with schools that have significant issues rather than *“come and terrify a class teacher for a day and then not be seen for another six or seven years.”* Most principals were satisfied with the practice of publishing school evaluation reports online, citing the importance of transparency for the school community and were pleased that the board was invited to comment before publication. Helen felt it could act as *“extrinsic motivation”* for a selection of principals or as an accountability mechanism for other principals, while David was skeptical of whether parents in his school read or care about the report.

The majority of principals indicated that they would like a more structured advisory relationship with their school inspector, with pre-arranged visits to reflect the professional nature of the relationship. Andrew suggested a *“sit down meet with the inspector even one a month, you know. Ten local principals go and meet the inspector and bounce things off him or her”*. More recently appointed principals tended to have a more traditional view of the inspectorate with Brian stating, *“the inspector is still a very powerful person in the primary school framework.... you probably feel more pressure with the inspector to nearly try to prove yourself or deliver for them.”* While Conor said, *“you’re always looking over your shoulder a bit”* and he would feel *“nervous”* at the thoughts of an inspection. In contrast more experienced principals demonstrated little fear of the inspectorate. Beth stated, *“there’s no point fearing the inspectorate”* while Andrew believed he would be confident enough to

*“eyeball them and say look come back tomorrow and I'll have it for you tomorrow.”* Patrick recalled an incident where the inspector noted a teacher in his school was not following the legal planning requirements, planning on a monthly as opposed to fortnightly basis. In response to this observation Patrick offered to *“get a scissor and cut them in half”*. He continued *“to be perfectly honest with you, I think that if more principals were willing to talk back to the inspectorate, the inspectorate would be an awful lot more mannerly. Because in my experience when you talk back to them, they're like headless chickens.”*

Some principals mentioned feeling accountable to the children and feeling responsible for the quality of teaching, learning and care they receive. Andrew commented that his first responsibility is to the children saying, *“they won't come knocking on my door but that's where my direct responsibility is.”* This was echoed by Beth, who felt children *“should never feel let down by an adult.”*

The increase in parental involvement and media scrutiny was also included as a form of accountability. Many principals felt accountable to parents, particularly in non-DEIS schools with Brian commenting, *“the parents are very active in their children's learning. They're very aware. They're very well educated too. They're linked in with what's happening within the school, so I feel accountable to them.”* Similar, Isla believed the parents were *“highly invested...and wouldn't stand back at telling me what to do.”*

Andrew described the pressure from the media as *“unrelenting”* and *“piling on the pressure”*, with an anti-school sentiment. He argued that the media will seize an issue and report on it, without querying the facts with the school. Principals in non-DEIS schools reported receiving queries from the media regarding how they teach religion or on enrolment

issues and were wary of interactions with them believing they were “*trying to catch you out*” (Amy). There is evidence of role conflict here, as some principals (Andrew, Ciara, Seán) did not feel they were adequately equipped to deal with the media.

#### **6.4 Theme 3: Well-being and sustainability**

The impact of the role on the physical and emotional well-being of the principal arose frequently throughout the interviews. The findings show that a combination of role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload is resulting in role stress and role strain. The expansion and intensification of the workload is proving overwhelming for principals, in light of the current levels of support available. This is causing feelings of anxiety, tension and stress, which is impacting negatively on the physical and mental well-being of principals. This section explores in greater detail the impact of the role on the physical and mental health of the principal and examines the supports available.

##### ***6.4.1 The impact of the role on physical and mental well-being***

The majority of principals have experienced some negative impact on their physical or emotional well-being because of the role. Almost all principals mentioned stresses from the job impacting sleep, reliving events that occurred during the day or worrying about forthcoming difficult conversations. One principal described feeling “*literally one second away at all times from complete disaster*” (Matthew). Sarah recalled feeling “*under huge pressure and stress*” and reaching out to the DES funded counselling service, who acknowledged her call but never responded to it.

Numerous principals reported finding the role isolating, as there is no other person in the school at the same level. Edward described it as being “*part of a staff but you’re not part of*

*a staff*”, with staff oblivious to personal issues the principal may be experiencing as “*they expect you to be looking after them*”. Issues relating to confidentiality prevent the principals from discussing matters with other members of staff, leaving principals with less support. As members of Boards of Management are not onsite and often work full time, there are limited supports within the school to avail of.

#### **6.4.2. *The sustainability of the role***

A large majority of the principals interviewed believed that the role, in its current form, is unsustainable, stating that without a significant reduction in the principals’ workload, burnout is a very real possibility. Seven principals made references to knowing, or knowing of, principals who had resigned from the role and returned to the classroom, due to stress. One principal spoke of the difficulty some schools face in recruiting principals evidenced by the advertising and re-advertising of numerous principalship posts, with Amy claiming, “*There were three advertised in Donegal and nobody went for them.*” Similarly, Lucy believed that the role was becoming “*less attractive for people*” as the role is “*impossible to fulfil the role within the timeframe*”. This was echoed by Beth who personally knew four principals who have resigned from the position since 2013 “*because they just felt it really wasn’t worth it*”.

A study conducted by the National Principals’ Forum was referenced by two principals. Matthew quoting the study, claimed that of the respondents in that study “*over 90% of principals said that the job of the principal is no longer sustainable. And there’s been a good bit of documentation of principals telling their stories and nothing is changing...We’ve lost a third of principals in the last 5 years due to stress*”. In contrast Liam was skeptical of the

“*dystopian view*’ this report presented of principalship. Although comfortable within the role himself, he still expressed concern for the sustainability of the role in general, based on the statistics released and stories heard.

Many principals believed that the context of the school was an important factor in the sustainability of the role. Both principalships in DEIS band 1 schools and teaching principalships, in particular were viewed as unsustainable by both the teaching and administrative principals. Grace spoke about the lack of allowances made for teaching principals “*there’s no like ah, she’s a teaching principal, let’s cut her a break*”. While Orla, who works in a developing school stated that “*If I thought that I would be a teaching principal forever I would not stay in it because it’s not sustainable for me. Not at the pace I’m going*”.

There was some evidence of burnout even among the principals who felt their role was manageable. Seán commented “*I’m sure I’m not as tolerant a principal maybe as I was at the start. Maybe I was a bit more touchy-feely. And now you kind of say, you know, you kind of get tired to a certain degree.... When I come close to retirement, I won’t fight the battles that I fought my first years as principal because it just isn’t as important anyway*”. One principal, who has since retired from the position, spoke of his own experience of burnout. “*I think burnout is inevitable. I hit burnout last year. I talked to somebody, and he talked me through it....I was questioning my ability to continue doing what I was doing. It was wearing me out*” (Andrew). This self-doubt was a common occurrence amongst participants. Amy recalled how even after 10 years in the role “*there are still nights I will think I really could*



*have done that better. Am I still fit for purpose?"* Hannah commented *"because it's a multifaceted role, it creates so much doubt in oneself. Even in a confident and happy person."*

The lack of a step-down option for principals was mentioned several times during the interviews. Described as *"a fundamental flaw"* (Helen) and *"grossly unfair"* (Diana) under the current system if a principal resigns, they become the most junior member of staff in the school or as described by Jessica *"you go to the bottom of the pile."* Any years of service worked in the school prior to or during their tenure as principal is erased for the purposes of seniority and they are at risk of being re-deployed should the school lose a teacher. Alternatives such as transferring schools, outside roles or signing fixed term principalship contracts were proposed.

#### **6.4.3 Supports available**

The question of support available to principals received mixed responses. Nearly all principals responded with informal and school-based support, as opposed to more formal DES sponsored supports. When asked who supports them Sarah responded with *"There's nobody really if you like in a recognised position"* and Seán said *"you're kind of left to it yourself."*

##### **6.4.3.1 In school supports**

The majority of principals listed their Deputy Principal as a source of support. While Edward described his Deputy Principal as *"crucial"*, Diana believed that without the support of her deputy *"I just don't think it would be possible to keep going."* Several principals considered their Chairperson as supportive, particularly those where the Chairperson was a retired principal. Conor believed his Chairperson was *"very much on my side"* and described how

he and his Chairperson often discuss issues away from the other Board members. This was echoed by Edward, Orla and Judith who report “*going directly*” to their Chairperson when issues arise, and that the Chairperson would “*liaise with the principal more outside of meetings than the other Board members.*” Similarly, Ciara felt “*very supported and trusted*”. Although feeling supported Diana worries that her Chairperson “*doesn’t have the expertise really either to fully, fully support me in all matters*”.

#### ***6.4.3.2 Informal external supports***

All participants agreed that informal meetings, such as principals’ groups and networks were the best supports available to them. Regular scheduled meetings with clusters of local principals or reaching out to principal friends were the most popular supports listed. However, a number of teaching principals argued that cluster meetings with local principals were generally held during school hours making it impossible for them to attend.

#### ***6.4.3.3 Formal external supports***

Formal mentoring and coaching were also undertaken by more recently appointed principals. There were mixed responses to the Misneach programme. Aoife felt it was “*excellent training*”, Conor said “*some was good, some was ok*”, while Lisa said it was “*nothing groundbreaking*”. Edward described it as a few weekend sessions to “*sort of upskilled us in certain areas*” and Ciara felt it was a “*whistle-stop tour*”. While many (Sarah, Aoife, Lisa) acknowledged the usefulness of meeting other newly appointed principals through Misneach, there was a disconnection between schools' contexts reported in terms of mentoring. For example, principals in disadvantaged schools or developing schools were not automatically matched with mentors with similar experiences, somewhat reducing the effectiveness of the

mentoring process. Edel described her experience with her mentor as “*quite poor*” as she received “*very little assistance*”. Conor liked that idea of a mentor in general but felt “*it just didn’t really work overall*” while Amy said “*. it’s useful but I’m not sure it really helped me a great deal*”.

While many principals felt that no programme could adequately prepare them for the role, Sarah, Edel and Lisa believed more preparation is needed for principals in the area of human resource management. Jessica was the only principal who engaged in a transition period, overlapping with the retiring principal. A mix-up with commencement dates resulted in Jessica and the retiring principal working together for eight weeks, with the Board of Management paying Jessica privately, to shadow the retiring principal. Jessica recalled “*everybody was joking that they were two principals in the office, but it was really, really solid.... it enabled me to hit the ground running much sooner than had I come in and had to start from scratch building up*”.

There were mixed responses regarding the value of more formal support structures such as the Irish Primary Principals' Network and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, though all Catholic school principals reported the CPSMA as a very useful source for accurate information. The majority of the participants felt that the IPPN was a useful forum for explaining the details of DES circulars and for sourcing policy templates. However, one principal questioned the accuracy of the information posted on the message boards. Other principals reported “*negativity*” and “*whinging*” on the forums as unhelpful and off putting (Seán and Conor).

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the main findings from the semi-structured interviews with 31 primary school principals in the Republic of Ireland. A summary of the overall findings is presented below:

- Perceptions of their role

Principals feel their role is expanding rapidly and increasing in difficulty, with their workload reaching a critical point. Role ambiguity is evident as principals are unsure of the boundaries and parameters of their role. They feel they are expected to work outside of their remit, adopting the responsibilities and duties previously attributed to other agencies (Droichead, Fitness to Teach, Special Education Allocation). This is contributing to a sense of role overload, as principals cannot complete all aspects of the role simultaneously and must prioritise. Urgent managerial tasks necessary to keep the school running, such as grant applications, staffing needs, building maintenance is prioritised over leadership ones.

Experienced principals noted increases in the amount of paperwork needed by the DES and external agencies, to access supports and demonstrate compliance with the large volume of circulars, legislation and guidelines. Changes to the provision of special education and the subsequent lack of sufficient support for implementing these changes pose a significant challenge for principals. Principals are conflicted about how to provide education for all children, while providing a safe environment for staff. A crisis in teacher recruitment has further exacerbated their feelings of stress.

The individual context of the school does impact on how principals experience their role. Principals in DEIS schools reported more issues with behaviour management, special needs and trauma, which takes an emotional toll on the principals. Principals in small and medium sized schools reported difficulties in distributed leadership, as they physically do not have enough teacher to delegate leadership.

- Autonomy and accountability

Principals had mixed feelings towards the levels of autonomy they have and would like. The majority expressed a desire to have more autonomy over some aspects of the role, such as staffing but less over others, such as building maintenance. Overall, principals were content with their level of autonomy over decisions within their school contexts, believing their boards trusted them to make the decisions.

There were mixed reactions to the issue of accountability. Some principals felt accountable to their board of management, parents, children, the DES, the Inspectorate and themselves, while others did not feel accountable to anyone. All principals had engaged with the Inspectorate in some format. Though positive interactions were reported in some cases, principals viewed the Inspectorate as an accountability measure as opposed to a supportive, advisory visit. This external means of accountability was not unwelcomed by principals, with many preferring the traditional model of probation over Droichead and others using the Inspectorate as a way of subtly implementing changes in school practices.

- Well-being and sustainability

Role overload and expansion is causing role stress and role strain, which is negatively impacting on the health and well-being of the majority of principals. Most principals questioned the sustainability of the role, in its current form and knew principals who had resigned from the role due to the workload. Some principals had engaged in training, but still did not feel adequately prepared for the role. Effective supports included Deputy Principals, principal colleagues, informal principal networks and external agencies such as the IPPN and the CPSMA. Some principals acknowledged the support of their board, particularly their Chairperson. Although others felt a board consisting of volunteers, with no educational expertise, was unable to provide much support.

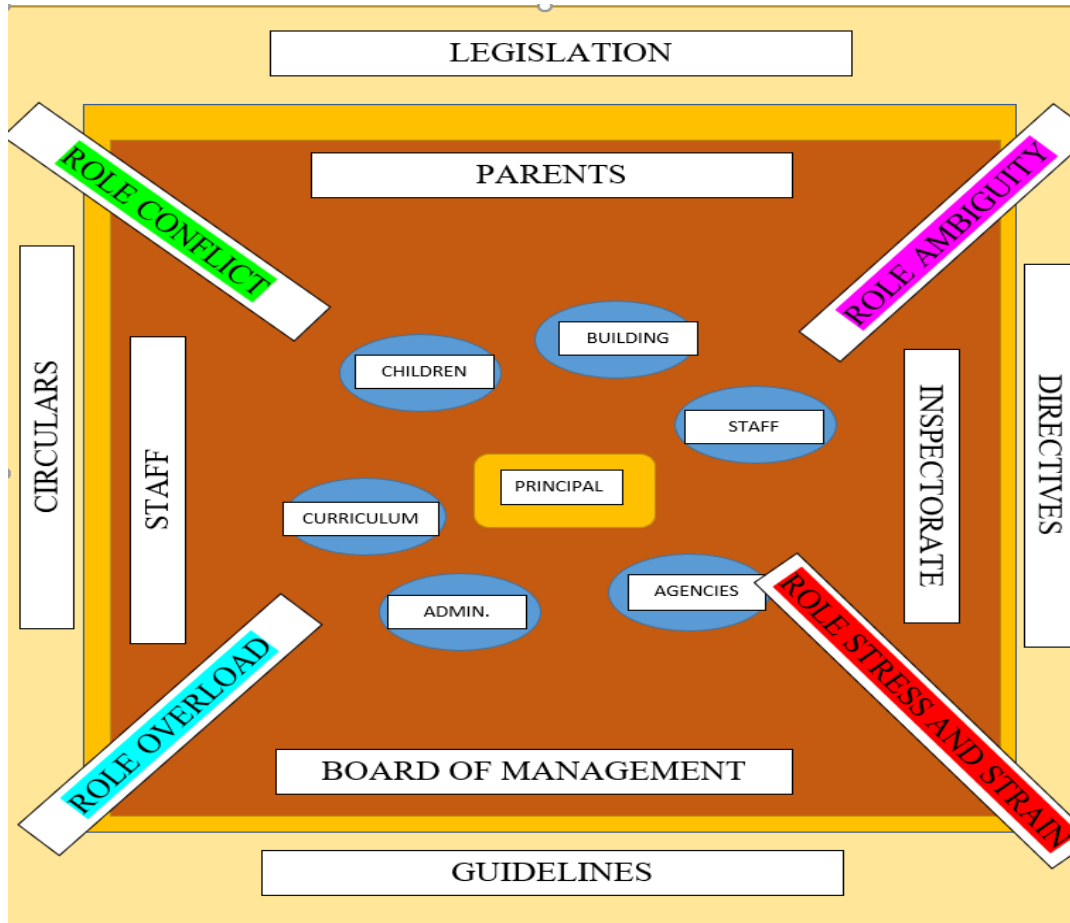
Chapter 7 examines these findings considering the role theory and the leadership and management literature previously discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

## **Chapter 7: Discussion**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This case study was concerned with exploring perceptions and experiences of the role of the primary school principal in Ireland. It sought to provide a deeper insight into how principals navigate their changing role by exploring their lived experiences. Chapters 5 and 6 presented the findings from the analysis of official government publications and the data gathered from 31 semi-structured interviews with primary school principals.

This chapter continues to examine the themes which emerged from the data and considers them in light of the literature critiqued in Chapter 2. Role theory and the associated concepts of role ambiguity, role conflict, role strain and role stress were used as a lens by which to examine the role of the principal and are presented in Figure 7.1 below.



**Figure 7. 1: Controlled Autonomy**

The research questions, which underpinned this study, were selected as headings for this chapter and are presented in the table below. The headings are broken down into further subcategories based on the themes which emerged from the interviews.



