Challenges to the sustainability of Irish post-primary school leadership: the role of distributed leadership

Niamh Hickey and Aishling Flaherty
School of Education, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland, and
Patricia Mannix McNamara
*School of Education, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland and
Faculty of Education, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences,
Bergen, Norway*

Abstract

Purpose – There is currently a shortage of applications for the role of principal. There are a range of factors contributing to this, one of which may be the considerable levels of stress and burnout reported by principals and deputy principals. Distributed leadership may offer some solutions to this challenge. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of distributed leadership from a role sustainability perspective of school principals and deputy principals.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper follows a qualitative interpretivist approach based upon 15 semi-structured interviews with principals and deputy principals working in Irish post-primary schools. Data were analysed via thematic analysis.

Findings – Results indicate challenges to the sustainability of the role of senior school leaders comprising administrative overload, policy proliferation and challenges due to the complexity and breadth of the role of these school leaders. It was reported that engagement with distributed leadership could aid the sustainability of participants in their roles and the importance of focusing on well-being practices was also highlighted.

Practical implications – Recommendations include the need to reconsider policy proliferation and the need to reconceptualise school leadership. Further consideration regarding how distributed leadership can aid the sustainability of the role of senior school leaders, without adversely contributing to the already busy role of schoolteachers is also recommended.

Originality/value – The findings of this study are valuable as they reflect previous findings relating to the current challenges to sustainable school leadership as well as highlight distributed leadership as a potential aid to mitigate against these challenges.

Keywords Distributed leadership, Sustainability, Post-primary schools, Well-being

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Stress and burnout have become increasingly prevalent in educational institutions and the COVID-19 pandemic both made explicit and added to the visibility of the challenges facing school principals. The pandemic has changed the very nature of the work of school principals with exceptionally high expectations placed on principals in a time of significantly fast-paced change (Pollock, 2020). The mental health and well-being of principals has been found to be negatively impacted by the pandemic. The constant pressure being placed on school leaders

has led to many leaders deciding to leave the job resulting in unfilled vacancies (Harris and Jones, 2022) and school systems are said to be "grappling with the tension between well-being and workload" (Netolicky, 2020, p. 393). The pandemic resulted in greater demands and expectations being placed on school leaders with "relentless pressures" and regular "sleepless nights" (Harris and Jones, 2020, p. 224). However, the increased pressures on school leaders has not abated post COVID-19 and has served to intensify principal burnout (Harris and Jones, 2022) as appears to be the current case in Ireland.

Background and context

In addition to the teacher shortage that is currently affecting Irish schools, there is an upward trend in attrition and early retirement of school principals. The challenges to recruiting and retaining principals are not new. For example, The Irish Primary Principal's Network (IPPN) released a report in 2006 discussing the challenges of recruiting and retaining principals (Irish Primary Principal's Network, 2006). Furthermore, a recent study conducted in the United Kingdom found that a quarter of teachers and leaders were considering leaving the profession in the next 12 months for reasons other than retirement (Adams *et al.*, 2023).

National principal associations, due to concerns that this may be linked to excessive workload, stress and burnout, commissioned a national study across Irish primary and post-primary sectors with principals and deputy principals. The results indicated that levels of stress and burnout among the Irish principals and deputy principals were much higher than a healthy working population (Arnold and Rahimi, 2022). Participants' self-rated health was reported to be lower than the healthy working population and their average stress and average burnout were reported to be higher than the healthy working population (Arnold and Rahimi, 2022). Further results indicated that 44% of participants are "highly" or "severely" burnt out. Participants also expressed experiencing significant work-life conflict and described the lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, the quantity of work and teacher shortages as the main stressors that they experience in their roles (Arnold and Rahimi, 2022). Many principals and deputy principals reported that their role in its current guise is unsustainable (Arnold and Rahimi, 2022) creating significant concerns for the well-being of Irish principals and deputy principals.

