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Principals' accounts of practices, system support and challenges in leading secondary immersion education in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Sparse attention in the educational leadership literature is given to those leading immersion schools, despite the established connection between educational leadership and context, including cultural context. By eliciting principals' accounts of practices in leading Irish language-medium immersion education in secondary schools, this study begins to fill this gap. Here, six principals' accounts provide insight into principals' leadership practices; system-level support; and challenges encountered as they lead immersion schools. Analysis of their accounts points to the necessity to support these and future principals in more specialised, targeted and practice-focused ways for the contexts in which they lead, with implications for multiple education system stakeholders. These implications are relevant to dual-language and bilingual schools in other cultural contexts, particularly minority language settings, and to educational settings more broadly in recognition of diversity and multilingualism.

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Introduction

This small-scale, qualitative case study research explores six principals' perspectives on leading in secondary immersion schools in Ireland where the school community engage in education activities and curricular provision, such as geography and mathematics, through the medium of Irish Gaelic (a Celtic language, referred to as 'Irish' both locally and in the remainder of the paper) rather than English. The paper's aim is to provide an in-depth understanding of principals' perceptions of their leadership practices in these schools. While filling a gap for the national context by providing contemporary research about the leadership of Irish-medium education (IME), in so doing, the research focused on leading bilingual (Menken and Solorza 2015) and dual language (DeMatthews and Izquierdo 2019) schools more broadly. Although research literature on the leadership of immersion education is limited (Gilmetdinova 2019), it spans topics including principals' leadership identities (Murakami et al. 2016; Rodríguez and Alanís 2011) and pedagogical approaches (Bower 2019). Additionally, given that most of the research discourse on immersion education tends to be situated in French or Spanish-speaking contexts and focuses more on dual immersion (DeMatthews and

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Izquierdo 2019), the contextual focus in this paper serves as an important addition to the literature and will be of interest, for example, to Welsh, Scottish Gaelic or Basque immersion school contexts, amongst others, including New Zealand (te reo Māori), Nordic countries (Sámi languages), as well as Russia and Chile, all of which offer indigenous language immersion education.

As Cummins (2011, 162) outlines, immersion[1] education is 'a planned program aimed at bilingual development'. IME can be categorised as an approach whereby immersion education's aim is to both 'maintain or revitalize the minority language' and for students 'to develop bilingual and biliteracy skills' in general or specifically for those who speak Irish in their home or communities (Cummins 2011, 165). Cummins (2011) also importantly points out that there may be challenges – both pedagogical and organisational – in implementing immersion programmes, including the extent of bilingualism in instructional strategies and perceptions of the status afforded to the majority and minority languages. Cummins' (2011) observations directly connect to the most recent and best available evidence on principal leadership (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay 2021) whereby principals' skills are observed to span pedagogy/ instruction (skills to support teachers' classroom practice), organisational skills (management skills, including data literacy and resource management), and beyond Cummins' (2011) direct observations, people skills (relating to professional learning and fostering a productive school climate and relationships to realise this). Clear implications for professional education emerge in this regard and, most especially, the leaders' role in its construction and provision (Hallinger and Kulophas 2020).

Therefore, while a clear purpose exists for the leaders of immersion schools in Ireland and elsewhere, they simultaneously face a myriad of broader challenges, including challenges and obstacles in the policy contexts – both at the macro (system) and, relatedly, the micro (school) levels – in which they lead (Gilmetdinova 2019). Therefore, a final aim and focus of this research was to explore the challenges faced by leaders in immersion schools in Ireland. While distinct to the Irish context, analysis of the context may be generative for others, most especially those leading immersion schools in cultural context where indigenous language immersion education occurs.

The remainder of this research paper is split into five parts. First, some further background and contextual information is provided. Then, the literature reviewed overviews both the Irish school leadership policy and research context, as well as the national policy context and an overview of contemporary research pertaining to the leadership of IME. International research examining the role of school leadership in immersion education is then presented, including the relationship between school leadership and language planning and policy (LPP). Methodological considerations are then outlined. Subsequently, four themes and associated findings are presented, before considering overall implications in a discussion.

Although this paper is focused on the leadership of secondary immersion schools in the Irish context, its conceptual framework and findings will be applicable to key questions or issues encountered by school and system leaders in other immersion school contexts, such as those aforementioned, as well as in schools more broadly in Anglophone societies given rapidly shifting patters in global migration resulting in increasing linguistic diversity in all schools (Norberg 2017). This is an increasingly crucial consideration in contemporary times about which more research will be required.

Background and contextual overview

Article 8 of the Irish Constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann 1937) states that the 'Irish language as the national language is the first official language' and recognises English as 'a second official language'. Areas in which Irish is spoken as the majority language of the community are called 'Gaeltacht' regions, and many of these regions are in counties along the Western seaboard. Gaeltacht regions have a population of almost 100,000, albeit that not all inhabitants are native or habitual speakers, and some may not be able to speak Irish, signalling the language decline in these regions. However, Irish is also spoken in other areas in the country outside of Gaeltacht regions. Although legislative status is afforded to the language nationally, as well as its recognition as an official European language, Irish is an 'indigenous minority language' (Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Duibhir 2017, 3). Recent estimates from the 2016 Census indicate that 39.8% of the population declare they can speak Irish, of whom 1.7% declare speaking it daily outside of the education system (Central Statistics Office 2017). Studying the Irish language as a subject is compulsory for the vast majority of students throughout their primary and secondary schooling in both English and Irish-medium education (IME).