**Table 7. 1: The main findings from the research questions**

Research Question	Main findings
Based on legislative and policy statements, what is the role of the principal? How do principals perceive their role?	The role of the principal is multidimensional and has expanded considerably over the past two decades. It spans managerial, administrative, pedagogical and leadership tasks.
What are main challenges principals associate with the role?	The main challenges identified were the lack of resources to support children with additional needs, an increase in administration difficulties in the recruitment and retention of staff.
What impact, if any, has the nature of the role on the well-being on the principal?	Most of the principals believed the intensification of the role impacted on their mental and physical health.
Of the professional supports available, which are utilised by principals and why?	Principals mainly relied on informal principal networks and their deputy principals for both managerial and emotional support.
What are principals' perceptions of the levels of autonomy and accountability present in their individual school contexts?	<p>Most principals were content with their level of autonomy in most aspects of the role. They believed they had sufficient control of decision making within their individual schools.</p> <p>They were frustrated at the level of autonomy given over other domains (building works) and expressed a desire for less autonomy there.</p> <p>External and internal evaluations had increased, though there was a mixed response to whom principals felt accountable. Principals expressed frustration at the increasing levels of bureaucracy and negative impact on their engagement with teaching and learning.</p>

## **7.2 What is the role of the principal and how do principals perceive their role?**

Given that the role of the principal has evolved over the past twenty years, their role is multidimensional and constantly in a state of flux. The past two decades have witnessed

unprecedented change in Irish society, which is reflected in the changing nature of the role of principal. Although legislation, circulars, frameworks and guidelines structure and shape the role, no one single document entirely governs or comprehensively depicts what is expected of the principal in daily practice. Despite Ireland having a national, centralised curriculum (Gleeson, 2010), a centrally determined staffing quota, a nationally operated inspectorate and state-wide policy requirements, the role of the principal remains unstandardised. This gives rise to what Biddle (1986) described as role ambiguity, as principals are unsure of the parameters or boundaries of their role. In previous years, principals were responsible for the academic development of the child: the teaching and learning. Now, societal issues publicised and fuelled by the media, such as cyber-safety, childhood obesity, racism and mental health, lead to the often-rapid development of government initiatives, that then inevitably find their way into schools and the domain of the principal. In addition to the academic development of the child the Revised Curriculum (1998) included the holistic and spiritual development of the child also. A diminished parental involvement in the health of the child has resulted in a pilot programme to have therapists deliver sessions within the school day, on school premises, to ensure the attendance. There is a blurring of the lines between the role of the principal and the parent, and there is an ambiguity around where one role ends, and another begins. The individual context of the school means the expectations of the principal, challenges faced and supports available differs from one from school to the next, further clouding the margins of the role.

### ***7.2.1. Perceptions of the role more***

The role of the principal was described by principals as multidimensional, all-encompassing and endless. The expansion and intensification of the role was evident in the interviews

conducted, with experienced principals acknowledging the steady increase in the volume and complexity of their work. This is similar to findings by Heffernan and Pierpoint (2020), where Australia principals in their study described the role as “overwhelming and all-encompassing” (p. 6). It is also comparable to findings by Bush (2009), Fullan (2014) and Lunenburg (2013) who found that an international agenda for school reforms results in the role of the principal becoming increasingly more complex.

There was evidence of role ambiguity, as principals found the task of defining their role difficult. Instead, they described their duties and outlined the roles they adopted in the course of their day. This indicates that rather than focusing on leadership, principals are very much concerned with the practical, visible, managerial tasks required of them. Most of the tasks listed were managerial in nature relating to building maintenance and administrative work rather than leadership focused statements of practice detailed in the LAOS (2016). Principals described acting as accountants, counselors, psychologists, gardeners, architects, and plumbers, while simultaneously balancing the responsibilities of teacher and principal. Some principals adopted the language of business, comparing schools to companies or themselves to CEOs, echoing the neoliberal policy trend outlined by Mooney Simmie (2012, 2021). Comparisons were made with organisations and professions with some principals questioning how leaders in other organisations have HR, ICT and maintenance staff, while in schools everything comes to the principal’s door. This adoption of business terminology reflects a move towards managerialism (Ball, 2003), which is also evident in several government publications, such as the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy for Learning and Life* (2011).

Role expansion and role overload was evident, as several principals noted the lack of a job descriptor or clear boundaries, which means the role can continue to be expanded without consultation with principals. The enormous volume of instructions, amendments and requirements communicated from the Department of Education through circulars and guidelines in the past two decades was noted, with some principals admitting not having time to read all of them and instead opting for the cliff notes version on principals' networks. They commended the work of external organisations such as the IPPN and the CPSMA for summarising and highlighting the key actions for schools. The ever-increasing pressure on schools to address societal issues, such as cyber safety, childhood obesity and mental health, is blurring the lines between home and school. Many principals agreed that schools are being bombarded with new initiatives by government departments and private enterprises. For example, a new initiative to provide speech and language therapy within the school day and school building, to facilitate parents, highlights the confusion as to where the role of the school stops, and parents start.

The blurring of the lines regarding the roles and responsibilities of the principal is resulting in role ambiguity, which is causing stress and frustration. It is also negatively impacting on the ability to prepare for the role, which Sugrue (2015) “is vital if more than the status quo is required” (p. 108). An uncertain role makes formal courses in leadership preparation less beneficial for participants. Although some principals had engaged with training through CSL before or shortly after appointment to the role, few principals found the content particularly valuable, instead praising the informal connections which were formed. Although there was a clear perception that the skills required for the role went far beyond the Bachelor of

Education qualification needed for the role of principal, principals were unsure what training would have been useful.

### ***7.2.2 The importance of school context***

The role of the principal is impacted by the context in which they operate. In general principals in disadvantaged schools experienced a heavier administrative burden associated with partaking in the compulsory DEIS programme. Additional initiatives associated with the DEIS programme include organising breakfast clubs, homework clubs, liaising with School Completion staff and engaging in the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, all of which goes through the principals' office. There was a sense that principals in DEIS schools dealt with more trauma than those in non-DEIS schools, which did impact on their physical and mental health. Similar to research conducted Lupton (2005) and Fleming and Harford (2021) principals in DEIS schools did report more time spent on behaviour management and providing emotional support, as opposed to a focus on academic outcomes. The context of a school is not taken into consideration by the DES.

### ***7.2.3 Principalship: internal requirements and expectations***

The heavy administrative requirements placed on schools by the Department of Education and external agencies were identified as one of the least important but most time-consuming aspects of the role. This is similar to research by Grissom et al. (2015) in the United States context, who found that administration such as grant applications, SEN applications, policy writing and mandatory paperwork, took up most of principals' time. The majority of principals expressed frustration at the time they dedicated to paperwork, at the expense of other aspects of the role such as teaching and learning. A tension was evident between

instructional leadership and management tasks. Most principals expressed a desire to spend more time engaging with the children or developing teaching and learning strategies but felt compelled to spend their time on administrative and management tasks. Long and short terms plans, policies, accounting and applications for funding and supports were listed as activities which required the most time. Some principals were very vocal about the repetition of information needed on forms for different agencies and the need for pre-referral, referral forms and data returns. This is not reflective of the LAOS (2016) document, which suggests managing the school is only one of the four domains of effective principalship, alongside the leadership of teaching and learning.

Sufficient and competent secretarial support was listed as a major support. However, secretarial support is not guaranteed for every school and differs between school contexts. Larger schools, with administrative principals are entitled to full time secretaries while smaller schools with teaching principals are often not entitled to such support. This means teaching principals are juggling teaching with administrative duties that could be delegated. Although it was noted that anything child protection related could not be delegated due to the confidential nature of the information. A lack of trained available secretarial support was identified as a challenge, with principals highlighting the poor financial remuneration and working conditions experienced by secretaries as a disincentive for applications. Several principals highlighted the unfairness of the secretarial pay system and claimed support for the Forsa mandated industrial action.

The changes evident in the policies and provisions of special education featured as a significant aspect of the role. The provision of education to children with special educational

needs was a major cause for concern for nearly all principals, particularly those in DEIS settings. The only principal who did not list special education as a challenge was employed in an affluent Gaelscoil. Noted by Shevlin and Flynn (2011) as more than simply logistically in nature, principals in this study viewed the provision of inclusive education as central to their role but it was the logistics or jumping through hoops, that accounted for a significant portion of their time. The application for support hours, the appeals, the liaising with the NCSE and the SENO, applications for assistive technology, timetabling SET and SNA support, meeting with parents and managing sometimes violent situations added significantly to the workload and overall stress of the principals. Most teaching principals were also special education teachers, as opposed to mainstream teachers, believing that the applications and paperwork completed by SETs overlapped significantly with the role of the principal.

#### ***7.2.4 Principals: external requirements and expectations co-professionals***

The amount of additional communication and administration needed to engage with external agencies was noted. Principals found the volume of information needed by external agencies contributed to their role overload. There was some ambiguity and tensions regarding role responsibilities, with some principals feeling they were expected to take on the role of the educational psychologist or special education needs organiser, without additional specialised knowledge.

### **7.3 What are the main challenges principals associate with the role?**

The challenges identified in this research support those found by Fitzpatrick Associates Economics Consultants (2018). Principals in both studies noted the pace of change, human relations, the volume of work, the increasing parental demands, ICT and new administrative

requirements as significant challenges. In contrast, principals in this study did not note “student demands” (2018, p.12) as a challenge. Instead, they noted the difficulty in accessing appropriate supports to address student needs.

There was evidence of role conflict (Biddle, 1986) in the expectations of the role of the principal. The majority of principals believed the role was different from how they imagined it would be. Numerous principals felt frustration at being blamed for or pressured to fix issues entirely outside of their control, by some parents and staff. Problems such as COVID-19, a lack of parking outside of schools, damaged public pathways near schools, school closures for polling stations and even the weather landed at the principal’s office.

Most principals expressed disappointment at the limited contact they now have with the children and how the reality of the situation is hugely different from the how they imagined the role. The contrasting views presented on the principals’ role in relation to teaching and learning suggest that instructional leadership is not happening in many settings. In many cases principals feel disconnected from the children and the teaching and learning happening. There was a sense of role overload, whereby the principals wanted to be more involved in instructional leadership but could not. This was attributed to time constraints and crisis management, which out prioritises teaching and learning.

### ***7.3.1 Time constraints and crisis management***

The expansion of the role has resulted in role stress (Biddle, 1986) as principals attempt to meet the increasing and sometimes competing priorities of the job. Similar to Grissom et al. (2015, p. 774) there was a sense that time was a “scare resource”. Many principals echoed sentiments by Mooney Simmie (2012) that policy changes by the Teaching Council, such as



Droichead, are being used to “delegate downwards responsibility” (p. 497) to schools, increasing the duties the principal. While there were mixed responses to the Droichead programme itself, all principals involved in the programme recognised the additional work involved. There was a general sense that the induction of newly qualified teachers was forced onto schools, with school staff taking over the task of the inspector without additional remuneration.

Firefighting and crisis management were seen as central to the role. Many principals felt a lack of control over their day. This lack of clarity and control of the direction of their day made planning and preparation difficult and contributed to a sense of role stress, as principals felt they could not meet all the expectations of their role.

### ***7.3.2 The substitute crisis***

A key source of stress identified by principals was the lack of qualified staff available to fill both short- and long-term positions. A shortage of qualified teachers is not unique to Ireland. Similar situations were identified in research conducted in Australia (Riley, 2019), the USA (Sutcher et al., 2016), the UK (Hilton, 2017) and Israel (Donitsa-Schmidt and Zuzovsky, 2016). The two tier pay system, a lack of job security and a high cost of living in Dublin were all cited as factors at a national level which are contributing to the shortage of substitute teachers. Shortages were further exacerbated by COVID-19, which increased the demand for substitute teachers to replace high risk staff working remotely and those self-isolating. Government restrictions introduced to reduce the spread of COVID-19 also prohibits classes from being divided for teacher approved absences, further increasing the demand for qualified teachers. Difficulties in securing short term SNA replacements were attributed to

the nonexistence of a centralised garda vetting system. A lack of available staff resulted in principals reporting spending hours trying to source teachers, and failing this, teaching classes themselves thus increasing their already full workload. Alternatively, principals were forced to temporarily reallocate Special Education Teachers into mainstream settings, resulting in children with additional needs losing supports.

### ***7.3.3 Technology***

Several principals alluded to the impact of technology on the intensification of the role, with Isla citing it as one of the most notable changes of the role. While there were some positives listed, such as easy access to circulars and ease of communication with the board of management, technology overall appeared to add to the workload of the principal. In contrast to Pollock and Hauseman's study (2018) only one principal used email to establish "an accountability trail" (p. 389) because of trust issues. This would suggest that the majority of principals rely on email for communication purposes rather than records of work completed.

The introduction of email allowed for greater accessibility to schools by parents and other stakeholders to make complaints, request information or sell products. Described as being overwhelmed with emails, some principals acknowledged feeling a pressure to instantly respond, which impacted on the course of their day. Numerous principals answered emails in the evenings and weekends, with some having access to school emails on their personal phone. This blurring of home/school life echoes Pollock and Hauseman's findings (2018) that principals are responding to work emails outside of school hours, extending the working day.

#### ***7.3.4 Financial responsibilities***

The concept of a school as a business was supported by the volume of financial responsibilities placed on principals. All principals interviewed had undertaken some building work, through the Department of Education grants. The range of projects extended from minor works to the building of an entirely new school. The process of tendering bids, hiring contractors and project managing builds of up to €100,000 was deemed as time consuming, pressured, and stressful. Budgeting, paying ancillary staff, grant application and the overall management of school finances are an unwelcome part of the role. There were mixed responses regarding fundraising. Some principals reported needing to fundraise to meet basic school costs while others flatly refused, comparing their profession to others and questioning whether health care professionals fundraised for essential resources. As Community National Schools are relatively new in Ireland, there is a gap in the literature available regarding how the centralised budgeting system is received by principals only CNS principal interviewed had mixed feeling about their centralised budgeting system. Although relieved that the school was well resourced and not reliant on Department of Education grants to purchase essential equipment, the impractical nature of the system was noted. Niamh stated that without access to funds she does not have the means or autonomy to purchase small items needed for lessons. The need for flexibility within the system was noted.

#### ***7.3.5 Special education provision***

The changes to the provision of special education was seen as the most significant challenge of the role. Principals felt overwhelmed by the range of special educational needs in their schools, and the lack of support to meet these needs. Similar to research conducted by Kenny

et al. (2020) principals are still reeling from the budget cuts made following the economic recession, to related SEN services such as speech and language therapists.

#### **7.4 What impact, if any, has the nature of the role on the well-being on the principal?**

Most principals agreed with Niesche's description of principalship as "numerous, complex and increasing seen as unmanageable" (2012, p. 457) and believed that the role was unsustainable in its current form. The intensification in the volume and complexity of the role is consistently reported by participants as negatively impacting on their sense of well-being as principals. There are clear indications of role stress (Biddle, 1986) with almost all principals interviewed reported feelings of occupational related stress, frustration or pressure, to varying degrees. Similar to research conducted by Ray et al. (2020), issues relating to sleep loss, missed lunches, increased weight again and ill health were all reported as resulting from principalship. This is consistent with previous findings by Riley et al., (2015) in the Irish context, suggesting a stasis rather than improvement over time, highlighting that more effective policy levers are required. In most cases the male principals interviewed believed the stresses of the job had less of an impact on their personal well-being, compared with their female counterparts. This supports findings from Persson et al. (2021) whose study showed female principals reported higher levels of exhaustion and physical symptoms of stress. However, given that 1555 of the 2451 primary school principals are female, the impact of stress on personal well-being needs to be explored (2018/2019 education.ie).

Riley's study (2015) also found variations in how Irish principals are coping in their role, with some "thriving" and other merely "surviving". While none of the principals reported

feeling thriving in the role, three administrative principals questioned the negativity presented by some of their colleagues, arguing that the complaining on forums was unhelpful to the profession. Some principals avoided the forums as they which negatively impacted on their ability to be a progressive and energetic leaders. Coping mechanisms ranged from relaxing to exercise and mindfulness.

Although principals who were nearing retirement age voiced concern for young principals starting in the role, questioning how they would maintain the pace of the role, the chronological age of the principal did not appear to impact on feelings of stress. In contrast to Darmody and Symth (2015) feelings of stress appeared least prevalent with principals appointed less than three years ago. However, they did note that job satisfaction was highest amongst newly appointed principals and begin to decline after three years (2016).

#### ***7.4.1. Recruitment and retention***

Role stress and strain became apparent when exploring the topic of principal recruitment and retention. Similar to findings by Darmody and Symth (2016) a significant number of principals reported feeling occupational stress. Although no official records exist in Ireland to record principal turnover, seven principals reported knowing of principal resignations or of schools struggling to appoint individuals to the role. This was linked with the intensification of the stress, workload and negativity associated with the role. Principals also cited the low financial remuneration as a disincentive for promotion, particularly for the role of teaching principal, which involves a pay increase of less than €10,000 for what is effectively two distinct roles. All principals interviewed believed the financial remuneration unequal to the volume of work and level of responsibility. Several older principals spoke of

retiring soon, while younger principals interviewed could not imagine remaining in the role for the rest of their careers, citing stress and burnout as potential reasons for leaving.