Distributed leadership is explicit and prominent in Irish educational research, policy and practice. Distributed leadership appears to be the most frequently researched theme in school leadership research since 2015 within this context (Murphy, 2019). Schooling in Ireland is traditionally hierarchical in nature (O'Donovan, 2017). Teachers and school leaders traditionally operated behind a "closed-door" with legendary autonomy (OECD, 1991). Since the 1990s, there has been a movement towards more shared leadership practices within Irish schools, but this has been quite slow (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). This is due in part to the substantial cultural shift required from the traditional view of leadership as residing with one individual, to the more complex notion of leadership as a shared practice.

Recent policy documents are underpinned by advocacy for a distributed leadership model in Irish post-primary schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2018; Department of Education, 2022; Department of Education and Skills, 2016). Yet, there is no one conceptualisation of distributed leadership advocated in these policies, nor is it present in the discourse. Distributed leadership was first mentioned in *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* which suggested that principals should use effective distributed leadership models to empower teachers to take on leadership roles and lead learning (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). This has been further elaborated upon in the 2022 version of the framework as well as the circular *Leadership and Management in Post-Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Skills, 2018), which states that the middle leadership structure in Irish post-primary schools is based on a

distributed leadership model. It was in this context that the researchers aimed to explore the lived experiences of school principals and deputy principals of distributed leadership from a role sustainability perspective.

Sustainable leadership and distributed leadership
Hargreaves and Fink (2000, p. 32) suggest that "sustainability does not simply mean that something can last. It also addresses how a particular initiative can be developed without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment, now and in the future." Sustainable leadership, which is described as a shared responsibility, has seven key principles: Sustainable leadership creates and preserves sustaining learning; secures success over time; sustains the leadership of others; addresses issues of social justice; develops rather than depletes human and material resources; develops environmental diversity and capacity; and undertakes activist engagement with the environment (Hargreaves and Fink, 2004). Leaders aim to develop their sustainability for reasons including their own sustainability and the sustainability of those around them to support teaching and learning while avoiding burnout (Hargreaves and Fink, 2004).

Distributed leadership is widely accepted as an appropriate model of leadership for schools and is well-renowned among researchers, practitioners and policymakers. It is a practice which positions leadership as a product of the interactions between leaders, followers and their situation (Spillane, 2005). In this perspective, the focus is on leadership as a practice stretched across actors, rather than focus being on specific leaders or their roles (Spillane, 2005). Harris (2003a) describes it as a "shared and collective endeavour that engages all members of the organisation" which implies "redistribution of power and a realignment of authority" (p. 75). The theoretical roots of distributed leadership lie in distributed cognition and activity theory to explain "human activity as distributed in the interactive web of actors, artifacts, and the situation" (Spillane *et al.*, 2001, p. 23). It involves several leaders working "collaboratively across organisational levels and boundaries" (Azorín *et al.*, 2020, p. 117). Yukl (1999) suggests that within distributed leadership "the leadership actions of any individual leader are much less important than the collective leadership provided by the members of the organization" (p. 293). In this way, the dualism between leaders and followers is challenged and the lines between both become blurred (Gronn, 2000). Hargreaves and Fink (2003) note that in this complex world, leadership simply cannot reside with a small number of individuals and that everyone's intelligence is needed to run an organisation. It has been suggested that distributed leadership has become the default leadership style since the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris and Jones, 2020). This has been noted to occur through necessity as school leaders are "running on empty" due to the significant challenges they faced during the pandemic and are required to utilise a distributed leadership model to survive (Harris and Jones, 2020, p. 246).

Distributed leadership involves the sharing of leadership practices and therefore has the potential to reduce some of the extensive workload from formal school leaders. Spillane *et al.* (2001) suggest that the collective properties of a group of leaders acting together, as in a distributed model, can be much more than the sum of each individual's practice. While there are differences between the constructs of sustainable leadership and distributed leadership, distributed leadership has characteristics that lend themselves to a sustainable leadership practice. For example, in alignment with the principles of sustainable leadership as outlined by Hargreaves and Fink (2004) relating to the development of human resources and sustaining the leadership of others, the focus of distributed leadership is in building the leadership capacity of others to increase leadership quality and capability (Harris, 2013). However, little research has yet been conducted into the concept of distributed leadership as a sustainable practice in the Irish context.