Principals in this study represent IME secondary schools within and outside of the Gaeltacht and in each principal's school in this study *all pupils* are taught *all subjects* through the medium of Irish. There are 73 such secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland and 5 in Northern Ireland serving almost 17,000 pupils, while in another over 20 schools nationally, *some pupils* are taught *some subjects* through the medium of Irish (Gaeloideachas 2021) where principals will have similar responsibilities and experience similar challenges as those raised by the leaders in this study. While this study focused on secondary schools, it is noteworthy that there are also 290 IME primary schools in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland combined serving almost 45,000 pupils, whose principals will also have responsibilities and experience challenges similar to those raised by the secondary school leaders in this study. Notably, under the legislation of the Education Act (1998), principals must: 'contribute to the realisation of national policy and objectives in relation to the extension of bi-lingualism in Irish society and in particular the achievement of a greater use of the Irish language at school and in the community'; 'contribute to the maintenance of Irish as the primary community language in Gaeltacht areas'; and 'promote the language and cultural needs of students having regard to the choices of their parents'. Therefore, a suite of leadership responsibilities specific to language are clear and are referred to by participants in this study.

IME has experienced fluctuations in fortune during the last two centuries, but there has been an active grassroots movement led by parents since the 1970s (McAdory and Janmaat 2015; Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Dhonnabháin 2017; Ó Duibhir 2018). Recent data indicate that IME is experiencing continued growth in primary (Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Duibhir 2017) and secondary sectors (cf. Gaeloideachas). Enrolments in IME have significantly increased over the last decade (DES 2019a), underscoring its expansion as a sector. This trend is also evident in Northern Ireland, with growth rates of 8.27% in primary education and 8% in secondary education (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta 2017). One principal in this study is located in Northern Ireland.

In view of such all-island growth in IME, it becomes imperative to consider immersion school leadership practices, system supports and challenges in the educational leadership research community.

Literature review

School leadership policy context and preparation in Ireland

Connected to the substantial body of contemporary empirical evidence of the impact of school leadership practices on educational achievement (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2019), school leadership in Ireland has undergone significant reform over the past decade (King and Nihill 2019; Murphy 2019). The reform is evident in the policy context, but perhaps more importantly, it is reflected in reformed leadership and management structures in schools, as well as in the provision of professional education for school leaders (Coolahan et al. 2017). The policy commitment to school leadership, particularly its preparation and development (Murphy 2020), is underscored by the establishment of a Centre for School Leadership (CSL) in 2016, funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). CSL's function is primarily to develop a continuum of school leadership, progress standards and ensure quality in professional supports for school leaders (Forde et al. 2018). However, although promising, these developments are nascent and evolving and, consequently, it remains to be seen how the rapidly advancing policy school leadership policy context will attend to the specific challenges for aspirant and actual leaders in IME across the variety of IME contexts. For example, in CSL's most recent document, *Learning to be a School Leader in Ireland* (CSL 2021), although the context in which the school leader works is referred to in contextualising their model, no explicit, substantive reference to IME contexts is made.

However, as part of CSL's activities since their inception, a particularly significant development since 2017 is the tendering of a reconceptualised university-led aspiring leadership programme being made available to approximately 250 teachers nationally every year. The programme is a collaborative offering, designed and delivered by a number of higher education institutions in a blended learning format to build systemic leadership capacity. Notably, one stream of this programme is delivered through the medium of the Irish language, specifically targeting aspiring leaders teaching in IME contexts. Importantly, while tutorials are facilitated through the Irish language and participants are encouraged to reflect on and learn from their experiences in IME, the material from the general cohort is translated into Irish. The programme aims, where possible, to include material pertaining to immersion education and teaching through Irish, although research on immersion education leadership (and IME specifically) is – to date – limited. In this sense, although translated, material is arguably more generic than specialised in nature. Another observation is that the admissions strategy aims to recruit aspiring IME leaders from within the sector as opposed to more explicitly providing a developmental opportunity for fluent speakers or language learners to transition into the IME sector, which as previously stated, is one that is growing, even if the sector faces a documented shortage of teachers resulting in specific and significant challenges for IME principals in recruiting teachers (Ó Grádaigh 2015; Ó Lionáird 2020). Beyond this national programme, other graduate, university-based programmes for

teachers operate with IME as their priority, and while their focus is less explicitly on leadership, it remains on their curricula to some degree.

Therefore, while the school leadership discourse has become more mainstream nationally (Murphy 2019), the research base in Ireland remains relatively limited as compared to other international contexts, despite calls for increased geographical diversity in school leadership scholarship (Hallinger and Kovačević 2019), underscoring both the inseparability and primacy of school leadership and context (Clarke and O'Donoghue 2017). In a recent systematic review of the research available in the Irish context, a specific gap in school leadership literature about IME has been identified (Murphy 2019), although some exceptions exist such as Ó Ceallaigh (2020) who has noted the centrality of leadership in effective immersion schools and conceived of a model of best practice, drawing on the national leadership framework, for IME school leaders.