Similar push, pull and mooring factors were identified in research carried out by Heffernan (2021). Potential push factors identified were the impact on family life and personal well-being, although these were not sufficient to prompt retirements or resignations, yet. A particular pull factor cited by many was the desire to move to a particular geographical location. With the panel system in operation, it is almost impossible to immediately secure a permanent position in some areas in Ireland, resulting in teachers applying for principalships they do not necessarily want, to move location.. Some principals interviewed voiced concerns about the high principal turnover in smaller or more challenging settings, questioning whether they were being viewed as steppingstones to larger, more financially rewarding principalships. Aoife spoke of her own school's experience of several young principals joining the school to gain principalship experience, before moving on to larger schools. The high turnover of principals was perceived as detrimental to the school community.

Heffernan (2021) identified the workload associated with starting in another school as a mooring factor as principals were reluctant to start again at the beginning building relationships with the children and stakeholders. Rather than being concerned about the intensity of the work in a new school, principals in this study were more concerned about the financial and job security risks associated with resigning from principalship. The lack of an appropriate step-down mechanism for principals was highlighted by many principals who felt returning to the most junior position in the school upon resignation was unfair. Others

were concerned if returning to teaching, principals in other schools would be reluctant to hire a former principal. There was a sense of some principals feeling trapped in the role.

### **7.5 What supports are available and utilised by principals?**

Principals accessed a combination of formal and informal supports. In contrast to findings from Murphy (2020), the majority of the principals had not engaged in formal leadership training prior to their appointment to the role. It is possible that the reduction in the number of applicants for principalship has reduced the competition for posts, in turn reducing the need for applicants to demonstrate engagement with formal leadership training prior to appointment.

Some more recently appointed principals had engaged with the Centre for School Leadership's mentoring and coaching programmes, after securing the position. Those who attended formal programmes such as Misneach cited forming connections with other newly appointed principals as the main benefit of the course. The academic content element of the course was less popular with the principals. Informal supports such as local principal networks and discussions with principal friends were viewed as the most valuable forms of support. There was a general consensus that skills and knowledge needed for the role of principal could not be taught but rather needed to be acquired through practice. This is contrast to Murphy's study (2020) whereby participants believed formal training prepared them for their role and "ought to be mandatory" (p.9). All principals cited their Deputy Principal as a source of both emotional and managerial support.

All teaching principals felt the amount of principal release days inadequate for the administrative work needed and the majority called for one administrative day a week. Since

the collection of this data the Department of Education has made provisions for one principal release day a week, citing its necessity due to the increase in the workload due to COVID-19. This started in September 2020, with supply panels established to ensure a consistent substitute teacher is appointed to cover each absence.

### **7.6 What are principals' perceptions of the levels of autonomy and accountability present in their individual school contexts?**

Although there were mixed views on the topic of autonomy and accountability, it is evident that a culture of performativity, as described by Ball (2003) is present in schools, to some extent. Schools were compared to companies and the language of business was used to describe the principals' role. Targets and measurable outcomes are used in SSE, and some principals referred to standardised test scores as a tool for monitoring standards.

The notion of a 'Goldilocks dilemma' regarding principal autonomy (Peck and Lewis-Durham, 2021) rang true. Principals expressed a desire for more autonomy over some aspects of their role, such as staffing but less desire for autonomy and the associated responsibility over other elements, such as building works. This is in line with findings from teacher autonomy research demonstrating that autonomy is considered desirable only if appropriate supports are in place (Wermke and Salokangas, 2021). Although there was an increase in the autonomy of the principal in areas such as special education allocation and the Gaeilge exemption, most principals noted the tight constraints in which the decisions must be made, and the extensive paperwork needed to justify it. This increase in autonomy is managerial in nature, with the decentralisation of administrative work to principals, rather than responsibility.



Principals are conscious of the heightened external accountabilities, which certainly impact on their decision making. However, principals, particularly those in middle to upper classes schools are more concerned with the opinions of parents rather than the Inspectorate. Negative publicity via the media in particular was a cause for concern. Engagement with the Inspectorate varied but overall principals did not feel the results from an inspection had any real consequences for school life.

Overall, the increase in administration was noted, with all principals complaining of an increase in paperwork and box ticking exercises. There was frustration at the amount of information, often repeated information, required by different DES processes or state agencies, to access support or funding. This suggests that principals are operating with “controlled autonomy” (Weiner and Woulfin (2017, p. 335) rather than full autonomy. Managerial responsibility has been devolved to school level but without the necessary power to implement real leadership changes at local level.

Although principals seemed aware of the constraints in which they operated, the majority were content with their level of autonomy within their school. Most felt they, rather than the board of management, were in control of the decision-making process and were happy for this to continue.

## **7.7 Conclusion**

This chapter examined the findings from the documentary analysis and interview data in light of the literature consulted in Chapters 2 and 3 and using the lens of role theory. It concluded that all principals, regardless of their school context, are experiencing role

ambiguity, role conflict, role stress and role strain, to varying degrees. Chapter 8 summarises the main findings and proposes recommendations.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion and recommendations**

### **8.1 Contribution of this study**

This case study contributed to the ongoing discourse of school leadership and added to the body of knowledge on how principals experience their role. Importantly, it did so by providing an opportunity for the authentic voice of the principal to be heard. Although a limited amount of research exploring the lived experiences of the principal exists (Stynes and McNamara, 2019), this research explored how principals perceive, experience and navigate their role, within the rapidly evolving policy landscape in Ireland. This research also analysed the impact of the role on the physical and mental well-being of the individual principal. Adopting a role theory framework allowed the researcher to examine how the principals, in their role, are responding to social, cultural, economic and political changes evident in recent years. In addition, it examined how principals experienced and managed their responsibilities and obligations during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent school closures. The overall findings, which contribute to empirical and theoretical knowledge are presented below, with recommendations to improve practice.

### **8.2 Overall findings and recommendations**

The following key findings emerged from this research.

- School context

The findings from this research confirm that no two schools are the same. Schools vary significantly in terms of size, location and culture. The challenges faced by schools are influenced by a myriad of internal and external factors, including but not limited to, the

disadvantaged status of the school, the physical location, the available funding, the needs of the children, the ethos of the school and the experience and training of the staff. This is in line with findings from Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017), who note the impact of the “situated”, “material”, “professional” and “external” contexts on the role of the principal (pps. 172-175). The one-size fits all policy mandate of the DES is not reflective of the uniqueness of each school. Blanket policies rolled out by the DES do not consider the factors affecting individual schools. The principals' role in enacting policy merits further study, with DES engaging in meaningful dialogue with principals on the ground level and co-constructing policies as opposed to dictating them.

- Autonomy and accountability

Although principals have some autonomy over their individual schools, they operate within a very tightly controlled environment. Legislative, policy and administrative requirements narrow their sphere of control to low level managerial decisions and restrict their ability to be creative, transformational leaders. Principals operating in this performative culture are encouraged to place value on measurable outcomes over the holistic education of the child. Guidelines and templates are welcomed, as they reduce the workload of the principal. Improvements in measurable outcomes and targets give the school a sense of success. In light of the significant increase in legislative requirements and the need to demonstrate compliance with regulations and adherence to professional norms, the reliance on voluntary boards of management need to be reconsidered. The effective leadership and management of schools should not be left to the goodwill of untrained volunteers. Principals need access

to a range of professionals in the fields of law, finance and construction, which is often unavailable on voluntary boards.

- The workload of the principal

The past two decades have witnessed the role of the principal evolving in size and complexity with no sign of the demands on the principal easing. The multidimensionality of the role is clear, with principals working across multiple domains, such as administrative, pedagogical, managerial and leadership, simultaneously, the competing demands of which are proving too difficult to juggle for one person. Although exacerbated by COVID-19, the workload of the principal was already reaching critical levels and looks likely to continue to grow. The Department of Education should work with principal bodies, such as the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and the National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) to create a realistic role descriptor, to address issues of role ambiguity, role conflict and role strain.

Although Department of Education circulars and the LAOS (2016) document envisage the principal as an instructional leader, leading the teaching and learning in school, the reality of the situation is far removed from this. Principals are inundated with managerial and administrative tasks, which consume most of their time, leaving very little time for learner focused leading. If principals are to play active roles in the promotion and development of curricular activities and the planning and implementation of the curriculum within their individual schools, then the DES needs to address the issue of their workload. Secretarial support should be made available to all schools, regardless of size. This would alleviate some of the administrative burden on principals.

Although the national policy context espouses distributed leadership, this is not practical in most cases. Teaching principals in smaller schools do not have enough teacher colleagues to distribute leadership. Although promotions to middle leadership roles have resumed, in-school management teams have not reached sufficient levels to meet the demands of schools. There is also uncertainty regarding the amount of responsibility that can be delegated to posts of responsibility holders. Currently principals are delegating managerial tasks rather than sharing leadership responsibilities. The capacity for distributed leadership needs to be developed, with the number of posts of responsibility reflecting the demands made on staff, as opposed to student numbers. Posts of responsibility should have clearly defined boundaries, with staff adequately compensated for the role. A culture of shared leadership needs to be promoted with adequate training and support provided. for senior and middle leadership in how to share leadership.

- The personal and professional sustainability of the role

The expansion and intensification of the role is leading to role overload, role strain and role stress, as principals attempt to manage the competing facets of the role, simultaneously. This is impacting on well-being, with many principals reporting their physical or mental health negatively affected by their role. This is contributing to difficulties in recruiting and retaining principals, as most principals believe the role is not sustainable in its current form. The Department of Education needs to urgently evaluate the supports currently in place for principals and develop additional initiatives to specifically address principal well-being. Consultations with principals from different school contexts will allow the DES to identify key areas for support. Training and preparation courses should address the skills needed for

the role, in addition to school context specific support. Training and preparation courses for principals should focus on the skills needed to be sustainable leaders. More research is recommended in the area of shadowing, mentoring and coaching for leadership development.

### **8.3 Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of primary school principals in Ireland. It presented the lived experiences of 31 principals of varying ages and levels of experience, working in a variety of contexts. It investigated the challenges they face and the supports they avail of, as they navigate their schools through the changing social, cultural and political environment. It explored how principals cope and the impact this role has on their physical, mental and emotional well-being.





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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Policy analysis of official policy texts

<b>Appendix 1: Policy analysis of official policy texts</b>					
<b>Title</b>	<b>Document production and location</b>	<b>Authorship and audience</b>	<b>Policy Context</b>	<b>Policy Text</b>	<b>Policy Consequences for principals</b>
Public Service Agreement 2010-2014  (Croke Park)	Published June 2010	Published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform  For the general public and all public service employees	The purpose was to outline changes to public sector employees as a result of the economic recession.  Restructuring and re-organising public services to reduce the deficit and restore public finances	Key elements: Additional time of one hour a week for teachers/principals  Flexible deployment of SNAs within schools (at the discretion of principals/BOMs)	Additional hours for teachers/ principals without additional pay.  Additional hours cannot be used for extra- curricular activities
Circular 0008/2011	Published January 2011	Published by the DES  For managerial authorities and teachers	The purpose of the document is to outline the changes required as a result of the Public Service Agreement and how they should be implemented.	Key elements: Additional time of one hour a week for teacher/principals  Reduce the need for early school closures and 'protect' class contact time	Principals/BOM may decide how the 36 hours are implemented.  Individual schools can assign hours differently.  Principals/BOM are responsible and accountable for their implementation and must

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				<p>Supervision before/after school</p> <p>Publish hours to parents</p> <p>Consultation at school level to the use of the hours but this is not expanded upon. How much of a 'consensus' should there be?</p> <p>The document states the core objective is for public services to contribute to the 'return of economic growth and prosperity'.</p> <p>School management may reassign Post holder duties</p>	publish details of their usage for parents to view.
Circular 0052/2014	<p>Part of the Public Service Stability Agreement 2013-2016 (Haddington Road)</p> <p>Amendment to Circular 0008/2011</p>	<p>Published by the DES</p> <p>For managerial authorities and teachers</p>	<p>The purpose of the document is to alert managerial authorities and teachers to changes in the usage of CP hours as a result of negotiations between the DES, teacher unions and school management bodies.</p>	<p>Key elements: 5 of the 36 Croke Park hours can be used for planning and development work on other than a whole-school basis, <b>if approved</b> by management.</p>	<p>Principals/BOM can allocate up to 5 hours for individual teacher planning, development work.</p> <p>All schools can implement this element differently. It is the decision of the principal/BOM.</p>

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Title	Document production and location	Authorship and audience	Policy Context	Policy Text	Policy Consequences for principals
				<p>The use will be subject to verification and accountability to management.</p> <p>It does not state if management is the principal or BOM. It does state how these hours will be recorded or monitored.</p>	
Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System 2015	A Research Paper  December 2015	Published by the DES to follow up on the <i>Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System Consultation Paper</i> in November 2015	The purpose of this document is to review current research on school autonomy and provide options for advancing school autonomy	<p>The individual context of the school was acknowledged.</p> <p>It acknowledges the depletion in middle management.</p> <p>Acknowledges a great number of experienced school leaders left the profession in recent years and a lack of State investment in leadership training</p> <p>Increased autonomy will be linked with increased accountability</p>	<p>The following changes envisaged were</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- more control over staffing, budget,</li> <li>-published 5-year plans.</li> <li>-SSE</li> <li>-Published annual reports</li> </ul> <p>Programme for Government 2011-2016 suggested;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• parents have a greater input into patronage</li> <li>• Schools greater autonomy around staffing</li> </ul>

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				<p>Autonomy dimensions adopted are</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governance, management and ethos</li> <li>• Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment</li> <li>• Budget and funding</li> </ul> <p>‘Failing schools’ are mentioned. They can be improved with greater curricular flexibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principals/ BOMs increased freedom round staffing</li> <li>• Increasing the parent reps on BOMs</li> <li>• Parental trigger ballots</li> <li>• Parent and Student Charter</li> </ul> <p>Need to develop school leaders as ‘instructional leaders’.</p>
The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020	Produced following an apparent drop in Ireland’s PISA results	<p>Published by the DES after ‘national consultation process’</p> <p>For public, education staff, parents, business/ industry representatives</p>	<p>The purpose of the document is to outline the national priorities for improving literacy and numeracy.</p> <p>Targets are set by the DES for the improvement of literacy and numeracy. (some linked to standardised testing)</p>	<p>The definitions of literacy and numeracy are expanded to include digital media and broadcast media.</p> <p>Low literacy/numeracy levels are linked to early school leaving, unemployment, poor mental and physical health.</p> <p>Ruairi Quinn acknowledges the difficulty in reaching the</p>	<p>BEd. and PME courses were extended- extended placements in primary schools.</p> <p>Principals and deputy principals must implement school self-evaluation in the area of literacy/numeracy</p> <p>Changes to the time allocation of subjects; discretion of the school.</p> <p>New Language Curriculum</p>

Appendix 1: Policy analysis of official policy texts					
Title	Document production and location	Authorship and audience	Policy Context	Policy Text	Policy Consequences for principals
				targets set when reducing public expenditure but will ensure 'we get the very best outcomes from existing financial and human resources'	Reduction in EAL specific teachers  Mandatory testing in 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 4 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> class  Reporting of results to parents and BOM and DES
Circular 0056/2011	Initial steps in the implementation of The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy	Published by the DES in 2011.  For BOMs, principals and teachers in primary schools.	The purpose of this circular is to draw educators' attention to the strategy and lists 5 immediate actions to be taken	Links literacy and numeracy will a 'fulfilling employment' and to 'a satisfying and rewarding life'  Identifies the need to 'build the capacity of school leaders'	National CPD for principals is available on voluntary basis  Principals should encourage NQTs to attend induction courses
Complaints About Registered Teachers	Information for Employers	Published by the Teaching Council in July 2016 for BOM and Teachers.	The purpose of this document is to advise employers as to when to involve the TC in a complaint.	TC become involved after the school's disciplinary procedure (Education Act 1998) has been exhausted or if there is a Child Protection issue. (issues from July 2016)	Schools may be asked to produce any documentation including internal disciplinary files.  A representative of the school may be required to give evidence as a witness at a Fitness to Teach hearing.  Documentation and/or witnesses can be legal compelled to appear.

Appendix 1: Policy analysis of official policy texts					
Title	Document production and location	Authorship and audience	Policy Context	Policy Text	Policy Consequences for principals
Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers 2 <sup>nd</sup> edition	Published by the Teaching Council July 2016	Published by the TC for teachers and for the 'wider public to inform their understanding and expectations of the teaching profession'.  Used as part of Fitness to Teach.	TC was established to reflect 'wider trends in professional standards' and mirror other countries.  'Teaching and learning are vital for social and economic progress'	The document outlines the standards which teachers are expected to adhere to.  Core Values: Respect, Care, Integrity and Trust.  The Council is mindful of the rights of pupils and the rights of parents.	Codes of Professional Conduct address professional  Values and Relationships  Integrity  Conduct  Practice  Collegiality and Collaboration
Teaching Council Acts 2001 to 2015	Enactment of Section 47 Fitness to Teach	Published by the Teaching Council in 2001. Section 47 enacted 2019.  For BOMs, principals and teachers and in primary schools and the general public.	The purpose of this section (47) and the guidelines published by the TC (22/03/2019) is to assist the Council in undertaking it's 'obligation to protect the public'	In the Context of Section 42 (1) matters relating to the following is considered <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• criminal offenses/ allegations</li> <li>• health problems</li> <li>• poor professional performance</li> <li>• 'whether public confidence in the profession is likely to be seriously damaged'</li> </ul>	TC can apply to the High Court for an order to suspend a teacher's registration pending investigation.  Sanctions can include advice, admonishment, censure, suspension or removal.



