Quality Leadership ⇔ Quality Learning

Michael Fullan is insightful, analytical and refreshingly practical. His empowering ideas for educational leadership emphasise the pivotal role of the principal for school and system improvement. He highlights critical connections between school leadership, school culture and student learning, and he challenges us to think strategically in building sustainable school-leadership capability throughout the system.

Eamon Stack, Chief Inspector, Department of Education & Science

Professor Fullan's paper captures in a most succinct manner the unique contribution that powerful principal leadership can make to school and student improvement. From outlining the ways successful school principals promote quality learning to discussing the barriers to be overcome, this contribution has the potential to build on initiatives already in train and inform the debate on all aspects of principalship, from recruitment to induction and retention.

Dr Séamus McGuinness

Drawing on a vast range of research, much of it focused on the dynamics of school life, Michael Fullan has distilled rich insights and wisdom of great value to the Irish school system in transition. In this paper he puts the spotlight on the pivotal role of the principal in the Irish education reform movement for the twenty-first century. Its tripartite format identifies how principals make a difference, what barriers prevent them from realising their potential and what actions need to be taken 'to create a new irreversible momentum of success'. The paper presents a concise and compelling case for constructive action, which we will ignore at our peril. As he remarks, the paper 'has a decidedly action bias', and he directs his specific recommendations to three agencies – the government, IPPN and individual principals. Fullan tells us that his recommendations are 'intended to build on the strong educational traditions and practices in the Irish system', but he is unequivocal on the need for action to secure the future well-being of the system.

Professor John Coolahan

In this insightful and informative paper, Fullan makes the crucial link between leadership and learning. The principal is the key to successful learning, and in this context Fullan challenges the system to develop and support the role of the principal teacher.

Áine Lawlor, The Teaching Council

Fullan's message to primary principals is mixed. First, principals are pivotal to successful schools. Second, leading and learning have a symbiotic relationship that needs strengthening. Third, this needs to happen within schools, between schools and at a systemic and policy level. Above all, principals need to be pro-active in their own learning, but their voices need to be heard much more clearly in the policy arena and in shaping the future agenda of schooling. Principals will find much to identify with in this presentation, while simultaneously being challenged to think differently about their leadership.

Dr Ciaran Sugrue, St Patrick's College

Principals are pivotal figures when it comes to school success. Michael Fullan has been saying it for years. Here he puts forward several powerful ideas aimed at strengthening the position of Irish principals. There is an urgent need for action, as quality leadership goes hand in hand with quality learning.

John Walshe, Education Editor, Irish Independent

Michael Fullan has an unerring ability to link educational theory to the everyday tasks of school principals. His contribution to the position in Ireland challenges both policy makers and practitioners; neither can afford to ignore his message. To do so would be an abdication of our duties as principals – if acted upon, the benefits for all – not least our pupils – will be great.

Kate Griffin, President, International Confederation of Principals

Quality Leadership ⇔ Quality Learning: Proof beyond reasonable doubt is another reminder of how Michael Fullan's work is and has been a beacon for over two decades in the sometimes confusing and challenging shadowlands of educational change. Drawing on a range of insightful studies and drawing out their implications for the development of the principalship in the Irish context, this paper shines a light on specific ways in which school principals can foster shared and distributed leadership (moving beyond a focus on their own leadership) as a cornerstone of quality education. As ever, Michael Fullan's writing is an invitation to delve more deeply into the the core of education – that is, the extent to which schools nurture quality-learning environments for students and teachers.

Dr Paul Conway, University College, Cork

Fullan's paper, and the solid research base that underpins it, makes a crucial and timely contribution to the ongoing debate on the key leadership function of principalship in this country.

The paper powerfully argues the extent to which the effective principal transforms learning and teaching, not only at the individual and school levels but also at system-wide and national levels, both in the short-term and, in many instances, the long term also.

Fullan notes how we have missed opportunities to develop leaders of the highest quality. He argues persuasively that it is now time to remove the barriers, to end official inaction and to build the capacity of this potentially powerful cadre of professionals. Building on earlier research, he offers a clear agenda for progress through recommendations which identify both the clear challenges of change and the ultimate rewards, not only for those who champion the change but for all who engage with our educational system.