Another key aspect of recent school leadership reform in Ireland consists of the centrality of school self-evaluation (SSE) (Hofman, Dijkstra, and Adriaan Hofman 2009; MacBeath 2008) in national school leadership discourse on which the national framework for leadership is based (Murphy 2019). As outlined in the iterations of *Looking at Our School 2016* (DES 2016a, 2016b), policy document framed by two domains titled 'Teaching and Learning' and 'Leadership and Management' on which Ó Ceallaigh's (2020) recommendations are made, the policy document is intended as the *framework* against which the SSE *process* is to be implemented through a distributed leadership *model*. This framework signals clearly what is perceived at a national level as quality in terms of leadership practice and it, therefore, offers direction for both leadership practice and, consequently, leadership preparation and development activities. However, the framework does not specifically align to the context of IME, and additional foci pertaining to IME with leadership implications are laid out in two guides of *Indicators of Good Practice for Immersion Education* (DES 2020b).

Furthermore, despite this national framework and conceptualisation of leadership, in previous research principals have broadly reported challenges in trying to implement distributed leadership (O'Donovan 2015) and have indicated the need for additional professional education (Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants 2018) connected to the distribution of leadership and the challenges in middle leadership capacity in the Irish education system (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor 2017), largely owed to years of relative underinvestment in middle leadership (Murphy 2020). For leaders in IME, such challenges are arguably rendered further complex. First, given the aforementioned challenges in recruiting teachers for IME (albeit that teacher recruitment has quickly become a bigger, national issue) and, thus, some recruited teachers' capacities to work collaboratively through the target language. Secondly, given IME school leaders' responsibilities under the Policy for Gaeltacht Education (DES 2016c; 2020a) and, moreover, attending to SSE as they endeavour to connect and to evaluate the impact and future direction of their leadership practices specific to school-based language planning and policy (LPP) implementation and, indeed, more generally beyond this focus.

Leading language planning and policy in Irish-medium education

Policies impacting and shaping IME school leaders' work include the *20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030* (Government of Ireland 2010) and the *Policy on Gaeltacht*

Education 2017–2022 (Department of Education and Skills 2016c). These policies then tend to be translated into SSE practices by members of the school leadership team, typically led by the principal or assistant principal. While these policies provide structure for the work of school leaders, they reflect a somewhat rationalistic notion of educational policy and leadership (Ball et al. 2011; Ó Laoire 2012; Young and Diem 2015). Ó Laoire has argued that the

> rational planning model of decision-making which has prevailed up to now within the DES works on the assumption that agency is only present at the center … The inadequacy of linear, top-down models has now led to an understanding that language policy … is more than the mere interpretation of official government texts in the context of regulation and implementation of the language curriculum.
>
> An alternative approach to policy that illuminates the centrality of human agency in the localized sites of education is needed. The policy process itself is peopled, dynamic and discursive. It is in the local site of the school, for example, where the main agents in language education (principals, teachers and learners) and the learners' communities grapple and struggle with issues. (2012, 22)

Consequently, while policies provide school leaders with imperatives and possibilities for action, the policies may be ambiguous (Gilmetdinova 2019) and prescriptively inhibit school leaders' capacities and agency to enact change in context-specific and more creative ways (Hornberger and Johnson 2007). Furthermore, it does not necessarily follow that just because a policy exists that principals adhere to it. For example, in educational settings principals may lack resources (either material or cognitive) to respond to policy imperatives, make sense of the policy differently than intended or need to respond in a context-sensitive manner (De La Cruz Albizu 2020). Oftentimes, such approaches are precluded in the epistemology of macro-level policy-making. Accordingly, both Gilmetdinova (2019) and Hornberger and Johnson (2007) call for research to focus on school principals' interpretations of LPP implementation and resistance, as well as documenting the challenges and pressures they face, which are taken up in this paper in one context.

The Irish State has traditionally associated solutions to its sociolinguistic concerns about the Irish language with the education system, focusing first on language revitalisation and, more recently, language maintenance. Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Dhonnabháin (2017, 182) provide a comprehensive summary overviewing this interrelationship, which they term as both 'complex and controversial'. Given the interrelationship between policy and leadership (Lochmiller 2018), it is necessary to briefly elaborate on this. Some scholars assert that the focus of LPP in the education system has not been balanced by investment in community-based supports, suggesting that 'the issue of language use outside the education context is the "X" factor that has been missing from Irish revitalization efforts' (Ó Duibhir 2018, 152). For school leaders in Gaeltacht areas, who have particular additional responsibilities under the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017–2022* (DES 2016, 2020a), this interrelationship between policy and leadership is rendered more complex and, by logical extension, demands intensive resources in terms of educational infrastructure, including professional education and supports through leadership preparation and development.

School leaders have been repeatedly evidenced to be key to successful schools, spanning (a) setting directions, (b) building relationships and developing people, (c)

developing the organisation to support desired practices and (d) improving the instructional programme (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2019). Although much less is known about school leaders in immersion education (Menken and Solorza 2015), it is asserted that their role is key both internationally (Scanlan and López 2015) and in Ireland (Ó Ceallaigh 2020). Menken and Solorza (2015) contend that principals are critical in successful immersion education, although their focus is on bilingual schools in New York. They argue that better prepared principals, such as principals with extended understandings of bilingualism and bilingual education, were even better placed to serve immersion schools overcome the challenges they face, including those related to equity, linguistic diversity, instruction and barriers in communicating with system leaders about the distinct needs of immersion schools. They argue that specialised preparation is necessary for principals in these circumstances. In fact, Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) argue that all principals should conduct their leadership practices through an equity lens, a lens applicable to immersion, bilingual and dual-language school leaders, in this case school leaders working in endangered, indigenous minority language contexts. This paper takes up discussion about equity in its findings, contributing to the literature on school leadership, language, and equity.