Appendix 1: Policy analysis of official policy texts					
Title	Document production and location	Authorship and audience	Policy Context	Policy Text	Policy Consequences for principals
Droichead: An integrated induction framework for newly qualified teachers	Published by the Teaching Council in March 2016	Published by the TC for NQTs and school staff.	The Document relates to the procedures and criteria for the completion of Droichead.	Principal is part of the PST	<p>PST must be established and trained by NIPT</p> <p>Professional conversations must take place.</p> <p>Observations must be arranged.</p> <p>PST makes a recommendation regarding the NQT's Droichead status</p>
Droichead: The Integrated Professional Induction Framework	Published by the Teaching Council in March 2017	Published by the TC for NQTs and school staff.	The Document relates to the procedures and criteria for the completion of Droichead.	<p>Recognises the extended school placements in the ITE.</p> <p>It is a non-evaluative phase.</p> <p>Must have a School Based Induction Programme</p> <p>A joint declaration is made by the NQT and a colleague to state they have 'participated in the quality teaching and learning process'</p>	<p>PST must be established and trained by NIPT</p> <p>Professional conversations must take place.</p> <p>Observations must be arranged.</p> <p>Principal 'as a leader of learning' 'fosters a learning culture in which Droichead can flourish'.</p> <p>An 'informal review' process takes place before the formal NIPT level.</p>

Appendix 1: Policy analysis of official policy texts					
Title	Document production and location	Authorship and audience	Policy Context	Policy Text	Policy Consequences for principals
					PST records must be maintained in compliance with GDPR
Looking at our School 2016  A Quality Framework for Primary Schools	Published by the Inspectorate for teachers and school leaders.	Framework will 'inform the work of inspectors'  Replaces the 2003 Looking at Our School.  Written 'following extensive consultation' with students, teachers, parents, school leaders, management bodies and wider stakeholders.	This document provides a 'set of standards' for the dimensions of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teaching and learning</li> <li>leadership and management</li> </ul> Designed to support School Self-Evaluation and School Inspections by providing a picture of what 'good and very good practices' look like.	Two key areas which directly impact on pupils' learning experiences and outcomes are teaching and learning and leadership and management  Importance of career long CPD, reflection and collaboration  Schools are 'dynamic learning organisations'  'Schools should assume responsibility for the quality of the education they provide'  'External and internal evaluation as complementary contributors to school improvement'  The 2 dimensions are subdivided into domains.	School leadership is 'defined by its impact on learning'.  'to be led effectively, they must be managed effectively'.  The core work of a school is the teaching and learning. Leading and Managing serve this purpose.  School Context is important when engaging with the standards. The school has the flexibility to decide which statements best reflect their status.  Long-term impact of hiring decisions on teaching and learning is noted.

Appendix 1: Policy analysis of official policy texts					
Title	Document production and location	Authorship and audience	Policy Context	Policy Text	Policy Consequences for principals
				Contains a ‘transparent guide to support teachers and leaders in being accountable to their communities’	
Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017	Child Protection Procedures for Schools.	Published by the DES for Managerial Authorities.  To be read in conjunction with the Children First Act 2015 and Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children	Developed by DES following consultation with Tusla, school management, parents and teachers.  Outlines the statutory obligations for teachers and schools under the Children First Act 2015	School personnel with any child welfare concerns must bring the concern to the DLP. In addition, all teachers are mandated per Statutory obligation on schools to obtain a vetting disclosure from staff. Decisions on ‘suitability for such work rest at all times with the relevant school authorities’  Freedom of Information means reports are available.	Schools must have Safeguarding Statement displayed.  Statutory obligation on schools to ensure each child is safe from harm in school.  Report allegations to Tusla.  Adopt and implement Child Safeguarding statement. Adhere to procedures.  DLP must retain appropriate records.  Principal must report to BOM at every meeting.
Circular 0049/2018	Revised Procedures for the Suspension and Dismissal of Teachers and Principals	Published by the DES for Managerial Authorities.	This Circular relates to school procedures for professional competence and disciplinary matters.	There is no definitive list of circumstances which may result in disciplinary procedures.	The BOM and Principal have ‘a responsibility for the quality and effectiveness of education

Appendix 1: Policy analysis of official policy texts					
Title	Document production and location	Authorship and audience	Policy Context	Policy Text	Policy Consequences for principals
				Disciplinary procedures are needed to ensure 'discipline in maintained' but in a 'fair and consistent manner'. Management must 'maintain satisfactory standards'	<p>and the management of staff'.</p> <p>The principal should address allegations informally when possible.</p> <p>Professional Competency issues are addressed by the principal.</p> <p>Principal considers the nature of the complaint. The Principal decides if/when to advise the Chairperson. If the Board deems there is sufficient grounds, the Principal is responsible for devising an improvement plan.</p> <p>Complaints against principals (parental complaints) are directed to the BOM. Chairperson investigates.</p>
Circular 0044/2019	Published by the DES  Recruitment/Promotion and Leadership for Registered Teachers in Recognised Primary Schools	Published by the DES  For BOMs	Supersedes all previous employment circulars  This circular relates to employment and promotion of teachers	Teaching Council Registration is needed for employment except in some circumstances  BOMs should have 'appropriate and regular oversight of the teaching	<p>School Principal must record in writing to the BOM if/why an unregistered individual was appointed.</p> <p>Principal (except CNS) should report on staffing at</p>

Appendix 1: Policy analysis of official policy texts					
Title	Document production and location	Authorship and audience	Policy Context	Policy Text	Policy Consequences for principals
				<p>and learning in the school'</p> <p>BOM 'can and should play a key role in improving standards in the school'</p> <p>BOM ' have significant responsibilities in setting the direction of a school'</p>	each BOM (names and status of subs)
Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2019-2023	Published by the DES September 2019	For BOMs		<p>The BOM is accountable to the patron and the Minister.</p> <p>Training for Boards is advisable but not mandatory.</p> <p>The BOM should keep 'the public interest in the affairs of the school and accountability to students, parents and the community'.</p> <p>Acknowledges the individual context of each school differs.</p> <p>Boards should have regular oversight of</p>	<p>The principal, accountable to the BOM, is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school and staff issues.</p> <p>Principal must provide a report termly to the BOM on bullying.</p> <p>BOM and principal must sign off on the Annual Census Return. (Gardaí may become involved)</p> <p>School Principal and Chairperson will be the main source of information for other Board Members.</p>

Appendix 1: Policy analysis of official policy texts					
Title	Document production and location	Authorship and audience	Policy Context	Policy Text	Policy Consequences for principals
				<p>teaching and learning, setting literacy and numeracy targets, monitoring achievement of targets</p> <p>Advised to complete an annual checklist. (not mandatory)</p>	
<p>Circular No 0013/2017</p> <p>Special Education Teaching Allocation</p>	<p>Published by the DES</p> <p>2017</p>	<p>For BOMs and Principals</p>	<p>This circular replaces the General Allocation Model and English as Additional Language Support Scheme</p>	<p>A single unified allocation for special education support will be given to schools. A school's profile will determine the number of teachers and/or hours a school receives.</p>	<p>A greater level of autonomy for the school in selecting the children who will receive additional support.</p> <p>*frontloading SNA allocation delayed</p>

*Template adapted from Cardno, C. (2018) Policy document analysis: A practical educational leadership tool and a qualitative research method. Educational Administration Theory and Practice, 24 (4), 623-640*



## Appendix 2: Letter seeking participant

School Address

Dear Principal,

My name is Claire Geoghegan and I am a PhD candidate in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. I am conducting research exploring the role of the primary school principal in Ireland. My research is under the supervision of Dr John Walsh and Dr Maija Salokangas.

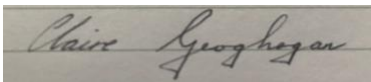
The data collection for this project includes an audio-recorded interview. It is anticipated that the interview will take no longer than 40 minutes and can take place at a time that suits you best.

I can foresee no risks being associated with taking part in this study. The information gathered will be treated with the utmost privacy and anonymity following the Trinity College Dublin ethical guidelines. No information about you or your school will be identified in the research. You are free to withdraw from the research at any stage before submission of the dissertation, without giving a reason and without prejudice. All information will be stored securely with access only available to the researcher and examiners. In relation to data storage, GDPR regulations will be followed. Data will be destroyed after a period of 10 years. As your school would be the site for data collection, a copy of the results will be made available to you, on request.

I am aware that this is a busy time of year for you and your school and I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this project.

If you have questions regarding this research, please contact me using the email address listed below. Finally, I would like to thank you for taking the time to consider my research. Without your generous participation, conducting such research would be impossible.

Kind Regards,



Claire Geoghegan

Email: [cgeoghe@tcd.ie](mailto:cgeoghe@tcd.ie)



Supervisors:

Dr Maija Salokangas: [salokam@tcd.ie](mailto:salokam@tcd.ie)

Dr John Walsh: [walshj8@tcd.ie](mailto:walshj8@tcd.ie)

### Appendix 3: Written consent

## The Multidimensional Role of the Primary School Principal in Ireland

### Consent to take part in research

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview at any stage during the dissertation process, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves participating in a semi-structured interview of approximately 40 minutes in length.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview that may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the dissertation, conference presentation, published papers etc..

- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in locked filing cabinets and in password protected files on a password protected desktop, until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board after which point it will be destroyed.
- I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant

\_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Participant Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

\_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Researcher Date

**Supervisors:**

Dr Maija Salokangas      [salokam@tcd.ie](mailto:salokam@tcd.ie)

Dr John Walsh              [walshj8@tcd.ie](mailto:walshj8@tcd.ie)

## **Appendix 4: Interview Schedule**

1. What do you feel are the different areas of your role?
2. Is the role what you expected it to be?
3. Did you have any training before you started in the role?
4. Do you feel supported in your role?
5. Since you became principal, what are the main challenges that have affected you?
6. Did you feel you have control over your own work?
7. Do you feel accountable for your work?
8. What do you feel are the main challenges you face?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add?



**Appendix 5 The Role of the Primary School Principal**

Please circle the appropriate answer

**Gender:**            Male                      Female                      Other

**Years of experience as principal of your current school:**

Less than 5            5-10 years            11-20 years            20 + years

**Were you principal of another school(s) before this?**

No                      Yes                      If yes, for how many years?

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Role:**

Administrative Principal

Teaching Principal

**DEIS:** Band 1    Band 2    Rural

**Non DEIS:** urban    rural

Denominational

Multi-denominational

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On a scale of 1- 6, measuring **importance** (with 1 being the most important), please rate the following aspects of your role as principal;

Number	Aspect of the Role
	Teaching and Learning
	Administration
	Internal Human Relations (behaviour management, staff, BOM)
	External Relationships (parents, wider community, DES, NEPS etc.)
	Managing the Physical Building
	Leading the School (vision, ethos)

On a scale of 1- 6, measuring **time allocation** (with 1 being the most time consuming aspect of your role), please rate the following;

Number	Aspect of the Role
	Teaching and Learning
	Administration
	Internal Human Relations (behaviour management, staff, BOM)
	External Relationships (parents, wider community, DES, NEPS etc.)
	Managing the Physical Building
	Leading the School (vision, ethos)

Anything else you would like to add?

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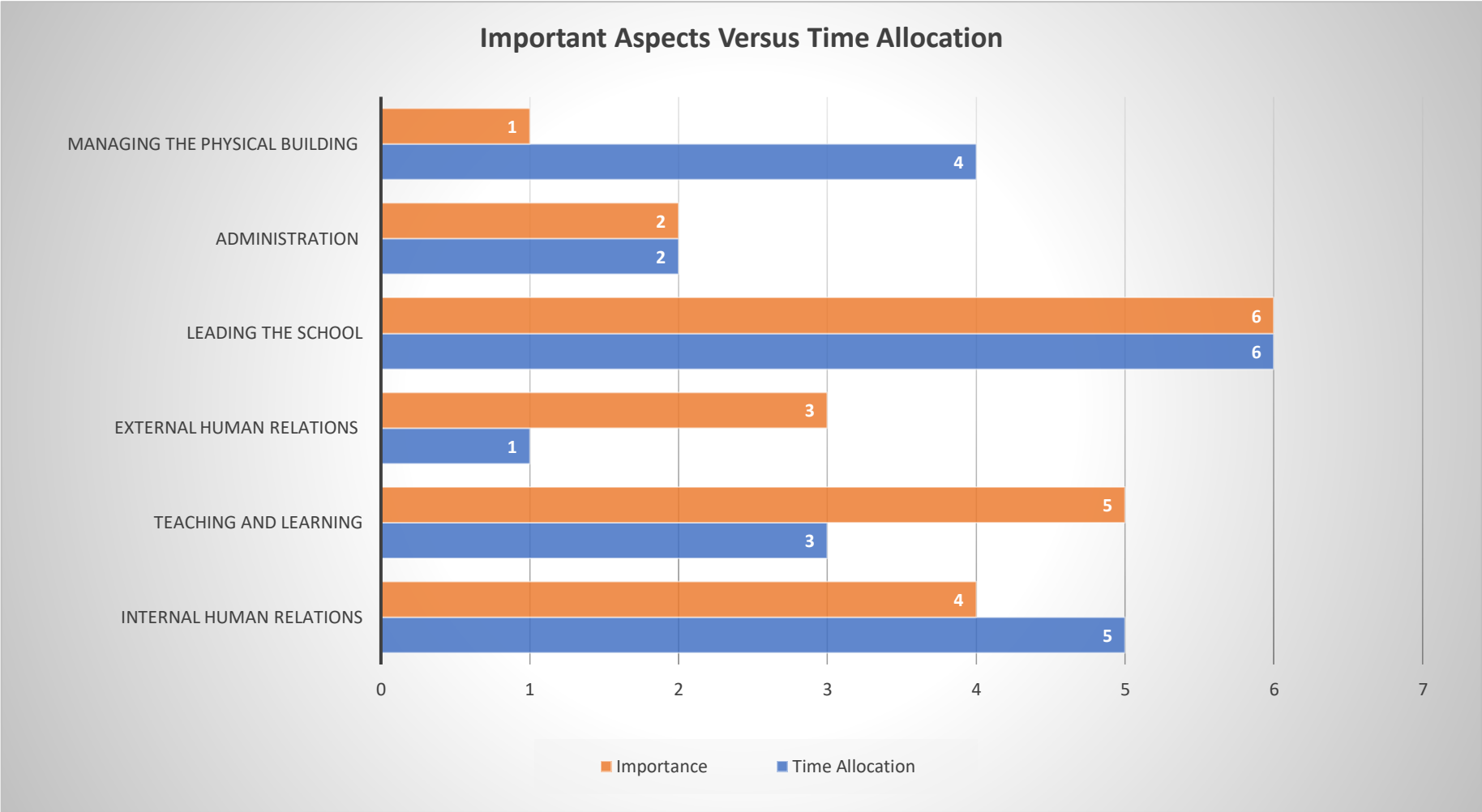
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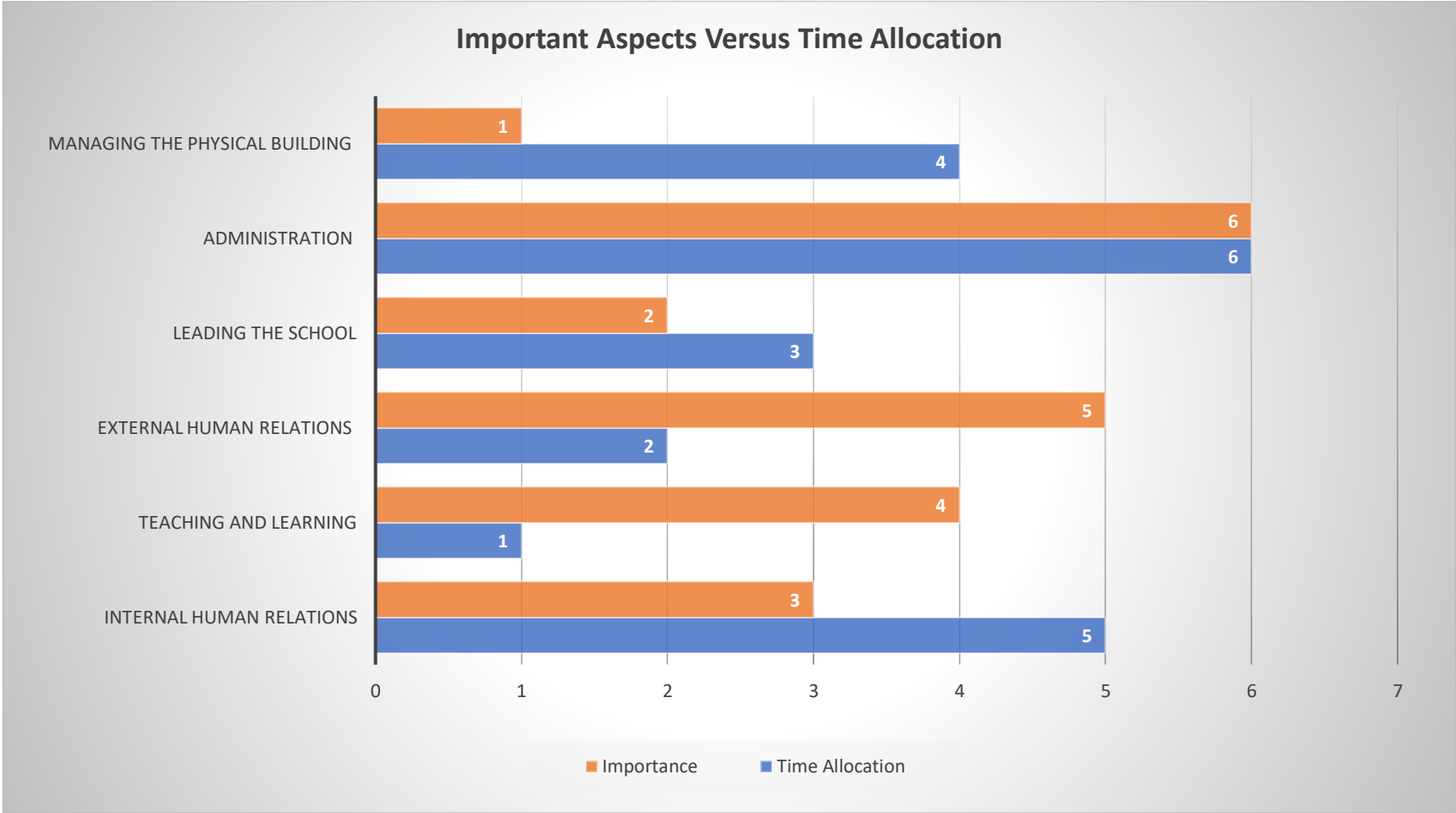
**Appendix 6 Results of Surveys**