Methods

To achieve the aim of exploring the lived experiences of school principals and deputy principals of distributed leadership from a role sustainability perspective, a qualitative research methodology utilising semi-structured interviews was employed. As the researchers sought to explore participants' subjective and complex views of distributed leadership from a sustainability lens, this research is situated within an interpretivist paradigm and is hence underpinned by the belief that lived experience is subjective and is created through interactions in social contexts (Bhattacherjee, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the appropriate method for this study to ask probing, open-ended questions to explore the independent thoughts of participants (Adams, 2015). This paper, therefore, reports on the thematic analysis of this data.

Data collection

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were carried out between June and November of 2022. This first author interviewed all participants. This included demographic questions and drew from an eleven-question interview guide using further probing. These questions related to an exploration of challenges and opportunities for principals and deputy principals, decision-making practices, policy, school self-evaluation, the leadership team and distributed leadership practices.

Participant recruitment

A snowball sampling strategy was utilised in this study to identify potential participants. A total of 23 principals and deputy principals submitted an expression of interest to participate in the study. After sending potential participants the information sheet, research privacy notice and consent forms, eight individuals did not proceed with the interview. One of the eight potential participants was ineligible while the other seven did not respond to further communication. It is unclear if they no longer wanted to participate, or if other obligations prevented them from doing so. Two follow-up emails were sent and when they were not answered and recruitment options were exhausted, the researchers proceeded with a total of 15 semi-structured interviews. The final participants included a total of 6 principals and 9 deputy principals, 8 of which were male and 7 of which were female. Participants had differing lengths of experience working in their current schools, were from various school types, and were working in urban, suburban or rural areas.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the authors' host institution for this study (approval code 2020_05_09_EHS). Ethical considerations were given at all stages of the research. Participation in this study was voluntary. During transcription, all names and identifying information were removed and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. Post-transcription, the interview transcript was sent back to each interviewee for an interviewee transcript review. While the process of interviewee transcript reviewing has been reported to have disadvantages as well as advantages (Hagens *et al.*, 2009), the researchers chose to utilise it to provide participant validation and in so doing, to give participants more control over their voice and words.

Data analysis

Data were analysed following Braun and Clark's (2008) approach to thematic analysis. The steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2008) were utilised as an intuitive and evolving guide more so than a static map, as intended by the authors (Braun *et al.*, 2022). The steps were

drawn upon as a "starting point" (Braun *et al.*, 2022). All transcripts were read and re-read multiple times and initial codes were generated before transcripts were coded from beginning to end in their entirety. Themes were then developed from these codes based on patterned responses which were then further refined.

Findings
Results of this study suggest a distinct challenge to the sustainability of the role of principals and deputy principals in the study. The challenges largely related to administrative overload, increased government documentation, and the complexity of the role of senior school leaders. Participants also described the need to further engage with well-being practices and the value of engaging with distributed leadership practices to enhance the sustainability of their roles.

Administrative overload – "paperwork, paperwork, paperwork" (James, principal)
The significant demand of administrative responsibilities being placed on principals and deputy principals was a noted frustration by participants. They expressed feeling overloaded with administration including excessive paperwork. All six participants in the position of school principal explicitly discussed the administrative overload that they are experiencing as school leaders, along with a further four out of nine participants in the position of deputy principal. Deputy principal Thomas stated that the "*burden on school management from an administrative perspective is huge*".

The administrative aspect of the role of principal and deputy principals was reported to be taking up the majority of school leaders' time. Principal John stated that "*ten percent of your day is focused on leading the learning, every bit after that is very much admin and that takes its toll in that you're not where you want to be all the time*" while principal Ken suggested that "*about ninety-eight percent of my time is spent pushing a pen or a laptop or a keyboard here in the school*". Deputy principal Andrew described this as being the case for the last couple of years.