Dr Peadar Cremin, President, Mary Immaculate College

Michael Fullan's contribution to school improvement has been immense on the international stage. *Quality Leadership ⇔ Quality Learning* challenges policy-makers, support agencies, school leaders and the teaching profession to reconceptualise aspects of current practice together. It highlights the centrality of the principal in leading the improvement of our schools, while offering a ringing endorsement of the pivotal role of the teacher as the powerhouse of learning. This paper offers a platform from which future discussions can be launched: an inspiring collaboration between IPPN and Michael Fullan.

Paddy Flood, Leadership Development for Schools

Quality Leadership ⇔ Quality Learning

Proof Beyond Reasonable Doubt

Michael Fullan

OISE/University of Toronto

Paper prepared for the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN)

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Foreword

MY FAVOURITE DESCRIPTION of *leadership* is 'the art of getting a group of people to do something as a team because they individually believe that it is the right thing to do'. On *learning,* I like the notion that to fully understand anything, you must have taught it successfully to someone else, for '*to teach is to learn twice*'. There is, perhaps, wisdom in the expression 'he *learned* me how to do it'!

This paper explores the relationship and correlation between the *quality of leadership* and the *quality of learning* in a school. There is no doubt about the impact and importance of *quality teaching* when it comes to a child's learning. However, if teaching is a 'team game' then the question needing to be asked is – how important is the captain's role? Is the captain there for the tossing of the coin beforehand and to accept the cup if the team wins, or is the captain an influence on the players' individual and collective performances. *Sin í an cheist*.

For the purposes of writing this paper, there are few people as experienced – and possibly none more eminently respected – than Professor Michael Fullan. Professor Fullan has many connections with Ireland, from the 'rootedness' of his family to the many personal and professional friendships he has made largely through his contribution to educational debate in Ireland. He is a long-term colleague and friend of Professor John Coolahan and, indeed, with each visit he strengthens and deepens his contacts with many other key figures in Irish education. Principals, through IPPN, also consider Professor Fullan to be a colleague and friend of theirs: more than 900 primary principals have had the opportunity over the past three years to listen to and engage with him through a sequence of facilitated workshops that have formed a part of IPPN's professional-development programme. IPPN has been most fortunate in having Professor Fullan engage with school leadership issues in Ireland, and we are privileged that he has been willing to write the

paper *Quality Leadership ⇔ Quality Learning* for IPPN at a critical point of our organisational development, and more so at a point in time when the professional issues around quality, leadership and learning require a focused response and action.

The case for *quality leadership* made in this paper by Professor Fullan has profound implications for the Irish primary education system. It calls for action. It presents a real sense of urgency. It is also provocative in its challenge to individual principals, to IPPN, and to the Department of Education and Science, that each should take responsibility for actions and initiatives within its own scope of influence. Such a collaborative approach has the capacity to unleash the incredible potential of purposeful leadership and, in doing so, to influence the quality of learning for each individual child.

On reading an early draft of this paper, its similarity to a prosecuting lawyer's closing argument in court resonated with me. The essence of the argument seeking a conviction is made dispassionately, without recourse to sentiment or emotion. The reader, like the jury in a trial, is convinced not by any dramatic effects but by the sheer weight and quality of evidence that is presented so clearly, logically and with forensic detail. The verdict is unanimous, as the evidence presented satisfies the burden of *proof beyond reasonable doubt*.

The draft title included the phrase *sine qua non*, suggesting that without quality leadership there is nothing to provide for quality learning. This has now been replaced by the mathematical symbol which is explained on the cover of the document. I believe that as you read and reflect on the depth, wisdom and courage of Professor Fullan's arguments. you will appreciate the significance of using the connective between the statements *quality leadership* and *quality learning*. Having had the opportunity to read this paper, I assure you that Professor Fullan has presented proof beyond reasonable doubt that the truth of either one of the statements requires the truth of the other: *Quality Leadership ⇔ Quality Learning.*

Tá ár meas agus ár mbuíochas tuillte ag an Ollamh Fullan as an gcáipéis seo a chur ar fáil le fonn dúinn. Guím rath Dé air agus é ag saothrú i ngort an oideachais. Agus sibhse, a chomhleacaithe – léigh libh! Tá saibhreas agus gaois an léinn le treabhadh agaibh.