Principal 1

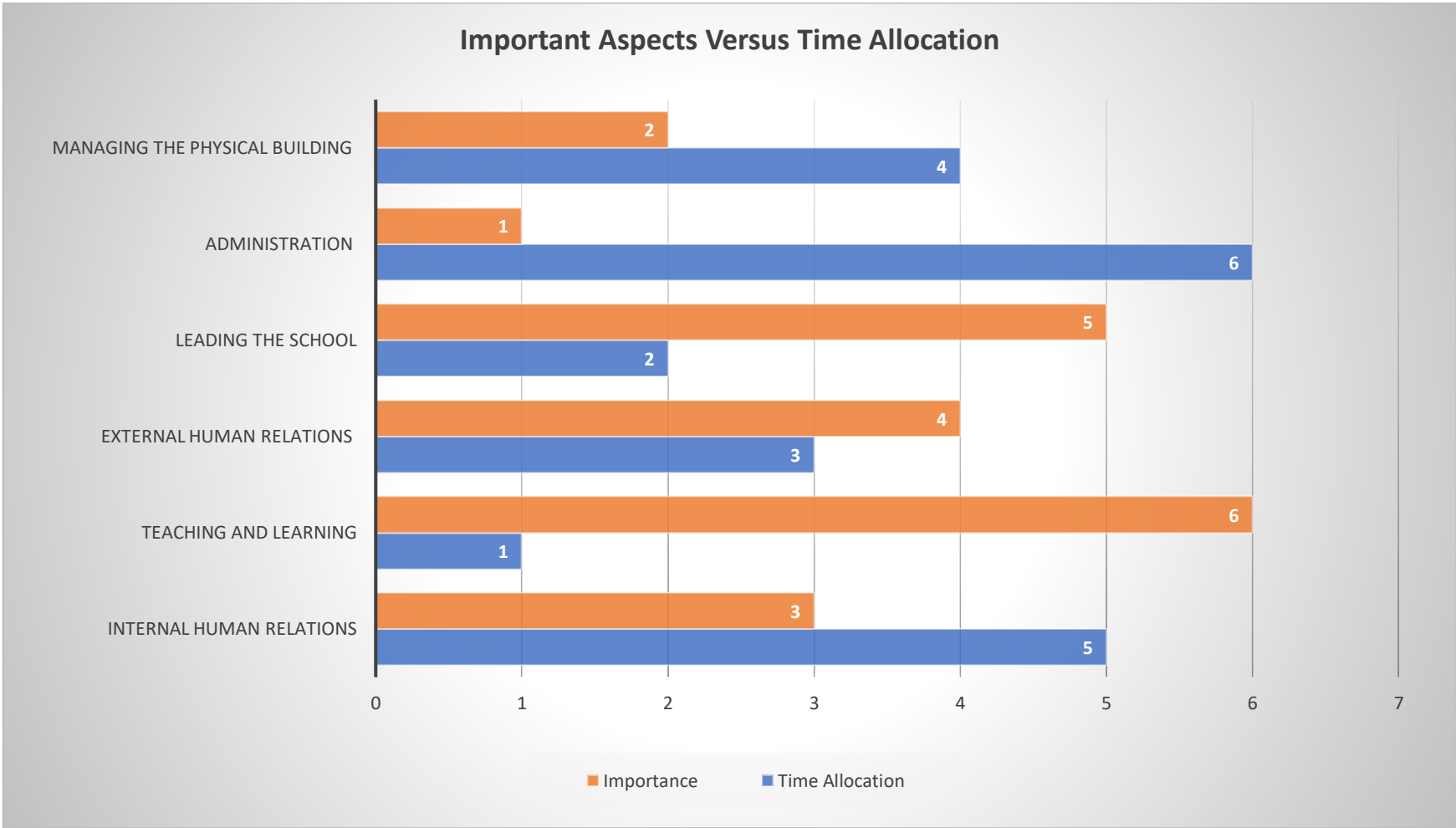




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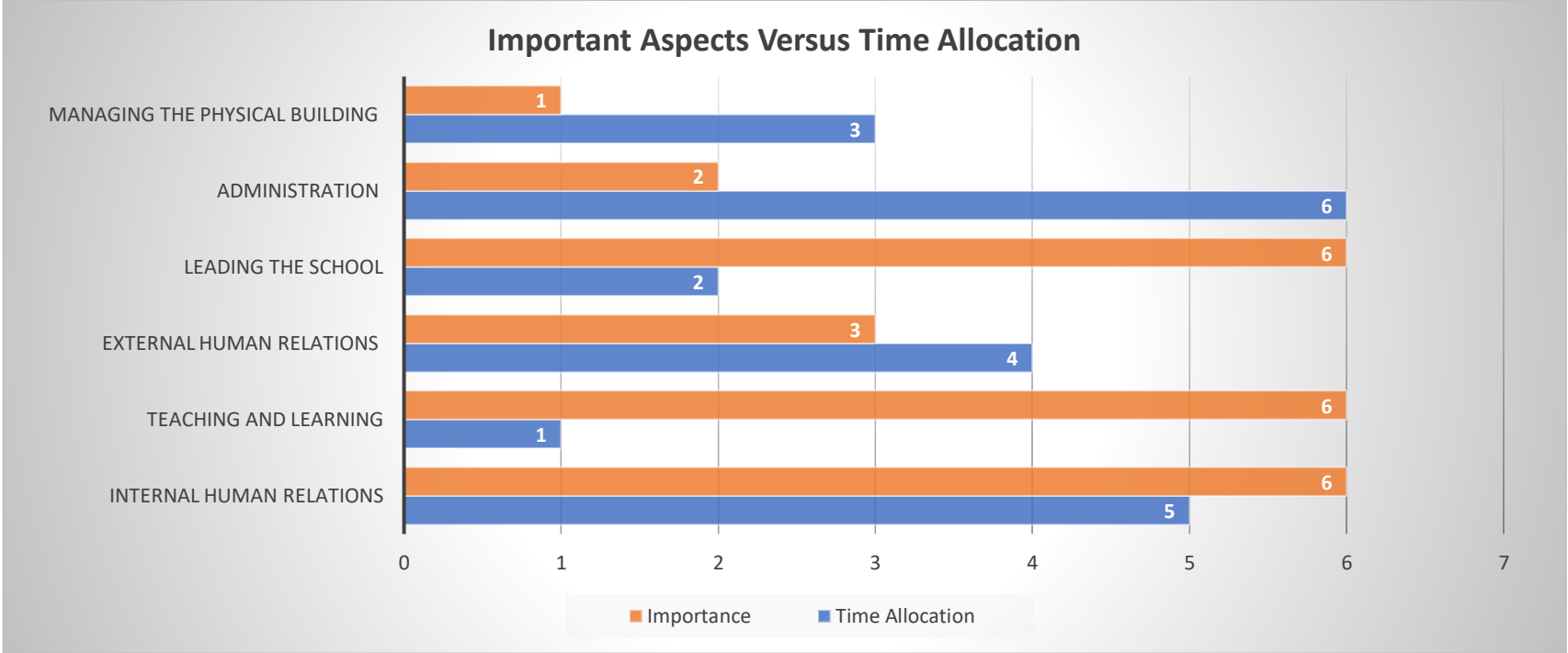


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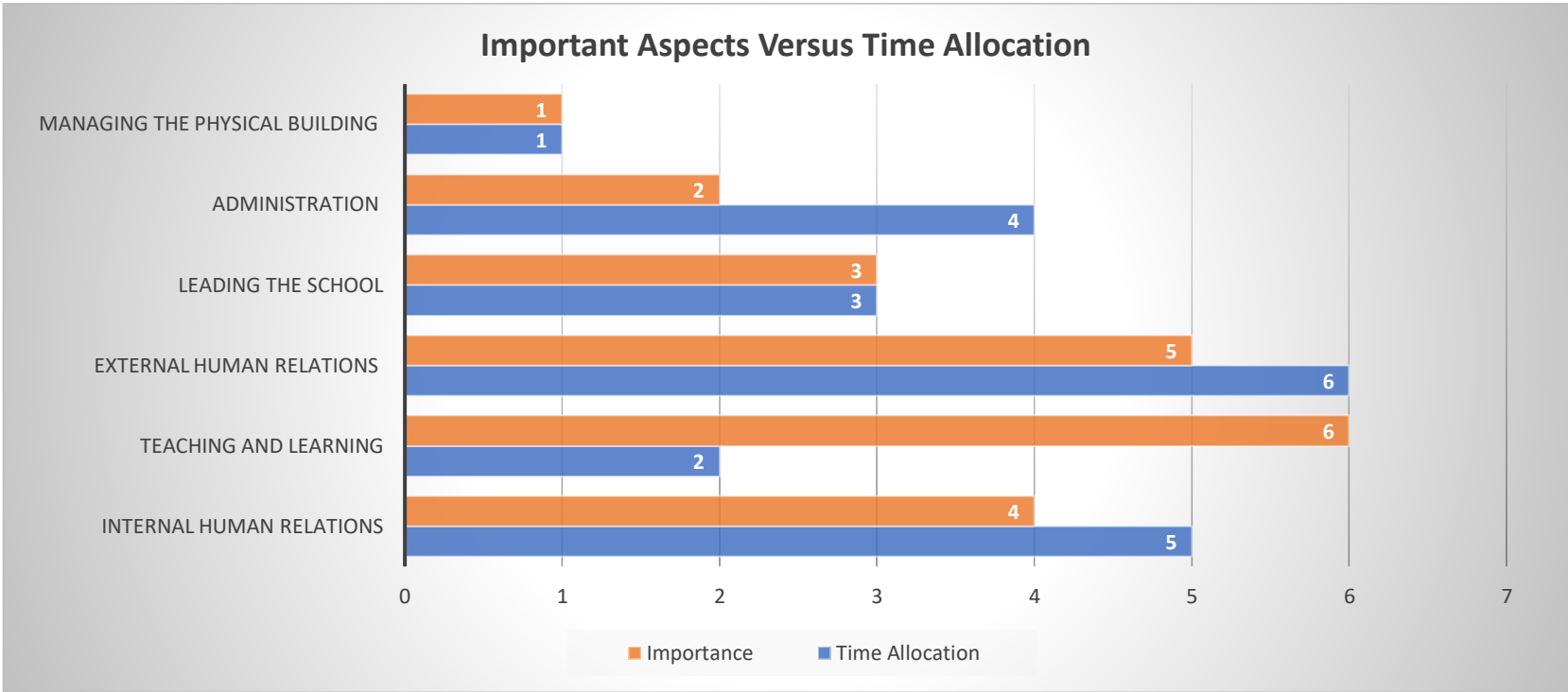


Principal 4 was unable to complete Important Aspects of the Role due to difficulty in choosing options. Comparison illustrates data submitted.