While participants believed there to be an issue with the amount of administrative work, further frustration arose regarding an apparent lack of justification for this work. Deputy principal Daniel simply stated, "*we're expected to do an awful lot more paperwork and to what end?*" Principal Ken further elaborated on this by describing "*the level of bureaucracy and paperwork for the sake of paperwork [as] just laughable, absolutely laughable*". Along with principal Jennifer, principal Ken shared further dissatisfaction at the duplication of paperwork, describing this as leading to superfluous emails that are in-turn ignored due to sheer volume. He described currently having 1,161 unanswered emails in his inbox.

Increased government documentation – "we're absolutely snowed under" (Mary)
Participants described a significant increase in the volume and frequency of government documentation being released in relation to their work resulting in increased pressure and less thorough engagement. Deputy principal Andrew suggested that this is considerably adding to senior school leaders' workload. Deputy principal Lisa agreed that while there is usually a very good reason for policy, they are often rolled out too fast and school personnel "*are not given a chance to digest it and you know, work it out, or even get accustomed to it, or even the lingo*". It was also noted by deputy principal Daniel that a lot of the paperwork can stem from these policies.

Several participants described an inability to engage with all government documentation due to the volume of them. Principal Ken stated that "*it's very, very difficult to stay on top of them all. So, I'll be honest with you, I just kind of plough on ahead and in terms of the new stuff that comes out, it's more kind of . . . what is it, I kind of plead for forgiveness more so than*

permission". This approach was echoed by deputy principal Daniel who stated that: "*I try to take some points from each one, but I have to have a life as well. I can't spend my time reading documents*". A similar approach was taken by principal Mary who said that if they were to engage with all government documents, it would be so time consuming that nothing else would get done. Mary described her preference "*to be acting in more or less a general way that is on the right track*" and would "*rather say 'sorry' than spend all that time*" reviewing documents.

Deputy principal Daniel also shared concern about what he described as the "*underhand tactics of publishing documents on a Friday afternoon or during the holidays*" which he believed to show a lack of respect to school leaders. This appeared to begin during the COVID-19 pandemic when last-minute guidance was unavoidable, and it has since remained the norm. Principal James spoke to the need for a return of focus to the people in schools rather than "*throwing us this policy and that policy*".

Complexity of the role of senior school leaders – "senior management take on too many roles" (Mike, deputy principal)
Participants viewed the roles of principal and deputy principal as complicated and demanding. Principal John described the three main areas of focus for the principal as leading school curriculum, teaching and learning, and school self-evaluation. However, principal Ken described his role as being a principal, cleaner, caretaker, leader of teaching and learning, doctor, psychologist, HR specialise, plant management, project management, and health and safety officer.

Principal Mary identified modelling for both staff and students as important in the principal role. Mary outlined this as comprising both the bigger things and the smaller things like emptying the dishwasher or picking up litter from the ground. She placed further emphasis on the need to model as a school leader that is not "*fraught and frantic and hating [their] life*". Mary acknowledged the difficulties in recruiting principals stating that people perceive it to be a "*desperate job*" that is "*too onerous for any one person*" which she believes must be the message expressed by senior school leaders for some time. She believes it is important for her to never say that she is "too busy" to engage with staff or students and to make sure that she has time to interact with people.

Mary continued to describe the interpersonal nature of the role of principal and the importance of people sharing their news or challenges with senior school leaders. She stated that "*everyone's issue is their main priority*" and the principal must engage with everyone in a meaningful way and be able to switch from being genuinely delighted for someone who has received good news, to showing compassion for someone who is sharing bad news. Principal Paul echoed this by describing everyone's issues as being very important to them and school leaders have many conversations like this in one day. This was reported as challenging for senior school leaders as they must think about the repercussions for the school based on an individual's circumstance as well as being expected to show empathy and compassion for the individual. Principal Mary described a situation where a staff member shares that their parent or child is sick, and the senior school leader needs to support that person because that is all that matters to them in that moment. However, the school leader is simultaneously thinking about the classes that they will have to cover, that they do not know how long the individual will be absent for, and that they will be unable to locate a substitute teacher as they do not know how many days they will be needed. Mary explained that "*those things play on your mind*".