Menken and Solorza (2015) further elaborate that the language policy context as a significant factor on school leadership and immersion education, a view shared by Gilmetdinova (2019). Gilmetdinova (2019), drawing on the useful metaphor of the LPP onion (Hornberger and Johnson 2007; Ricento and Hornberger 1996), focuses on school principals' 'attitudes, beliefs, professional knowledge and identities' (121) in immersion schools in Kazan, Russia. She concluded that principals' language-in-education decisions as 'brokers between the external and internal forces are mediated through their ideologies on learning, and teaching and managing their schools' (Gilmetdinova 2019, 132). This points to the role of principals as brokers between the local and the national, the school and the system, often facing competing tensions. Echoing Gilmetdinova's (2019) observations, De La Cruz Albizu (2020), who examined elementary school principals' language ideologies, also viewed school principals as language planning and policy-makers whose sensemaking was mediated by both the principal's context and ideology.

Methodology

Given that the focus was on exploring principals' perspectives (Brooks and Normore 2018) on leading secondary immersion education, qualitative inquiry (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2013) through a qualitative case study (Stake 1995; Thomas 2021) was deemed most appropriate for this research. As Bush (2011, 132) discusses, subjective models of leadership relate to qualitative research whereby 'the aim is to seek understanding of the ways in which individuals create, modify and interpret the social world which they inhabit'. For this study, interviews followed a semi-structured protocol that was initially piloted with one school leader. The topic guide, designed with breadth and depth in mind, is outlined in Figure 1.

The participants for the study were recruited by invitation through non-probabilistic, purposive sampling using school lists. To achieve this, a participant information sheet outlining the purpose of the research accompanied the invitation that was shared with

Gaeloideachas, an organisation who supports the development of IME. *Gaeloideachas* subsequently emailed a national list of secondary IME school leaders. Prospective participants were asked to email the researcher indicating their interest in partaking in the research. Five participants who responded followed up to arrange and partake in the interview, with one further participant who was snowball sampled from another participant. One participant was based in Northern Ireland and the others from the Republic of Ireland. Representation was achieved from IME schools teaching all pupils all subjects through the medium of Irish within and outside of the Gaeltacht, and in both the Republic and the North of Ireland, as outlined in Table 1. Participants reflected a range of years of experience as principal providing for variation. A significant limitation of the study was that all participants who followed up invitation to partake in the study through to interview, despite attempts to diversify the sample, were male. Interviews were conducted in Spring 2018 and Winter 2019.

Although the number of participants is small, Crouch and McKenzie (2006, 488) outline the logic of small sample sizes in interview-based, exploratory research, signalling the worth of small samples when participants' 'experience is analysed with the uncovering of its thematic dimensions in view … extracted from the material by dint of the researchers' interpretive and conceptual efforts'. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) contend that it is necessary to contextualise participants' subjective accounts to the sociocultural circumstances from which they emanate. Consequently, participants were probed during interviewing to provide concrete material examples and to make connections to policy to further detail and enrich their responses.

Each interview was digitally recorded and lasted between 50 and 90 min. The interviews, as explained and consented to by the participants, were conducted in English to facilitate transcription. Participants were assured that they were free to use Irish language terms and were aware of my ability to speak the language, and they did so on occasion during the interviews, most frequently when conveying aspects of their experiences and views or referring to titles of policies. As a fluent Irish speaker, I was positioned to translate these myself in collaboration with a transcriber. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Data were transcribed and subsequently analysed thematically in *NVivo12*. The data were analysed thematically in three phases. First, the data were analysed deductively, drawing on an *a priori* coding scheme generated from the notes taken during interviews and the literature reviewed for the study. Then, the data were analysed

- Career pathway towards leading an IME school as its principal
- Experiences of informal and formal preparation and development for the role
- Values and beliefs, educational purpose as an IME school leader
- Leadership practices as principal of an IME school, and perspectives on whether/ how these may be distinct from an English-medium school
- School-based language planning and policy and its implications for IME leaders
- Interactions with the system as an IME school leader
- To elaborate on any challenges, personal or professional
- Recommendations for the future

Figure 1. Semi-structured interview topic guide.

Table 1. Participants' contexts and years of experience as principal.

Pseudonym	Located in the Gaeltacht	Years of experience
Cormac	No	<5
Fiachra	Yes	<10
Hugh	No	<5
Liam	Yes	<10
Oran	No	<10
Patrick	Yes	<15

inductively. Finally, aligning to Nowell et al.'s (2017) six phases of thematic analysis, thus ensuring its trustworthiness, each theme was reviewed, defined and named. The final phase was repeated a number of times, with the named themes listed in Figure 2. These themes represent leadership at personal, school and system levels, including a focus on the challenges encountered. These findings are important because while much has been written about students and teachers in immersion education and IME, principals remain an underrepresented group in the research literature.

While interviews align to the purpose of this study and offer a rich insight into leaders' accounts of their perspectives on leading immersion schools, one limitation is that participants' accounts are self-reported. The small-scale nature of this research illuminates insights into leading immersion schools in a particular cultural context. Therefore, another limitation concerns the thematic findings, which cannot be generalised or applied to other cultural contexts in their entirety.