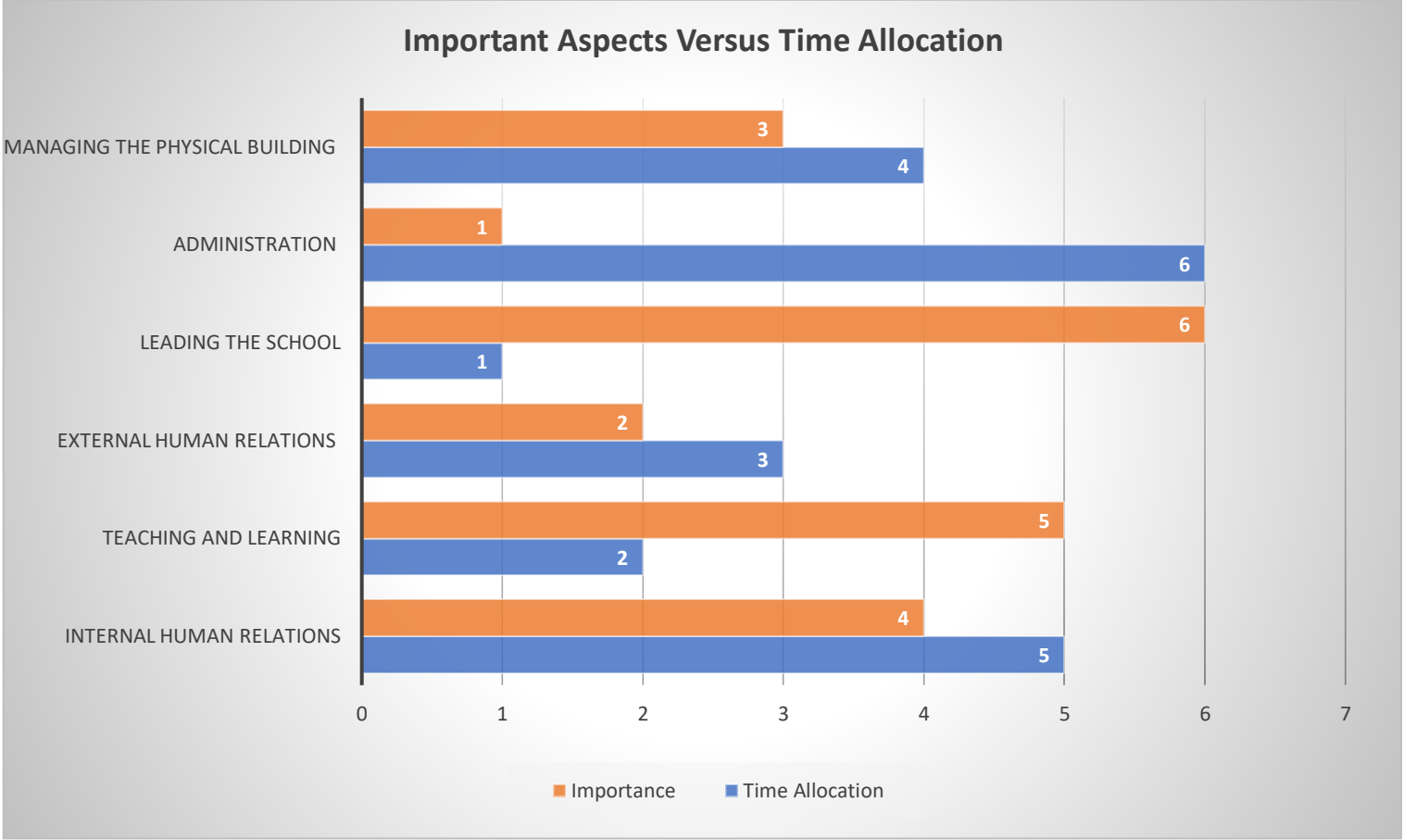
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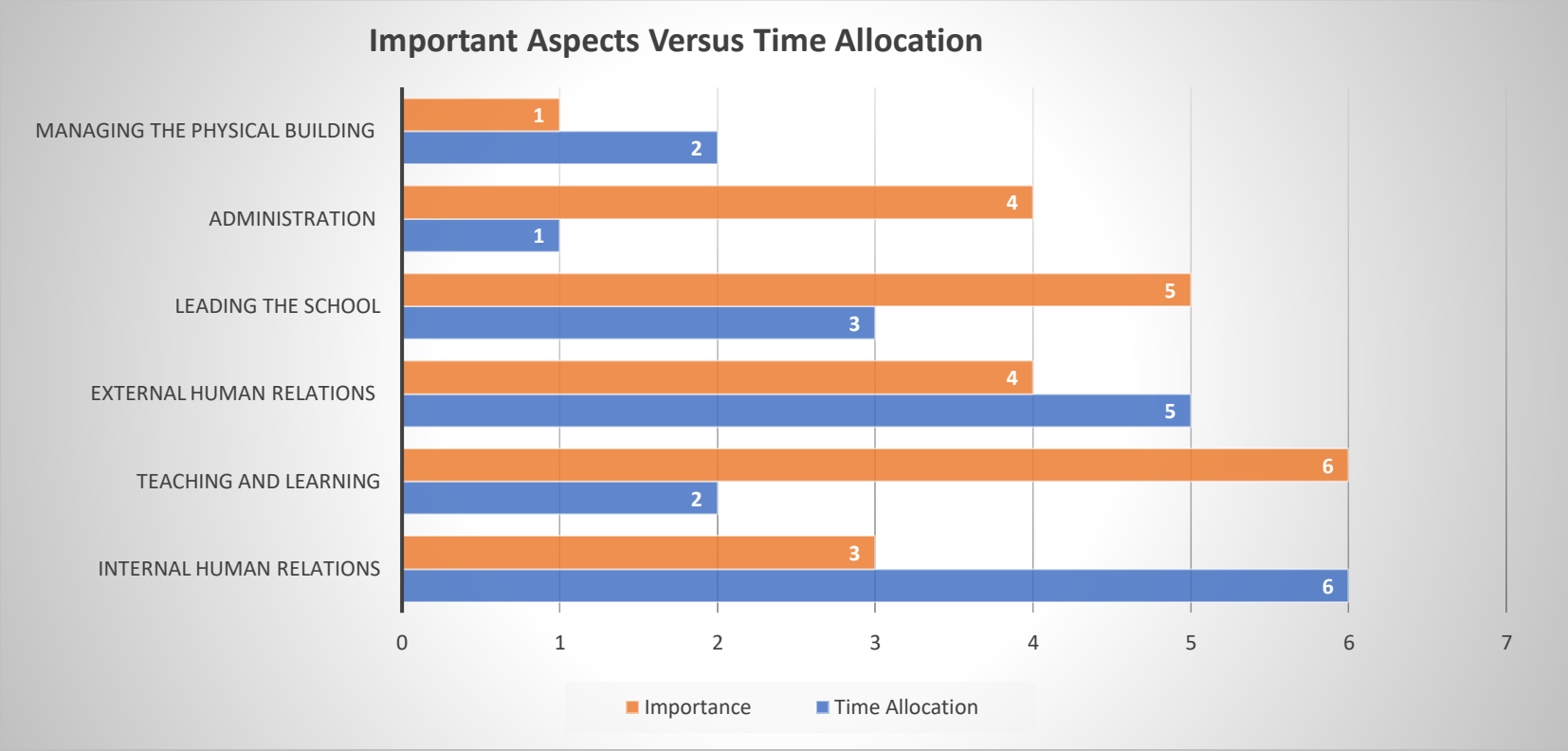
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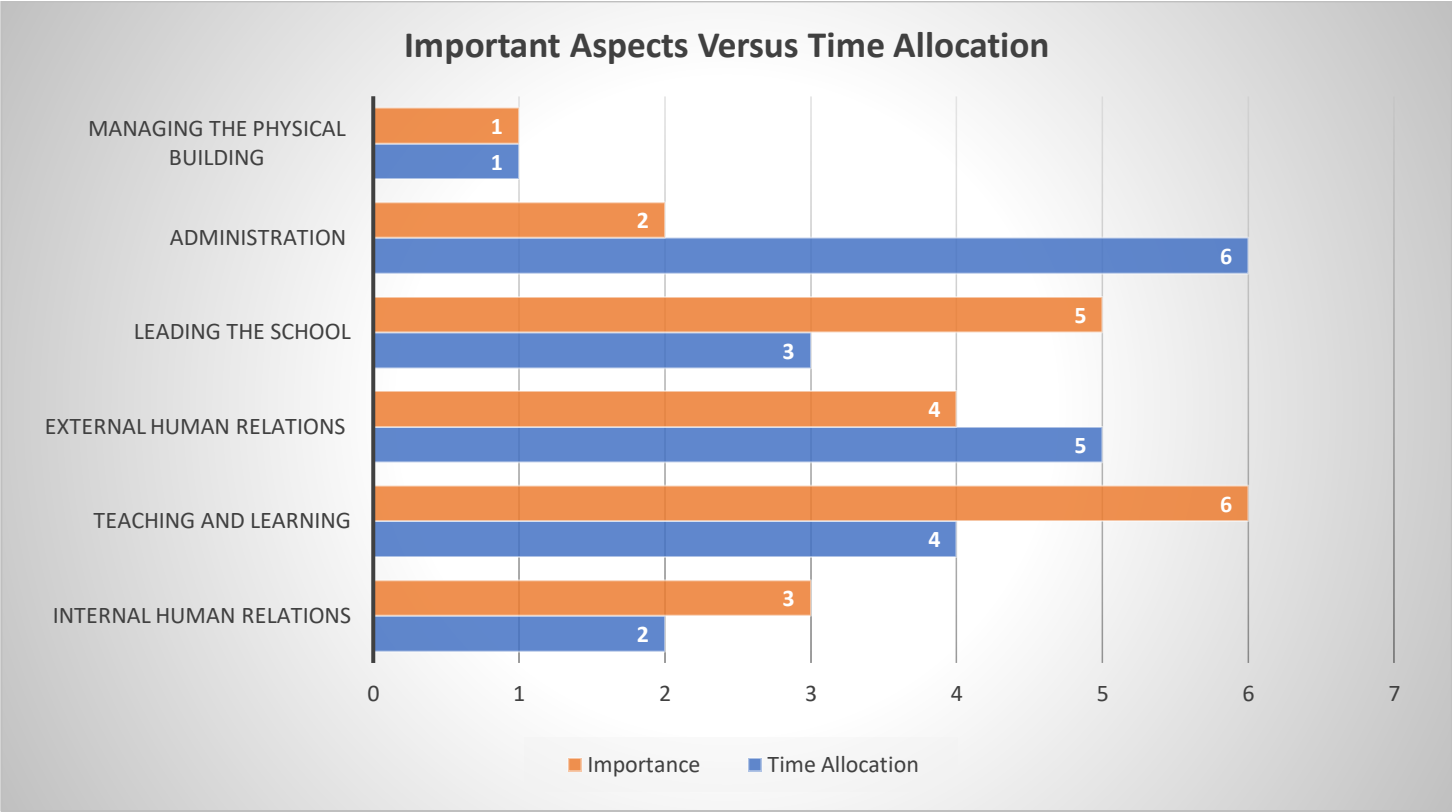
Principal 7



Principal 8

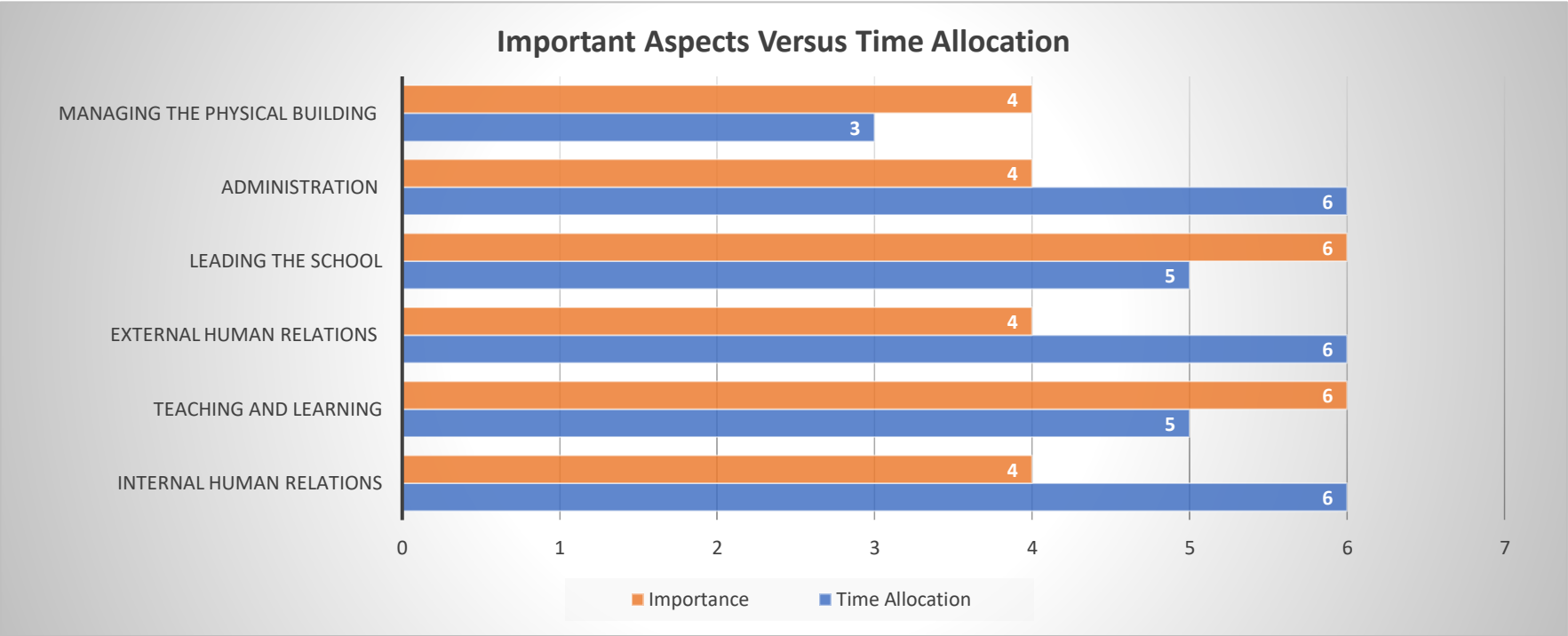


Principal 9



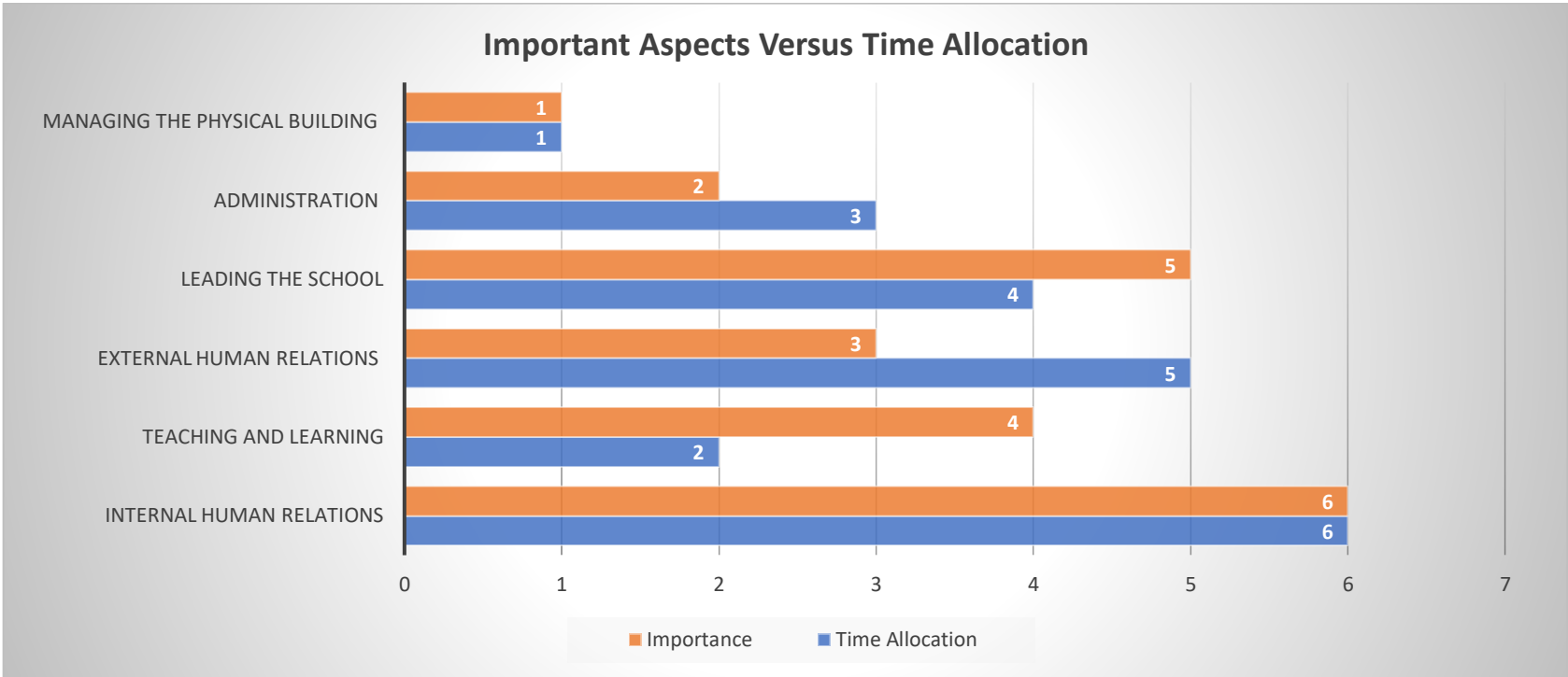
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Principal 10