Principal Ken articulated frustration regarding the expectation of senior school leaders to manage the school finances, with significant emphasis placed on the accountability of school leaders on finance with potentially no education on such matters. Ken also described pressure

in terms of leading the educational lives of young people, and staff, with no training. He disapproved of what he described as there being "*no qualification to be a principal*". It is important to note that while there are complexities evident in the role of both principal and deputy principal, it was noted by deputy principal Karen that it is easier for her as deputy principal to switch off, in comparison to the principal who is always "*at the end of the phone*".

Deputy principal Mike believed that challenges are stemming from a "*lack of distributed leadership or allowing others to take the roles forward or others coming forward to take on the roles*". However, part of the shared model of leadership described throughout the interviews involved consultation and openness regarding decision making. Mike described this as an additional challenge to the role of senior school leaders because they must decide when to consult with others, and who to consult with, which may include parents who he explained can be difficult to reach. Principal James echoed this challenging aspect of the work by querying if they are sometimes "*overly collaborative*" in his school. He described other principals in the local area making decisions without consulting their staff as much and it appears to be effective for them, whereas in his school, they consult a lot with staff, and he sometimes wonders if it is an effective use of time.

Focus on well-being – "we need to align the future career planning with well-being" (Mary, principal)
The importance of focussing on staff and student well-being within the context of increasing pressure on principals and deputy principals was outlined by several participants. Principal James stated that the most important thing for him in his role is to firstly, look after the well-being of students and then to look after the well-being of school staff. He noted that when you focus on that, "*everything else will fall into place*". Lisa echoed this focus in her role as deputy principal and described her desire to ensure that as many people as possible feel happy and safe coming to school and that those who do not still feel that they can talk about it and not feel isolated.

The need for genuine engagement with leaders' well-being was highlighted. Deputy principal Daniel expressed his frustration towards discussions about well-being for school leaders, with little actions put in place to improve it in practice.

> It would drive you insane. Every conference I go to, we have a speaker who talks to us about well-being and looking after ourselves and then the next day you get another list of admin documents that you have to fill out. So, the hypocrisy of it is something else (Daniel, deputy principal).

Deputy principal Karen echoed this frustration. She explained that school leaders are told to "mind themselves", but this is difficult to achieve due to "*the constant change of stuff and the circulars and the Friday evening bulletins we were being sent during COVID*". While she described loving her job as deputy principal, some days she thinks to herself "*I just can't keep doing this*". She described the emotional exhaustion and empathy fatigue from listening to parents asking for help, expressing her relief to reach the summer holidays this year: "*I've never been so happy to get my holidays I just said 'I cannot do anymore. I'm done'*".

Karen also discussed the high rates of retirement among school leaders. On one level, she described her shock at the current statistics relating to stress and burnout, but on another level, she understood this is the case by describing herself and other school leaders as exhausted. Deputy principal Sarah also spoke to the need to focus on senior school leader well-being to reduce burnout as "*the job [of principal] is becoming less and less attractive*". She further added that "*there's absolutely no way [she would] want to be a principal*" because of this. Principal Mary described the need to align career planning with well-being when re-thinking leadership roles going forward as she believed that they "*don't always have anything in common with one another*".

Engagement with distributed leadership for sustainability – "very simple, it's better for the workload" (Mike, deputy principal)

Participants shared a belief regarding the necessity of engaging with distributed leadership practices for sustainability. They reported the need to do this for several reasons including benefits to the teaching staff and increased buy-in among the school community. There was, however, a clear consensus on the use of distributed leadership practices for the sustainability of participants in their senior leadership roles.

Principal Jennifer described one of the main reasons for utilising distributed leadership practices as being for her own sustainability and the sustainability of the senior leadership team. She suggested that school leaders cannot effectively do their job without distributing leadership and stated that "*if you didn't distribute leadership effectively, you literally, you couldn't do your job*". Principal James echoed this by stating that "*you just can't do it yourself*" and if one tries to, they will inevitably fail. Principal Paul further suggested that using a distributed model "*from a selfish point of view*" is easier for him as he does not have to run the whole school.