Findings

Four main themes, as outlined in Figure 2, were generated having analyzed the data. These themes span school leaders' identity as and pathway towards becoming an

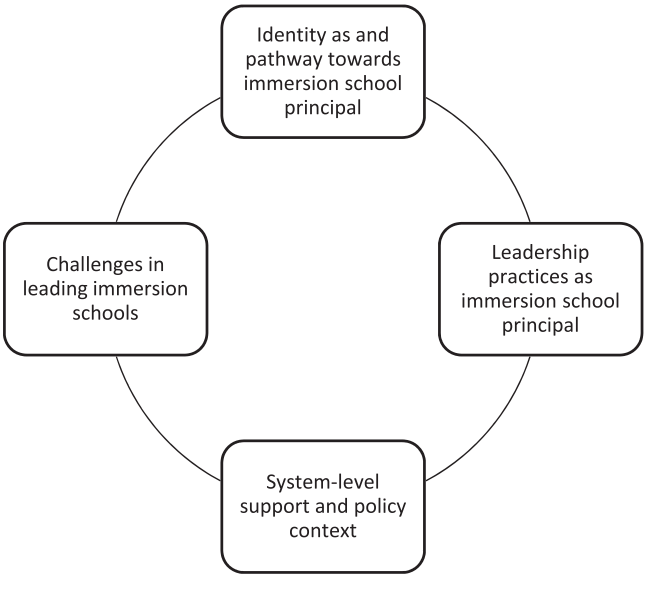

Figure 2. Thematic findings.

immersion school principal (which is referred in this paper but will be taken up separately in another given its richness in this case); leadership practices as immersion school principals; interactions with the system, such as the DES or providers of professional learning, and engaging with the school leadership policy context, particularly LPP; and, finally, the challenges they face. It is important to recognise that while each of these themes are distinctly presented that, as reflected in principals' accounts, they are inextricable from one another and are porously interconnected.

Leadership practices as immersion school principal

Principals' accounts reflect the four domains of leadership practice described by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2019), most especially (a) setting directions and (b) building relationships and developing people. Hugh talked about the necessity of setting directions and building a shared vision with parents and Cormac echoed this. Cormac also pointed out that building a vision with parents was especially necessary to counteract a view some parents had that IME was like *rocket science*, which he attributed to parents' own negative experiences of having learnt Irish in school. For Hugh, it was important to be clear with parents about what IME involved, and a way of achieving this was to develop relationships with local primary school principals to facilitate transition into IME secondary school. Patrick mentioned that parents' main goal in secondary school tends to be academic attainment, and the intensity of this focus can undermine the leadership vision to promote a love of and ability in the language of instruction, even in the Gaeltacht, in part indicating a shift – at least for some – in the language heartland. All principals cited having to contend with this tension of parents' preference for academic attainment rather than biliteracy or language maintenance, except for Hugh who elaborated less on tensions and more on promoting biliteracy. The principals' leadership in setting directions cannot be separated, they viewed, from building relationships with parents, as well as students and teachers, which builds on Rodríguez and Alanís' (2011) findings drawing on this cultural context about the socio-political pressures principals face concerning the language of instruction, as well as the necessity for vision work, and advocating for and with student, parents and the system.

The principals also talked about the necessity to explore longer-term vision. Liam explained that, in his case, longer term vision should focus on how best to develop teachers individually and collectively, particularly in the context of reform in the policy context where reticence, rather than reluctance, exists concerning reforms such as SSE. For Fiachra, longer-term vision work was associated with volunteering as chair of the local community language planning initiative, as he felt that ultimately the school would be fundamental to achieving its aims, many of which the school itself shared. For Cormac and Hugh, their longer-term vision – given that they were both principals of newly established schools – was to ensure a continuous and sustainable rise in student enrolment, and by consequence, being positioned to offer an increasingly broader curriculum. Oran and Patrick were principals in established schools within and outside of the Gaeltacht and each spoke of their longer-term vision of strategically maintaining a broad curriculum, connected to student enrolment, but also teacher recruitment.

Again, following Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2019), Hugh and Oran talked about ensuring and improving the quality of the instructional programme and linked this to (d) developing the organisation to support desired practices, and again, to building relationships with and developing people. The principals recounted a range of creative ways through which they achieved this, demonstrating innovation and teacher leadership. Hugh had in-school mentors to support teachers appointed for their instructional excellence, but who needed to further develop their Irish language proficiency. Liam used formal induction mentoring systems to support teachers' proficiency in Irish and capacity to foster capacities in all teachers to teach Irish, even if they are not a language teacher. Oran talked about involving all staff in assessing students' language skills to promote oracy. Cormac used a section of staff meetings as a forum for teacher leaders, particularly the Irish language teachers, to focus on language accuracy and paid for newly qualified teachers to access an evening course. He believed it unfair for them to pay, given salary cuts and the ending of an allowance of €1583 in recent years for newly recruited teachers in IME, indicating specific IME issues arising from more widespread reductions to teachers' salary since Ireland's economic recession. He also tried to timetable co-teaching for a period of time when new teachers were initially appointed. Cormac, like Hugh, appointed the school's teachers for their instructional excellence and enthusiasm for and willingness to improve their own and the students' Irish language proficiency. Similar to Cormac, Oran alluded to the injustice in ending the IME teacher allowance given the lack of resources available to teachers in IME and suggested that it compounded difficulties in attracting teachers to work in IME. Fiachra signalled the importance of being in a network with other principals:

> a few of us are trying to get together and share resources and policies, because even stuff like contracts … aren't available very often through Irish … we are getting them translated. But rather than me doing it and the other school over the road doing it we are saying "Okay, listen we need the similar contract. One of us will translate it and share it" But that is ourselves, it's not being facilitated by the Department or by the managerial bodies

For Patrick, this lack of facilitation meant inevitable delay in having access to tools supporting him and teacher leaders in his school in developing the organisation to support desired practices, resulting in a challenge for him and his leadership team: *it's almost culturally embedded into us. If it's in Irish we will have to wait.* Each principal pointed out concerns with equity as compared to non-immersion schools. They stated that dealing with language injustice was something with which they identified in IME. Patrick and Fiachra both expressed feeling like *second-class citizens* in the national system as IME school leaders. In their immersion school settings, the principals referred to the *extra layer* of having to work through administrative tasks, often unsupported, bilingually. This included, for example, correspondence to parents, and in some cases, translating documents from English to present to the school's governance board. For Fiachra, this extra work was something that remained unspoken, but key in how he distinguished himself from non-IME principals: *I have discussed it with other Principals … there is definitely a lot of added responsibility and added roles … in a Irish medium school and that's not recognised anywhere really*. Each principal also lamented that, in their view, too much of their time was spent on administration proportionate to leading the instructional programme of the school, about which they were more passionate. As Oran

recounts: *I just think sometimes that the [administrative] expectations on the management of a school … mitigate[s] against what we should be doing.*

System-level support and policy context

The principals recounted situations demonstrating a lack of certainty that they would encounter sustained, widespread support as IME school leaders at the system level or in the policy context. Their reactions to this differ over time and space and connect to the emotional and political dimensions of their identities especially (i.e. the extent to which principals felt comfortable to be activist). Patrick shared his realisation that trying to contact someone who could speak Irish from the DES or the education body to which his school is aligned, *is just a waste of [his] time*. In order to deal with the volume and velocity of tasks he encounters as principal, he has conceded to speak in English and translate the material for his board of governors but points out other school leaders will militate against this. Fiachra shared that this tension was particularly frustrating for him, not only as a leader of an IME school but because, for him, Irish was his first language, adding that materials to support principals in implementing reform often take longer to become available in Irish. Oran, echoing Patrick, also noted the availability, quality and capacity of the professional support services' capacities in supporting IME school leaders. However, they signalled that the limited availability of such supports and noted that the system could better resource professional support services to provide professional learning and development through the Irish language.

Liam and Fiachra stated that, given the regular lack of simultaneous provision of Irish-language resources alongside English-language resources, plus the broader lack of Irish-language resources more generally, implementation of reforms at the local level were made more difficult for principals, exacerbating the perception of the *extra layer*. Cormac suggested that this can leave the principal and teachers '*burnt* out', and more locally, Cormac also cited that each policy the school had to be translated into both languages, which also created a burden given the lack of access to centralised templates in Irish. While he had sourced a good translator, he signalled the necessity to source a translator who renders the policy readable for children and teachers who may be improving their Irish proficiency on-the-job but who, nonetheless, are expected to interpret policies and, ultimately, to enact them. For principals in IME contexts, the metaphor of the *extra layer* was interpreted as a lack of systemic support and policy implementation resources for them as immersion school leaders trying to lead their schools successfully, impacting how they set about cultivating leadership within the school. As Fiachra suggests: *it boils down to support and getting a whole team behind you because a leader is only as good as the team*. This finding has significant consequences given the restructuring of leadership policy and structure as outlined earlier in this paper signalling that the '*extra layer*' in IME schools may require a different policy to ensure effective, equitable outcomes that sustainably support the work of the principal and wider leadership team. This is particularly important given the national policy context and its ambition to have a distributed leadership system.

Patrick suggests that, overall, there tended to be more *reliance on* rather than *support of* IME principals by system leaders. His school network management have *said openly at meetings 'We might need you to help us with translation'. [Us principals] are now a*

translation service. Patrick elaborated that the people with whom he interacts as system leaders are highly competent and express guilt for not being more proficient in Irish or better positioned to support him to lead an IME school. He interpreted this as evidence of a systemic view that *Irish is seen as an optional luxury and that is quite frustrating*.

Challenges in leading immersion schools

Connected to the systemic-level support and policy context, a range of common, interconnected challenges encountered in leading immersion schools were identified amongst the six principals. One challenge all principals reported was the hegemony of English in the lives of young people attending IME and how this imbues their interactions and socialising with peers in school. For Oran *it is a huge challenge to get the pupils to speak Irish. It is, it's our biggest challenge and it's getting harder and harder*. None of the principals were in favour of any English being spoken at school and recalled their deliberate, concentrated and sustained efforts to promote Irish. This corresponds with Ó Duibhir's (2018, 163) finding from research with IME teachers that 'immense time and effort is expended in maintaining Irish during all school activities … requir[ing] persistent and constant vigilance'. For some of the principals, the collective promotion of Irish as the sole language of school business amongst all stakeholders – including some teachers – was another challenge they faced. Oran connected this to the recruitment challenge that all principals in this study mentioned. Oran wondered whether, ultimately, there might be longer-term leadership challenges for principals if they are continually in a situation where they have no option but to appoint teachers, who demonstrate instructional excellent, but have limited proficiency in Irish:

> you have to make sure that the ethos is not diluted long term and irreparably because of that, because it will have an impact definitely and … that sounds like I am criticising the teacher, and I am not. But it does have a filter down effect when students know that the teacher can't speak Irish.