Seán Cottrell

Introduction . . .

LET ME START with the conclusion. The principal is the nerve centre of school improvement. When principal leadership is strong even the most challenged schools thrive. When it is weak schools fail or badly underperform. But the principalship itself is not thriving. If anything it is reeling because of heightened expectations and corresponding neglect of re-examining and repositioning the role suitable to the needs of the system in the twenty-first century.

The fact that the principalship is not improving is partly a problem of individual principals and groups of principals not claiming a greater role, and it also a system failure – that is, insufficient attention by the system to re-examine the principalship in order to make the role more effective for leveraging teacher and student learning. We often talk about raising the bar for student learning. In this paper my subject is raising the bar for school leadership. If we do raise the bar we will get more out of leadership in the very terms prized by society: an ever-improving school system.

The principal, of course, does not carry the day by himself or herself. Individual teachers are the ones who make the fundamental difference in whether students learn. But for this to add up, for teacher development to have a large-scale and lasting impact on student learning as a whole, the research is unequivocal — you cannot do it without quality, active leadership on the part of the principal. In other words, principals make a difference or not through teachers individually and collectively by enabling them to work together inside and outside the school.

The research is irrefutable in concluding that the principal is the pivotal figure when it comes to success. This paper is about how we can dig deeper into the underlying nature of this finding; and then to focus on how we can effect widespread development of school leadership.

In light of the crucial role of education in the twenty-first century, we can no longer be content

to reiterate research findings. This paper has a decidedly action bias. If the school leader is so important, what will it take to get massive, actual improvements in the principalship.

I approach this action goal in three ways. First, we need to unpack the way in which successful principals go about obtaining success. We need to get inside the black box and understand *how* principals make a difference. What do they do and how do they do it? What are the pathways to success? I will use both quantitative and qualitative findings to better understand the nature of the role in action.

Second, we need to identify the barriers that stand in the way of more principals developing in the direction of sustained success. Right now, only a minority of principals in jurisdictions around the world are playing the kind of role that we know makes a school-wide difference. Why is that? And how can we tolerate the lost opportunity to make a difference for many more children than we now do?

Third, given the first two sections, what is the way forward? What can we do to act on what we know to create a new, irreversible momentum of success? I lay out a series of recommendations designed to contribute to the debate in Ireland on the future of the principalship. The flow, then, is the nature of the new role of the principalship; the barriers inhibiting us; and the way forward.

Not only are principals crucial for school-wide improvement, they are the key to system improvement

There is one more critical factor, which will become clear in the course of the paper. Not only are principals crucial for school-wide improvement, they are the key to *system improvement*. Properly conceived and supported, the new work of the principal is the cross-link from school-wide development to cross-school or lateral development of schools, and to the two-way gate that connects local and national interests.

1
How Principals Influence Student Learning

LET US START with Fred Newmann and colleagues' (2000) clear findings about schools that were especially effective in achieving success in difficult circumstances (*see* diagram below). Overall, Newmann found that successful schools had a certain 'capacity' which enabled them to focus on teaching and learning linked closely to student achievement.

The key initial question is what is school capacity? Capacity is the collective power of the full staff to work together to improve student learning school wide. More particularly, school capacity consisted of five components working together: individual skills and dispositions of teachers; a professional learning community (defined as the quality of ongoing relationships among teachers, and between teachers and the principal); coherence or focused effort; resources (time, materials, access to expertise) and the principal.

In Newmann's research, in effect, the main role of the school principal is to 'cause' the other four elements to develop in concert over time. In other words, the impact of the principal on student achievement is powerful but indirect. He or she focuses on developing the culture of the school (the synergy of individual skills of teachers, learning relationships among teachers, a

relentless focus on instruction, and ongoing mobilisation of resources). All of this with an explicit attention to helping the school link capacity to achievement through examining data on student learning in order to identify actions needed in classrooms and school wide for improvement.