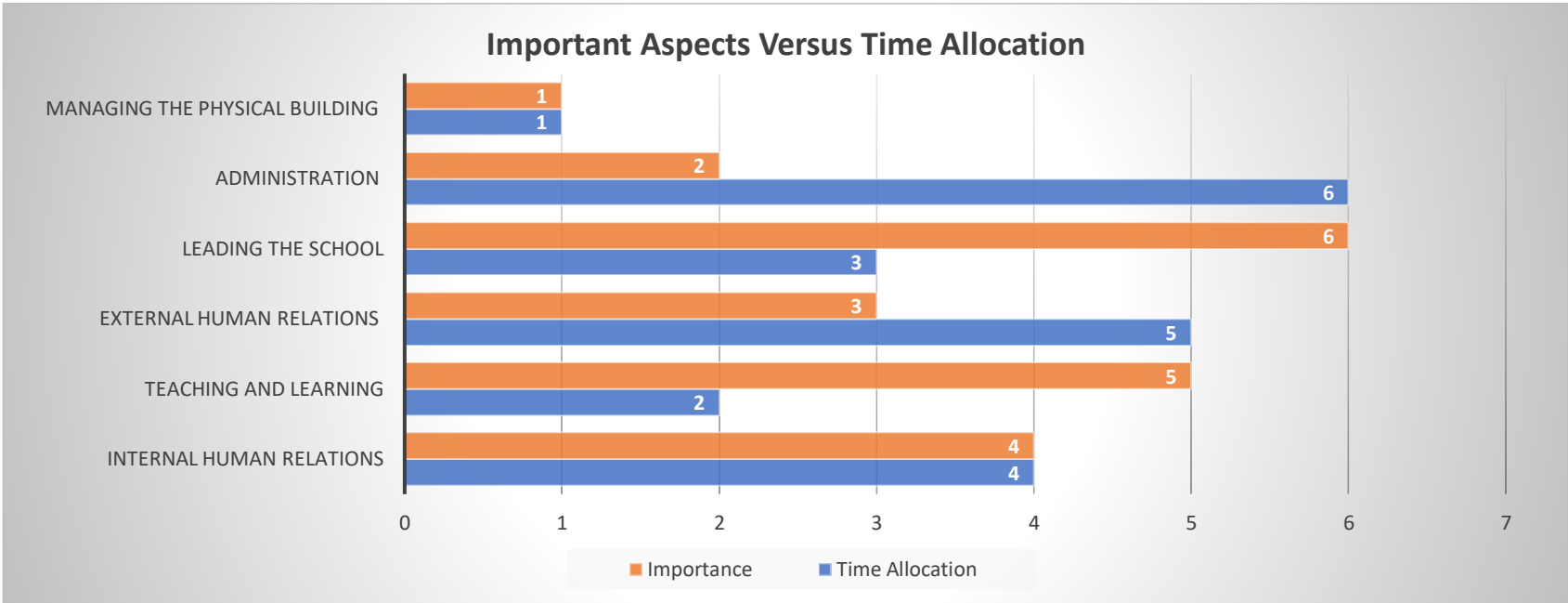




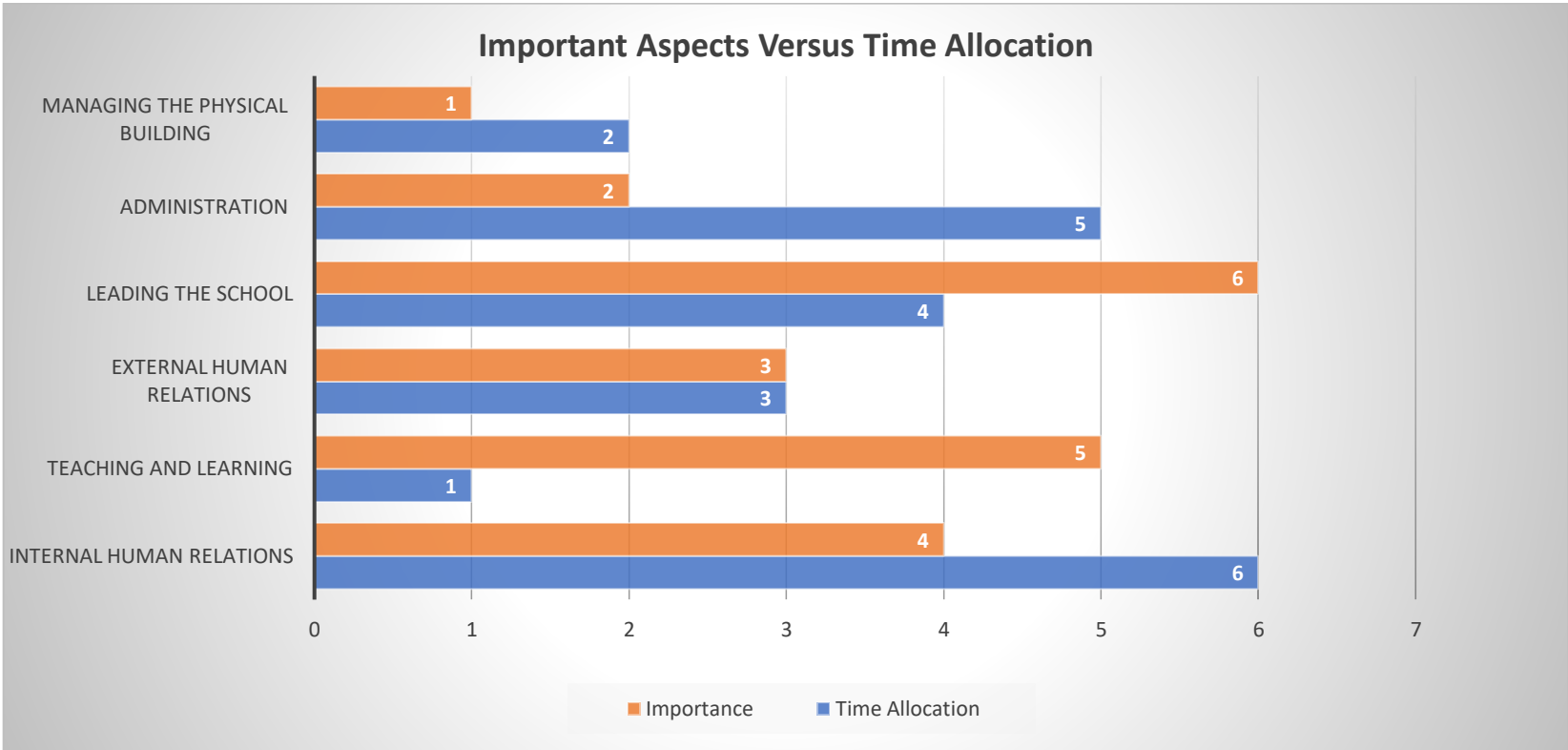
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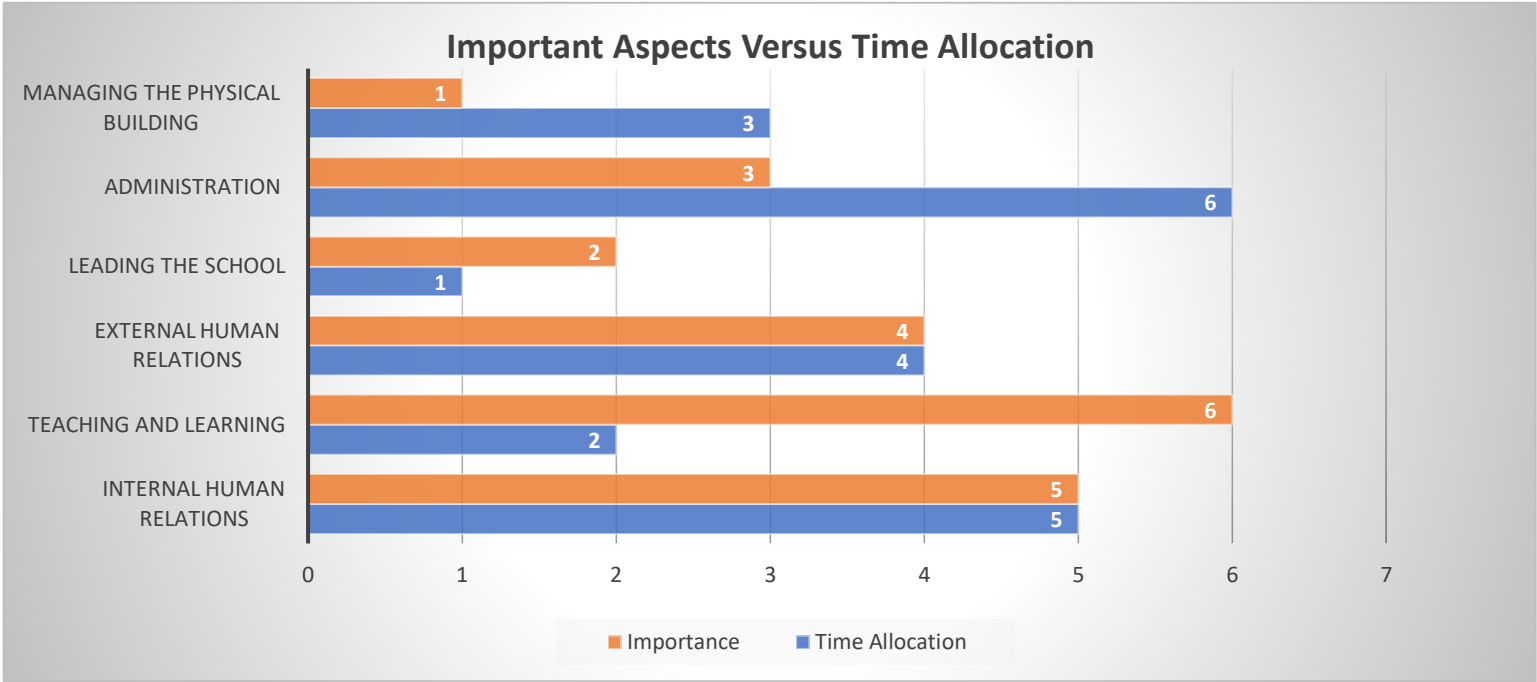
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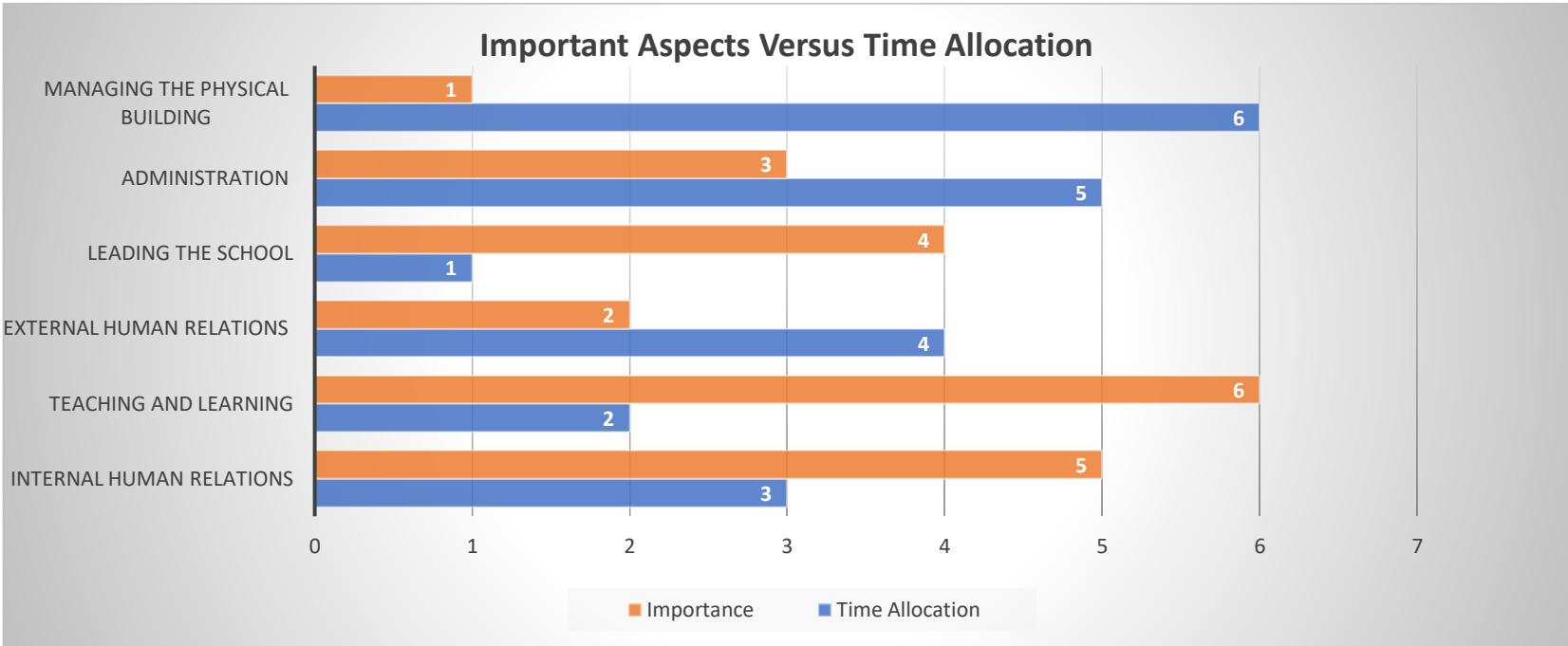
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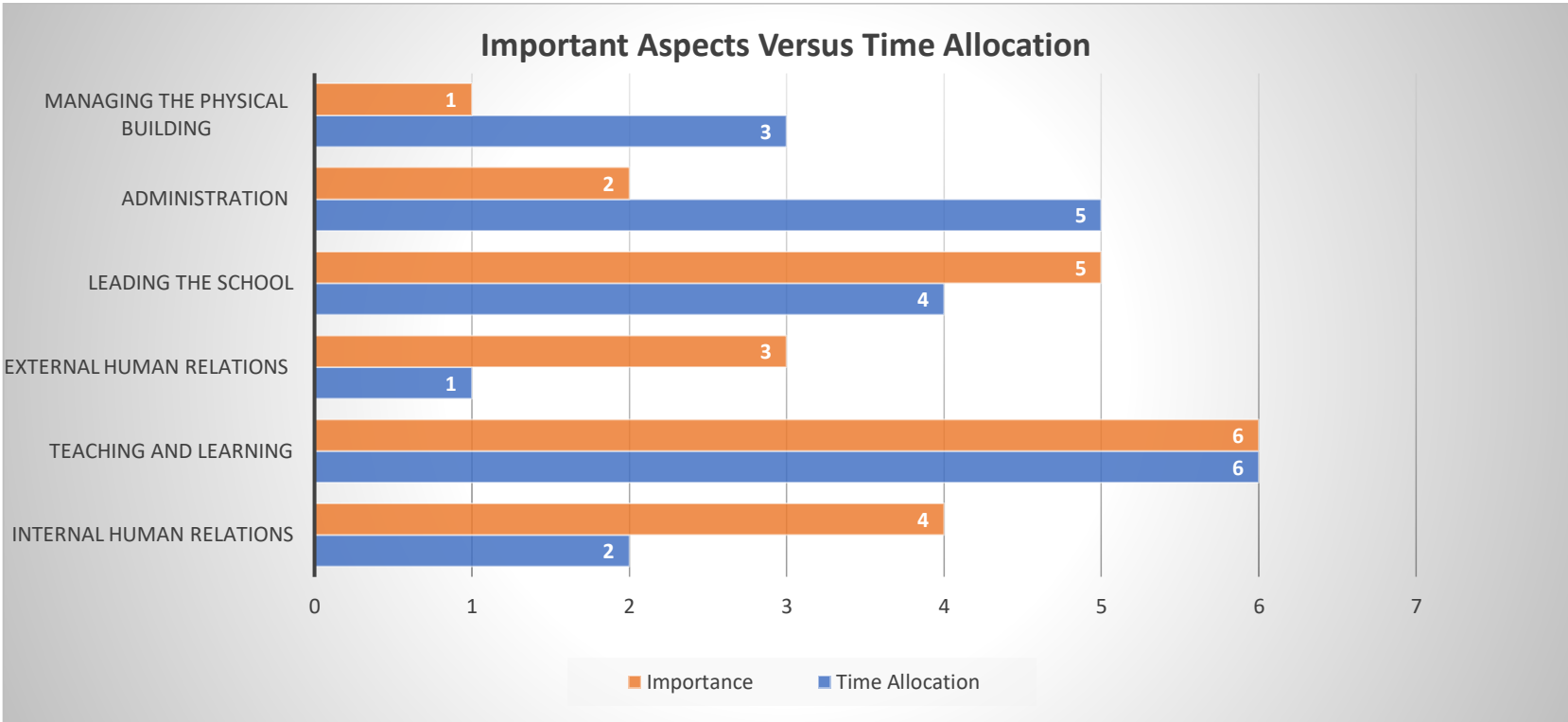
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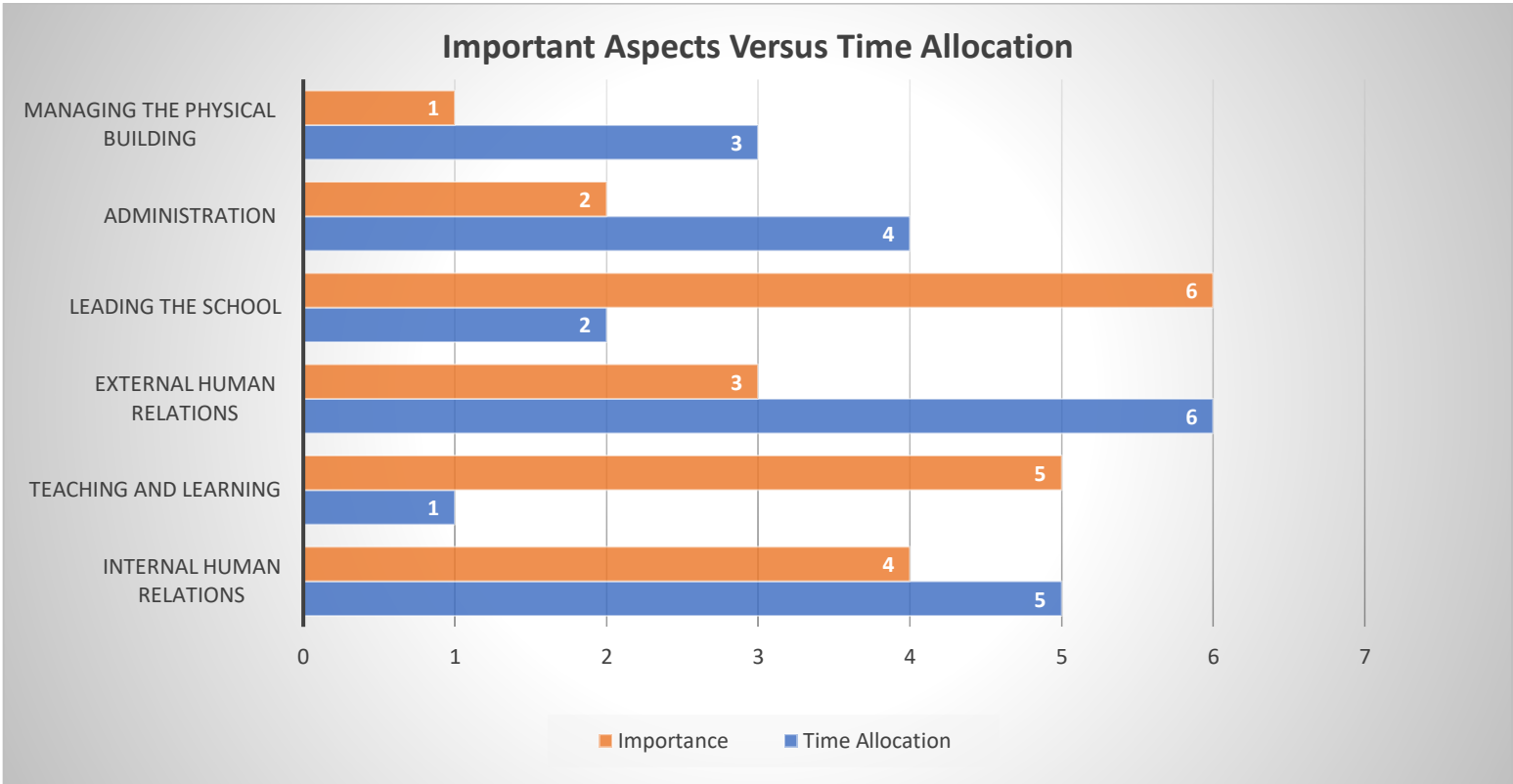
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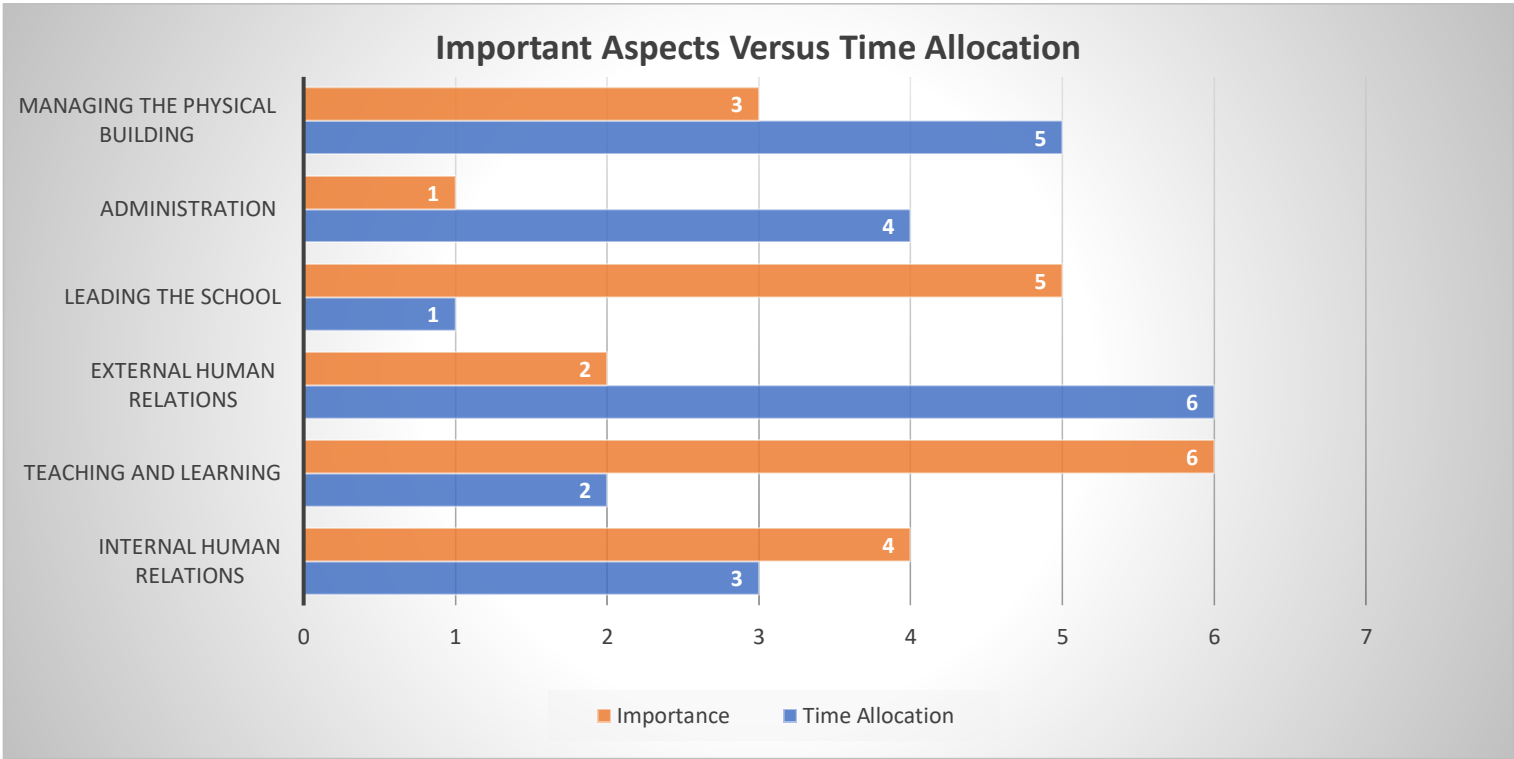
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Principal 17