No participant referred to the potential of translanguaging for either students or teachers.

Generic leadership preparation and development did not appear to fully prepare the principals for their role as immersion school leaders: Hugh was *not sure how well it prepared [him] to be a Principal in an Irish medium school*. Like the others, he was of the view that elements of leadership preparation and development ought to be specifically tailored for principals' contexts of leading immersion schools. Fiachra believed that

> if we [policy-makers] are serious about retaining our language and our culture and identity in the Gaeltacht regions … you have to prepare people. You have to give them an understanding and a background and equip them better to be able to have a more meaningful role in it.

Hugh also believed that in the North of Ireland school leaders needed to be prepared to be *imaginative and inventive* advocates because *it's nearly adversarial in the sense that you have to fight for everything you get*. Cormac, connected to previous findings, pointed out that

> most people who have been appointed to these roles in Irish-medium secondary schools would have the experience of working in those kinds of schools and they would be very aware of the challenges faced and, to be fair, there is a very good network amongst ourselves.

He was of the view that the supports were fragmented between a host of organisations and while he welcomed the good intentions, he characterised it as *death by support*, and in common with the other participants, signalled a lack of specialised and school-based preparation for IME despite the number of providers of preparation and development.

The volume and velocity of recent reforms, particularly as they tended to be unaccompanied by targeted support for IME leaders (when initially published, at least), was also commented on. Hugh mentioned that he is expected to attend professional development and learning in English and then *make the jump from those particular resources, those particular approaches, to actually make that work* in IME, symbolising the importance of context again. Oran and Liam also mentioned the challenge of enactment in IME contexts citing examples related to recent large-scale curriculum and assessment reform. These perceptions signal implications for system leaders about how to both target and harmonise supports for IME leadership.

Fiachra points out that many principals of IME secondary schools will be engaged in LPP both within and outside the school in the community, which he says illustrates *another layer, another load, another responsibility, and more meetings and more time outside of your workday*. While Patrick appreciated the financial resources available for his school's language plan, he indicated that despite his school's engagement in LPP they have not been able to spend the majority of the financial resources provided to them. He attributed this to two factors: the systemic lack of material resources for Irish and, coupled with this, the lack of specialised professional development and learning resources required by teachers to judge best how to use the resources to achieve the plan's aims. Both Patrick and Oran pointed out the need to better support principals with within-school LPP, while Fiachra urges that LPP ought to be considered in formal leadership preparation:

> if we are serious about retaining our language and [this part of] our culture and identity … you have to prepare people. You have to give them an understanding and a background and equip them better to be able to have a more meaningful role in retaining it.

Patrick adds that

> what happens a lot is that in a leadership role you become caught up in the micro stuff and the idea of planning for the future of the Gaeltacht and the future of the school, that kind of … you never get around to that. You just find yourself 10 years later and what are the Leaving Cert [terminal examination] results like? And why am I here? Is it for Leaving Cert results? Is it for the Irish language? That is a bigger question again.

Discussion

The principals' identities were collectively forged by a longstanding personal and professional commitment to IME. There was consensus amongst the leaders in Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht areas on values and beliefs vis-à-vis the cultural and linguistic significance of leading high-quality immersion education. Interestingly, the well substantiated academic benefits of immersion education (Steele et al. 2017) were less emanant in their accounts. Indeed, this went unmentioned. This consideration may further bolster the leaders' collective perceptions that more specialised leadership preparation and

development for immersion school leaders is necessary. A potential avenue these programmes might pursue is focusing on the academic benefits, as well as in-depth focus on the instructional leadership of immersion education, drawing on both theory and practice from both educational leadership and language. National collaborations between leadership and language specific providers might also be a worthwhile pursuit.

Although the analysis of leadership practices was limited by self-reporting and Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2019) framework, it was possible to observe that principals tended to spend the most time in setting directions, alongside building relationships and developing people. Although principals were very much preoccupied with ensuring the quality of the instructional programme, they faced systemic challenges in the availability, provision of and access to resources to assist in improving it. Connected to this, they also perceived that too much of their time was spent on administration. The systemic limitations and inequities they report encountering create leadership challenges for principals in developing the organisation to support desired practices. Principals' accounts illustrate that the acuteness of this challenge is exacerbated by a recruitment crisis not only for immersion schools, but in Ireland more broadly (O'Doherty and Harford 2018). They also viewed the policy change that revoked teachers working in IME receiving an additional allowance as regressive and having the potential to exacerbate recruitment issues, consistent with international findings concerning the interrelationship between the cutting of additional allowances and challenges in recruiting and retaining immersion school teachers (Howard and López-Velásquez 2019).

Little, if any, differences emerged in the practices employed by principals whether they were located within or outside of the Gaeltacht, or indeed, in the identities expressed as IME school leaders or challenges faced. However, a perception emerged in both cohorts that leading a school in the opposite context would be significantly different. Perhaps this is, in part, perpetuated by the fact these schools are distinguished in the national policy discourse, such as in the Chief Inspector's Report (cf. Department of Education 2022, 253–259). One difference related to the implementation of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017–2022* (Department of Education and Skills 2016c) which Gaeltacht school principals referred to. It is also clear in the Chief Inspector's Report that a significantly higher number of policies are targeted at schools within, rather than outside, of the Gaeltacht. Nonetheless, non-Gaeltacht schools also referred to local policies connected to SSE that aimed to consistently further improve students' proficiencies in Irish. This suggests that all immersion school leaders, not only those located in the Gaeltacht, merit more targeted, harmonised and collaborative support with LPP to better support them in balancing their own and the policy context's aspirations with the necessary resources for actualisation in a manner which is less rationalistic (Ó Laoire 2012) and more context-sensitive and specific.