In our own work in helping schools (in Ontario) and districts improve, we are engaged in partnerships which explicitly work on how schools can develop their capacity to do what Newmann and his colleagues found. To take one of many examples, we have been working with York Region District School Board for the past four years in a Literary Collaborative Initiative. York Region is a multicultural district just north of Toronto. It is a large district with some 170 primary and secondary schools. Starting in September 2002 with 40 schools, we began the capacity-building activities with school teams. The school leadership team consisted of three people — the principal, the lead literacy teacher (a teacher within the school assigned to work with the principal and teachers to improve literacy teaching and learning), and the Special Education Resource Teacher (another teacher leader focusing on special needs of children).

The work with school teams essentially involves the district (with our training and support) building its capacity to bring about improvements in literacy in all schools. Over the past four years we have expanded from the initial 40 schools to an additional 65 in September 2003, and to all 170 schools in participation as of September 2004. At this stage, then, all schools in York Region (working in four cohorts) are engaged in capacity building. The school principal is front and centre, and is clearly charged (and helped) with developing a new and more powerful culture of learning. The principal leads the school teams, and in effect is responsible for school-wide development, which is closely linked to student achievement.

In the course of doing this work, the knowledge of how principals carry out these developments has become increasingly focused and specific. It is similar to what Newmann found, but on a more comprehensive scale (literally all the schools in the district).

While retaining Newmann's core focus, we have expanded the strategy to include other necessary elements, which I will only list here and return to later. The expansion includes:

⇔ Taking into account how the school can best involve parents and the community;

- ⇔ How schools can work together to learn from each other and enlarge their commitments;

- ⇔ How schools can best relate to state policies and frameworks.

Before pursuing these matters, let us examine more quantitative research findings on the role of the principal. Every review of the research literature on school improvement has highlighted the key role of the principal, for better or for worse, i.e. there are no examples of school-wide success without school leadership; all examples of school failure include weak or ineffective leadership. These findings are so consistent that one would have to ask, 'What's new?' What's new is a more detailed examination of *how* leadership influences achievement.

An excellent case in point is Ken Leithwood and colleagues *(2004)* review of research for the Wallace Foundation on *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. Not only did Leithwood et al. review the research field, they also included a 'review of reviews', thus consolidating a massive amount of research on the topic.

Leithwood's comprehensive review found that successful leaders engaged in three sets of core practices:

- ⇔ Setting directions (shared vision and group goals, high performance expectations);

- ⇔ Developing people (individual support, intellectual/emotional stimulation, modelling);

- ⇔ Redesigning the organisation (collaborative cultures and structures, building productive relations with parents and the community).

Leithwood *(2004:21)* cites quantitative research studies that show that school leadership accounts for one-quarter of the variation on student achievement explained by school-level variables (school-level variables themselves are but a smaller set of other factors such as family background).

In an even more thorough review, Marzano and his colleagues *(2005),* in *School Leadership that Works*, examined 69 studies involving 2,802 schools and approximately 1.4 million students and 14,000 teachers. They also found a .25 correlation between the leadership behavior of the principal and student achievement. They identified 21 specific behaviours that influence student

learning, most of them indirectly (but nonetheless explicitly) through shaping the culture and relationships of people within the school and between the school and the outside.

Thus, we know that principals are critical to success — there are just not enough of them impacting improvement in practice. Leithwood concludes with this observation:

> The chance of any reform improving student learning is remote unless . . . school leaders agree with its purposes and appreciate what is required to make it work. Local leaders must, for example, be able to help their colleagues understand how the externally initiated reform might be integrated into local improvement efforts, provide the necessary supports for those whose practices must change, and must win the co-operation and support of parents and others in the local community. *(Leithwood et al.: 4)*

One further refinement is needed in our understanding of the role of the principal in reform. It turns out that it is not individual *leaders* who make for success, but rather the leaders who establish a critical mass of *leadership*. Jim Collins *(2001)* found this to be the case in his study of 'great' organisations (organisations that have sustained success over a minimum of fifteen years) compared to 'good' organisations. Collins made the distinction between 'effective leaders' who 'catalyze commitment to vision and standards' and 'executive leaders' who 'build enduring greatness.' This is a critical distinction. Effective leaders can get short-term results, but do not lay the foundation for continued success. Executive leaders work on the longer-term agenda.