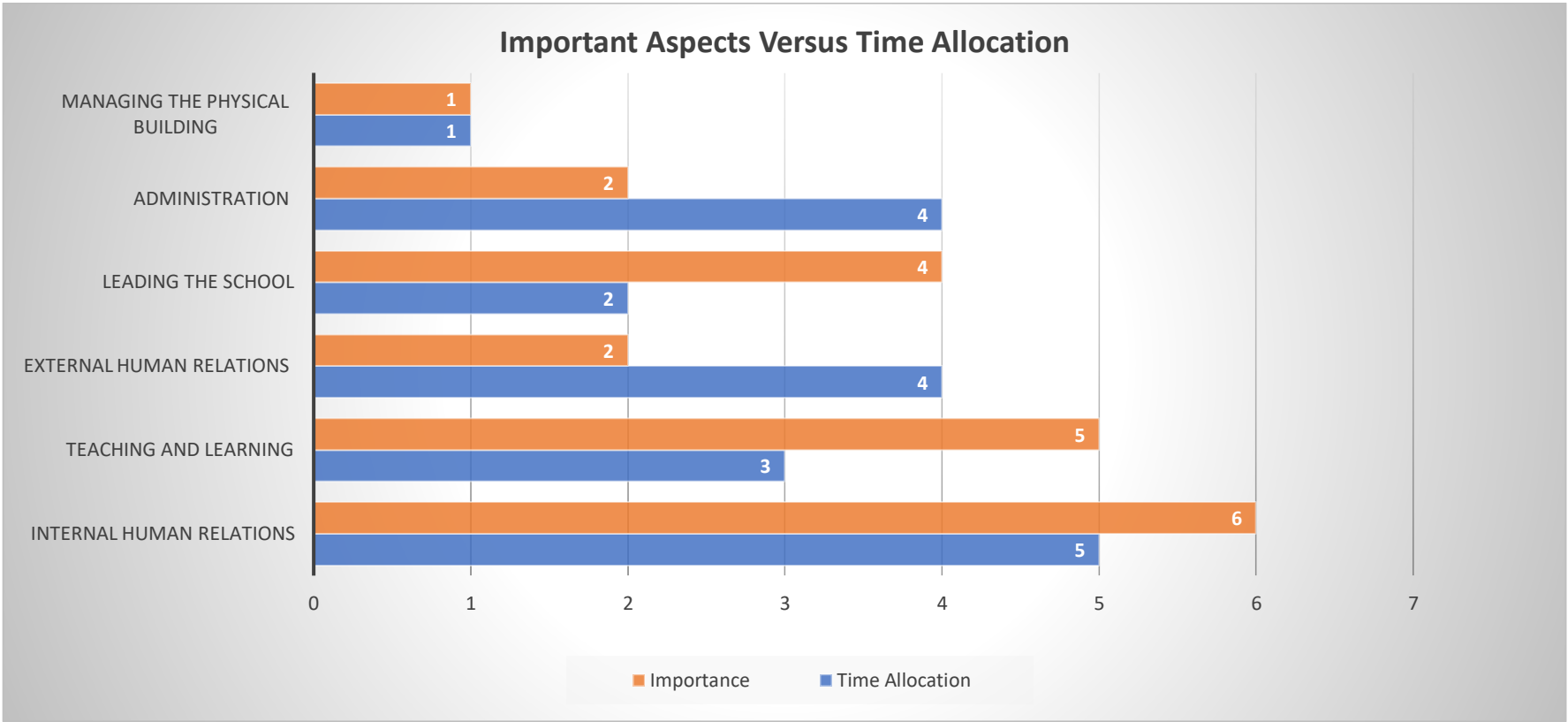


Principal 18

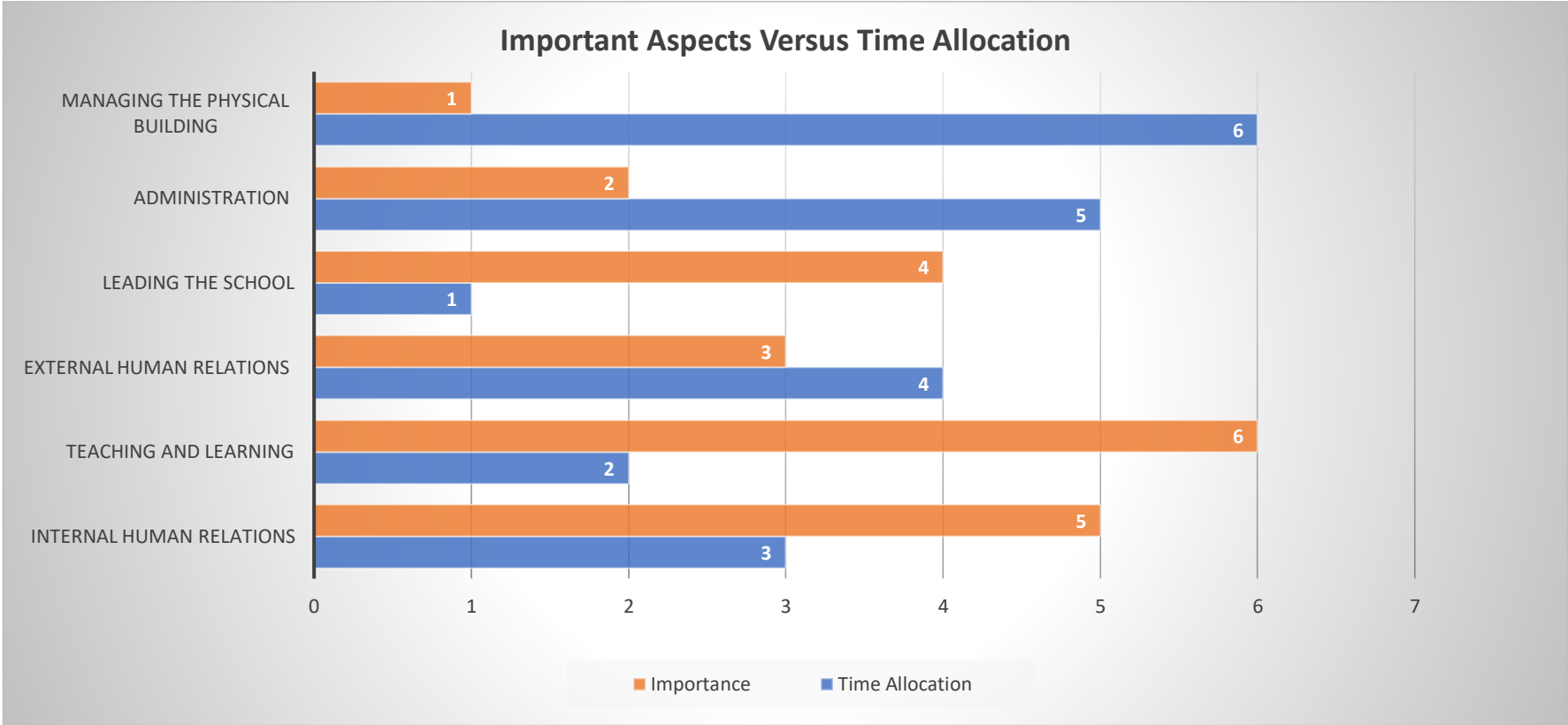




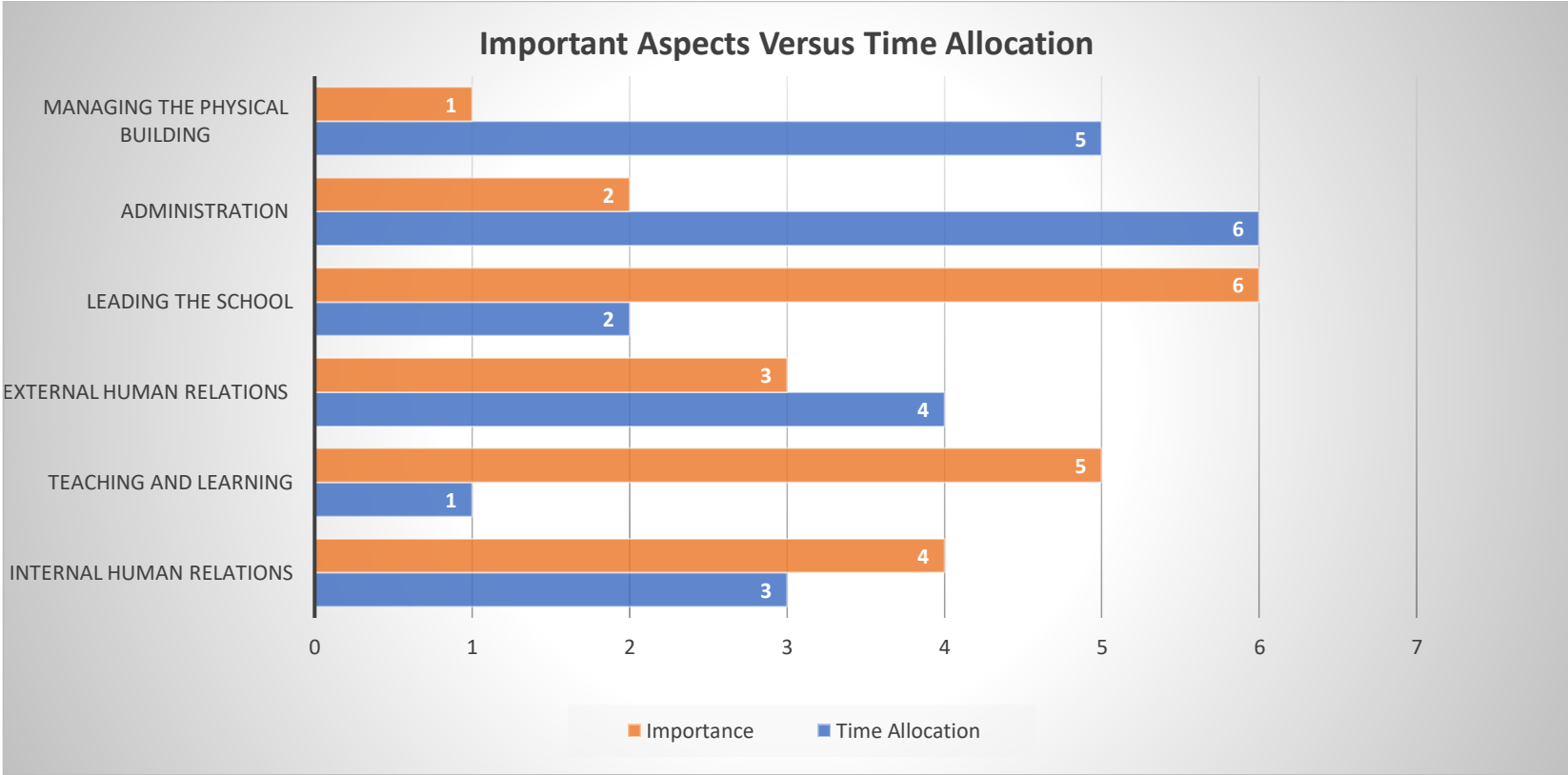
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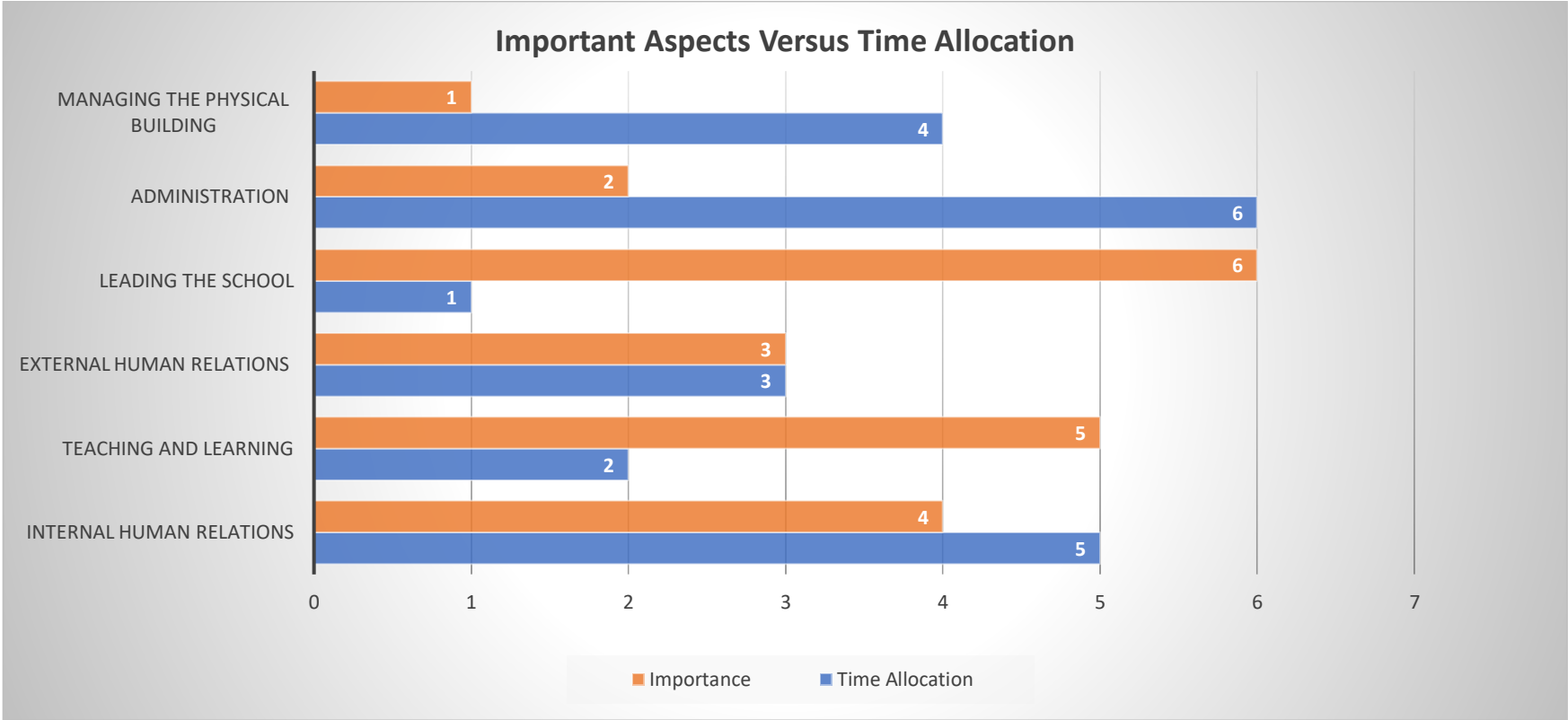
Principal 20



Principal 22



Principal 24



Principal 28