Deputy principal Fiona described the impact of distributed leadership on sustainability by stating that "*you can't just have one or two or three people leading everything within a school. It's not ... first of all, it's not sustainable. It will lead to burnout, and it leads to disengagement by others*". Deputy principal Mike elaborated on this in his setting by stating that he believed it is not healthy for three people to be set apart and making decisions for a staff of 75 and that the staff do not appreciate that either. Mike stated that "*it's not sustainable, but it is a huge amount of pressure. It's a huge amount of everything coming back into one central place*" and that using a distributed model is "*better for everybody*", because otherwise "*you start to fray at the edges then and you make mistakes and things fall away and then that creates more problems*".

Deputy principal Daniel stated that using a distributed model "*makes [their] job an awful lot easier*" and if they have "*people doing the job for [them] instead of chasing it [themselves] and if people are keen to do that, why not*?" Deputy principal Andrew described the utilisation of a distributed leadership model as having the potential to offer school leaders some freedom to attain a better work-life balance. Deputy principal Thomas outlined the need to distribute leadership because "*no one person can be responsible*" for many aspects of school including examples of uniform and mobile phone etiquette.

While the consensus regarding distributed leadership was found to be its potential to aid the sustainability of school leadership in terms of workload, participants also acknowledged some challenges to its implementation. Deputy principal Sarah shared concerns that the principal in her school might not have "*100% grasp of distributed leadership*" and believed that the principal could distribute more to her as deputy principal. Deputy principal Karen described the challenge of distributing leadership in her school due to the principal being "*an information junkie*" that needs to know everything and is "*exhausting herself as a result of that*". Deputy principal Fiona appeared to empathise with this by stating that sometimes she must "*push back [her] control freak nature*" to allow others to step in.

Other participants expressed caution so as not to negatively impact the well-being of other staff through their distribution of leadership. Deputy principal Carol identified that it is a challenge to distributing leadership to ensure that "*it doesn't feel like an additional workload*" to the teacher in question. Deputy principal Fiona expressed concern "*not to overburden people or not to give people extra work*". She stated that "*you have to be measured about what people take on and how they take it on*". Deputy principal Daniel shared the concern that if someone has a heavy workload and is volunteering, he advised caution to reflect on that individual's capacity before sharing leadership with them so that they do not burn out. Principal Jennifer also reflected on the importance of access of opportunity by suggesting that even if the principal recognises that an individual is busy, for example with young

children at home, they cannot assume that the individual in question will not want to get involved in the leadership of the school.

Discussion

The findings from this study echo concern for the sustainability of school leadership in its current guise. Participants described the complexity of the role of senior school leaders, the burden of administration and volume of government documentation, as well as the need to focus on the well-being of senior school leaders. Hallinger (2005) suggests that the role of school principal has always been multifaceted. He refers to the work of Cuban (1988) who describes the three fundamental roles of principalship to be political, managerial and instructional and that finding the correct balance between these roles in a specific school context is an indicator of principal effectiveness (Hallinger, 2005).

The Irish Education Act, 1998 (Department of Education, 1998) states that principals and teachers are expected to encourage/foster learning in students, regularly evaluate students and report these results to students and parents, promote cooperation between the school and the community, and carry out duties that are assigned to them by the board of management (Department of Education, 1998, p. 23). Further to this, school principals have many other functions including day-to-day school management, setting objectives, creating a school environment supportive of learning, providing leadership to others and encouraging involvement of parents in school life.

While the role of a senior school leader will inevitably comprise various roles, we argue that school leadership, including the role of the principal and deputy principal, should be revisited considering the challenges that this has presented for participants. While many participants described their roles as largely administrative, only one participant stated that they had to "*make peace with that*". The other participants described the administrative burden as taking away from the important parts of their work (i.e. leading teaching and learning), or their original motivation for becoming a senior school leader which could comprise motives including self-actualisation, professional growth, personal fulfilment etc. (Spillane and Lowenhaupt, 2019). This challenge appears to be growing as participants described the significant increase in policy documents and administrative duties in recent years.