The findings demonstrate a range of multi-layered and complex challenges encountered by principals as they lead immersion schools. One principal, Oran, stated that they are *victims of [their] own success*. A perception emerges that the unique needs of the sector's context were not sufficiently reflected in national strategies of teacher preparation and professional development and learning, which connected to the issues of recruitment and extending the range of leadership practices respectively. The necessity for a more coherent and strategic systemic response, drawing on the collective experiences and expertise of committed organisations, was clear. Given that principals reported

various inequities and injustices they encountered as they led, the balance of *aspiration* and resources for *actualisation* provided by the LPP context must be continually measured. Where inequities identified, they should be addressed as a priority. As a further matter of equity and justice in a system which purports to distribute leadership, policy makers and those in positions of responsibility at all levels – state, system, network and school – should also measure the balance of their policy's *reliance on* or *support of* school principal leadership. While the next generation of immersion school principals should be supported (Menken and Solorza 2015), it is also important in light of the policy context and principals' accounts to be cognizant of the necessity to develop teacher and middle leadership, especially in systems claiming to be committed to the implementation of a distributed leadership model. It is clear principals' career pathways in this study had been entirely committed to IME. Yet, they reported little by way of specific immersion school leadership preparation and development. Further continuing to support and expand on efforts addressing this absence would be significant for immersion school leaders, aspirant and appointed, especially given that school leaders now expect more preparation for the role, favouring context-specific supports (Murphy 2019, 2020).

Conclusion

Despite the reported impact of leadership on the success of schools, as well as the academic benefits and cultural enrichment for students in immersion school contexts, immersion school principals' leadership remain understudied in educational leadership. This study in the Irish, minority-language context contributes to the nominal available literature by providing a portrait of immersion school leadership practices. The research demonstrates the support required for and challenges inherent in balancing the policy context's and their own *aspiration* with resources and infrastructure for *actualisation*. Particular leadership challenges expressed by principals related to continually improving instructional quality and developing the organisation to support desired practices. What is imperative is that the inequities reported be addressed, and future multidisciplinary research should evaluate the scale and impact of these inequities, as well as whether, and if so, why, they endure. As developments in the field of IME in Ireland have continued to be discussed at a policy level (DES 2019b) but are now likely delayed by the impact of Covid-19, the considerations raised in this paper will be useful to begin and inform ongoing discussions and research (cf. Department of Education 2022, 253–259).

In order to mitigate against the perception of individual school leaders that the scale of the challenges they face is limited to their own context, as well as to indicate that challenges are common within and outside of Gaeltacht contexts, group leadership coaching (Aas and Vavik 2015) may a practical intervention, and one which addresses the notion of leadership identity as an IME school leader, as well as more technical dimensions of leadership. Group leadership coaching could also potentially facilitate the distribution of leadership should leaders at all levels in schools be included, such as middle and teacher leaders. This may also begin to address the gaps in specialised leadership preparation and development for immersion schools and begin to develop a leadership pipeline. In tandem with more access to formal professional development in LPP, specific IME group coaching may also be a site in which leaders can collaborate to grapple

with and develop agency to respond with bottom-up policies for issues they encounter beyond more rationalistic interpretations of policy (Ó Laoire 2012). Ensuring co-professional membership of the group – spanning principals, the Inspectorate, and academics in language and literacy, school improvement and school leadership, the language-speaking community themselves – would likely further enhance its impact.

Given the inherent connection between language, culture and context, further research on leadership and context (Hallinger 2018) should also pursue questions pertaining to language. Further research might also explore how culturally and linguistically responsive leadership (Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis 2016; Scanlan and López 2012) might be better supported in immersion schools, as well as how such approaches are leveraged to respond to diversity in such schools. While immersion schools are particularly interesting microcosms in which to study these phenomena, they may have implications for other schools in contemporary, multilingual society given the global policy imperative for schools to address language and literacy. For international audiences, the findings suggest that education systems should take seriously and provide adequate resources to actualise their responsibilities to support school leaders at all levels, most especially principals, by offering linguistically and culturally relevant preparation and development. To further support immersion school principals, systems should also focus on clear recruitment, retention, remuneration and capacity building activities for teachers in immersion settings from initial teacher education through to principal preparation and development. Approaches to teacher and principal development erring on the generic or leaving it to chance is not enough to maintain, lest still develop, the enrichment of immersion education, especially for minority languages.

Finally, alongside these suggestions, it will be necessary to remain critically inquisitive of the degree to which professional education opportunities and broader educational policy structures for the organisation of immersion (and, indeed, multilingual) education facilitate opportunities or create barriers for leaders. Beyond the main issues of teacher recruitment and retention, and professional development and capacity building, how immersion school leaders are supported to negotiate other specific challenges such as growing new schools, special and inclusive education, curriculum reform, increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in immersion education, governance arrangements, specific immersion school language planning and policy priorities, and more, will demand ongoing collaborative research and resource provision in order to ensure the best outcomes possible for all in the school community.

Note

1. In this paper, drawing on Cummins' (2011) definition, the terms immersion and bilingual are used interchangeably owed to the limitations in the literature by focusing on one or the other.

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