. . . it is not individual leaders who make for success, but rather the leaders who establish a critical mass of leadership

What this means is quite specific: the main mark of a school principal at the end of his or her tenure is not just the impact on the bottom line of student achievement, but also, equally, how many good leaders they leave behind who can go even further. Once again, the impact of the school principal is both direct and indirect. Developing leadership in others within the school is a core requirement of the new work of the principal. This becomes a chicken-and-egg problem. We need to attract high-quality people to

leadership positions because it is only high-quality people who can model and otherwise help develop strong leadership in others. It will be this critical mass of distributive leaders who can make the largest differences.

The conclusion we can draw about the role of the principal is twofold. First, school-wide success, especially with respect to establishing the conditions for continuous improvement, depends on the leadership of the principal – leadership that focuses on the improvement of teaching, closely linked to student achievement; and also leadership that fosters the development of leadership in others who form part of the critical mass of leaders who can carry on improvement into the future.

Second, and a case I shall make in subsequent sections, the principal has a critical role to play in system-wide reform, development and success. As we shall see, by working in clusters of schools, or other networks, principals can influence their colleagues but can also help refine national strategies that get people working on the policy issues of the day.

If both of these conclusions are valid, what stands in the way? Some of the barriers are self-imposed, but most are systemic. We have not yet made it possible for the role of the principal to take its powerful place in school and system-wide improvement.

2
Barriers to School Leadership Development

BARRIERS CAN BE self-imposed – as when one does not exercise the existing possibilities within the role – or systemic, as when incentives and constraints of the system make it difficult to play certain roles. Self and system-imposed constraints are two sides of the same coin because they affect each other.

It is difficult to calculate which of the two sets of barriers is dominant, but I would say that when one observes that many principals are not able to carry out their role effectively, then it is more likely to be a system problem. For the sake of argument, I am going to suggest that about 30% of the problem concerns self-imposed limitations, and 70% relates to system limitations (of course, the point is to address both aspects simultaneously).

In *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership (Fullan, 2003)*, I identified several self-imposed factors: perceived system limitations, 'if-only' dependency, loss of moral compass, and the inability to take charge of one's own learning. Briefly, perceived system limitations occur when principals attribute more constraints to the system than is objectively warranted. As Sarason *(1982)*

observed almost twenty years ago: 'the system is frequently conceived by the individual in a way that obscures, many times unwittingly, the range of possibilities available to him or her'. *(p. 64)*

'If only' dependency limits action because individuals fail to push in new directions, blaming the system and seeking only system solutions (e.g. 'if only the system could provide coherent policies, I could do my job'). It is not that these complaints have no basis in reality, but rather that they result in inaction so that nothing happens. Principals should become greater risk-takers in the knowledge that to maintain a dysfunctional status quo is itself a *greater* risk.

Loss of one's moral compass can occur when people get caught up in daily routines, become tired and cynical, and fail to reconnect with why they became an educational leader in the first place. Not taking charge of one's own learning is an especially important problem because principals need to model learning, setting an example for all in the organisation.

While the message is that individual principals should exercise more initiative as leaders of continuous improvement, my main conclusion in this paper is that the solution we need is indeed a *system* one. Richard Elmore *(2004)* makes this case clearly and forcefully. First, Elmore argues that schools need to focus much more intensely and continuously on teaching and learning than they currently do. Indeed, he shows how schools have failed to zero in on instruction, while accommodating many structural changes over the years. What we need (and don't have), Elmore says, is to:

- ⇔ Maintain a tight instructional focus sustained over time (apply the instructional focus to all students);
- ⇔ Routinise accountability for practice and performance (create a strong normative environment in which adults take responsibility for the academic performance of all children);
- ⇔ Reduce isolation and open practice up to direct observation, analysis and feedback. *(Elmore, 2004:81)*

And, of course, these priorities represent substantial organisational reforms (structure and culture) in schools, which will require school leaders who can model and lead the 'design and implementation of school improvement strategies', including altering conditions under which teachers work.