In the most recent policy framework provided to schools entitled "*Looking at Our Schools 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*", which aims to provide an overview of effective practice, school leadership is described under four domains: leading teaching and learning, managing the organisation, leading school development and building leadership capacity (Department of Education, 2022). These four domains span far beyond administrative duties, yet some participants in this study described spending most of their time dealing with administration. There appears significant misalignment between the expectations of the role of senior school leaders and the reality of a working day in the role. It has been noted by school leaders that apprenticeships and training cannot always prepare them for every aspect of the role, which may contribute to this misalignment.

Participants in this study describe the need for senior school leaders to engage with practices that will genuinely improve their well-being. They believed that school leader well-being is frequently discussed, but the reality of it can be quite different suggesting some rhetoric. There was a sense of the need to align career planning with well-being which is an integral step towards the sustainability of school leadership. Much has changed in how leadership is conceptualised, suggesting the need to reconceptualise school leadership in Irish post-primary schools as identified by Arnold and Rahimi (2022).

Given the changing nature of educational leadership, the increase in administrative demands on school leaders, the challenges in recruiting school leaders and the data regarding

challenges for school leaders' well-being (Arnold and Rahimi, 2022), it is an appropriate time to revisit expectations and how these factors intersect with sustainability for school leaders. There is clearly an emerging leadership, given the significant changes post COVID-19, with no established blueprints due to the significant and potentially irreversible impact of the pandemic (Harris and Jones, 2020). This further highlights the need to critically engage with expectations of school leaders and how we conceptualise or indeed reconceptualise the role of senior school leaders.

The data here point to the need to re-think aspects of school leadership at a system-level regarding the increase in government documentation, policy proliferation and administrative overload. Some participants attributed this as part of the reason for high rates of retirement and burnout among school leaders, as well as a reason that the role of principal is becoming less attractive. Conscious that researchers must be aware of the impact that their policy recommendations are having on teachers' and leaders' well-being (Shirley et al., 2020), we suggest that in order to address the issues relating to senior school leader well-being, retention and low applications, that government bodies, educational stakeholders and policymakers should engage in a collaborative process with school leaders to reconceptualise school leadership to ensure its sustainability going forward.

Further to this, Shirley et al. (2020, p. 1) suggest that "educator well-being prospers in environments that embody key principles of sustainability" including spreading "beyond individual teachers and schools by activating and drawing on the power of collective commitment, support and solidarity" (p. 3). This very much aligns with a distributed model, whereby leadership is spread across leaders, followers, and the situation (Spillane, 2005), which was suggested by participants as a method to aid in the sustainability of their roles. However, the authors suggest that further consideration needs to be given to conceptualising how we envision distributed leadership as a sustainable practice.

Distributed leadership is likely being enacted in various ways and to various extents from school to school. Some participants in this study described what they appeared to deem a successful model of distributed leadership in their schools while others described themselves as moving slowly towards a distributed model or struggling with its implementation. This is not surprising as its introduction into policy and endorsement is relatively new and this is coupled with challenges associated with the traditional "closed door" culture in Irish schools (O'Donovan, 2017).

While many participants noted distributed leadership to be necessary for the sustainability of their own roles, they were cognisant of the challenges associated with its implementation. This included challenges regarding what they perceived as "correct" understandings of distributed leadership, the challenge of giving "control" to someone else, as well as difficulties in navigating consultation in a distributed model. Exercising caution to not overburden others when utilising a distributed practice was also noted. This echoes the criticism of distributed leadership as potentially increasing workload and stress among school staff (Mayrowetz, 2008; Liontos and Lashway, 1997; Timperley, 2005). This is a new landscape for leadership to navigate. Some participants were cautious and more measured regarding the leadership activities that members of the school community were engaging with and were conscious of ensuring that the distribution of leadership is packaged in a way that it does not feel like more work for others. However, there is a greater complexity in developing a practice whereby leadership capacity within the organisation is developing, and where individuals feel that they are welcome to engage with leadership practices, while protecting the well-being of the full school community and ensuring that an unsustainable workload is not simply moving from one person in the school to another as it could be in delegation. These sustainable distributed leadership practices, require further exploration with focus on workload, division of labour and work culture.

It is also important to note that participants were asked for their interpretation of distributed leadership, their responses to which were varied. Some participants described it in terms of contributing to leadership and management, while others referred to utilising expertise within the school community, shared decision-making, or in terms of sharing jobs or workload. It is unsurprising that participants had differing understandings of the term as this has been identified previously (Hickey *et al.*, 2023), but it is important that this paper is read with this in mind. However, the variety of interpretations of distributed leadership is a further indication that the mechanisms through which leadership is being distributed need to be further teased out before it can be advocated for as aiding the sustainability of school leaders as the term can be misinterpreted as delegation for example.

Moving from the theoretical perspectives of distributed leadership to a practice of distributed leadership for senior school leaders' sustainability requires conceptualisation of the necessary processes through which this can occur. This includes the interactions between leaders, followers and situation which are required for sustainable distributed leadership and aligns with the findings of Harris *et al.* (2022) who suggest that the contemporary research evidences that further research is required on distributed leadership practice. While there are potential benefits of "sharing the load" for the sustainability of school leaders, distributed leadership is much more than delegation (Harris, 2003b) and the mechanisms for distributed leadership as a practice for sustainability require further investigation.

While this study is specific to the Irish post-primary school context, similar challenges relating to school leader stress, burnout, retention and appointment, due to the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, are global themes. The literature evidences challenges to the well-being of school leaders resulting in unfilled vacancies, continuing heightened pressures and intensified principal burnout due to the pandemic (Harris and Jones, 2022). Distributed leadership which is perceived as a potential solution is the most frequently adopted school leadership practice internationally (Wenner and Campbell, 2017; Wang, 2018) and as a result appears in international school leadership policy (Harris, 2011). The findings of this study suggest the potential for the effective use of distributed leadership practices to be beneficial for senior school leaders' sustainability in this time of heightened pressure. The authors advocate that further work is required regarding the conceptualisation of a sustainable distributed practice, there is merit to exploring this further.

Limitations of the study
The authors acknowledge the limitations to the study. The first relates to the sample size and representation of participants. It is important to remember that this is a sample of 15 senior school leaders within a much larger population identified using a snowball sampling strategy. This sample, therefore, has inevitable limitations. The second limitation of the study relates to self-selecting participants with implications for generalisability and respondent bias. This paper should be read with this in mind.

Conclusion
The authors aimed to explore the lived experiences of school principals and deputy principals of distributed leadership through a sustainability lens. Participants described challenges to their current roles including the complexity of the role of senior school leaders, policy proliferation and administrative overload. Results of this study undoubtedly point to increasing demands being placed on school leaders, with distributed leadership as a practice that they draw on for their own sustainability. It is spoken of in terms of a necessity due to the scale of workload. However, the authors, while acknowledging the many benefits of

distributed practice, do not suggest it as a panacea for the nature of senior school leader workload. Rather, we advocate that attention to workload, division of labour, culture and adequate resourcing should not become invisible when implementing distributed leadership practice and that the mechanisms of this practice need to be further conceptualised. We also note the period of change brought about by recent global events and as such it is timely to reconceptualise school leadership, focusing on the well-being of senior school leaders. This research has implications for research, policy and practice. Future research is recommended to explore distributed leadership as a sustainable practice. There are several implications of this research for policy including that school leaders are struggling with the volume of policy documents being published. One suggested way to address this is the greater use of partnership models for the creation of these polices. The potential impact of this study on research and policy may in turn significantly influence practice by aiding the sustainability of the role of senior school leaders nationally and internationally.

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Corresponding author
Niamh Hickey can be contacted at: Niamh.Hickey@ul.ie