Elmore's analysis is consistent with our own analysis, which is that times have dramatically changed in the twenty-first century. We can no longer be content to educate only those 50–60% of students who easily pass through the system. The knowledge economy and the complexity of surviving in a global world demand that we have a quantum improvement in educating 90% or more of our children *(see Fullan, Hill and Crevola, 2006)*. Elmore's first point is fundamental:

> In order for people in schools to respond to external pressure for accountability, they have to learn to do their work differently and to rebuild the organisation of schooling around a different way of doing the work. *(p. 93)*

Radical organisational change requires strong organisational leadership — hence the elevation of the role of the principal and the need for broader school leadership. The identification of much more fundamental reform in how teachers teach and especially in how they need to work intensively together is only one half of Elmore's (and ours) argument. The other half is that orchestrating such change is a system responsibility, and further that currently systems are failing in this respect as much as schools are.

Elmore notes that existing *system* incentives that focus only on accountability 'have virtually no relationship to the knowledge and practice of improvement'. *(p. 113) F*or schools (systems of schools) to improve on any scale, we need to focus on both accountability and *capacity*. Capacity involves the collective efficacy of a group to focus on and sustain its efforts in improving learning for all or nearly all students. It consists of new knowledge, skills and competencies, mobilisation and concentration of resources, and the deepening of commitment and motivation to keep improving. All of this requires colaborative work, but most schools do not now have the capacity for such sophisticated colaborative work:

> The idea that a school will *improve* its instructional practice and, therefore, the overall performance of its students implies a capacity for collective deliberation and action that schools [do not] exhibit. *(Elmore 2004:1973, italics in original)*

And here is the bottom line: if schools do not currently have the capacity to do this new demanding work, it is partly, argues Elmore, because the system has not done its part to make it likely or possible for new capacities to develop.

In order to get different results, claims Elmore, 'schools would have to learn to do something they did not know how to do, and in order to do that they would have to have access to skills, and knowledge [again collectively] that would help them understand and enact those practices in the classroom'. *(p. 241)* Meaningful amounts of regular uninterrupted time for professional dialogue is a basic prerequisite for this to happen. In other words, if team-based planning is to take place, it must be by design rather than by chance.

. . . if team-based planning is to take place, it must be by design rather than by chance

The inevitable conclusion according to Elmore is 'the principle of reciprocity' between accountability and capacity.

> For each unit of performance I [the system] demand of you [the school], I have an equal and reciprocal responsibility to provide you with a unit of capacity to produce that performance. *(p. 245)*

Integrated forms of accountability and capacity building – i.e. what we need to bring about major and continuous reform in schools – invokes the principle of reciprocity:

> Schools build capacity by generating internal accountability — greater agreement and coherence on expectations for teachers and students — and then by working their way through problems of instructional practice at ever-increasing levels of complexity and demand. *(Elmore, p. 254)*

But schools do not have such capacity now, and will not develop in this direction unless the conditions under which they work are fundamentally altered. For the latter to occur requires a quid-pro-quo resolution. The state needs to make new investments in the infrastructure at the system and local levels in order to meet the requirements of expertise for improving schools; and schools for their part must engage in collborative action (inside and across schools) that focuses on capacity building with emphasis on accountable outcomes.

In order to make teaching and learning an organisational and system priority, it is not only positive incentives that are required but also the removal or dimunition of what we have come

to call 'distractors'. Distractors are bureaucratic, managerial, industrial action and other forces that eat up time and energy at the expense of instructional and student-achievement matters. Proactively addressing the distractors has to be at the heart of any solution.

The final system barrier concerns the way in which the principal's role has expanded without anything being taken away, while providing few incentives to develop capacities related to the new enhanced role. Accountability and managerial responsibilities in most jurisdictions have been added, regardless of size of school; and as these have been increased, so has the expectation to lead improvements in teaching and learning.

There is an ironic way in which the research on the importance of the principalship has worsened the situation. Because research demonstrates time and again that the principal is key, policy-makers start to load up the role. A typical case in point is the Cross-City Campaign (2005) report on reforms in Chicago, Milwaukee and Seattle. The reform initiatives failed to improve classroom practice, and one of six main reasons cited by the case study writers was:

> Principals had multiple responsibilities that often worked at cross purposes with their role of instructional leader. *(p. 9)*

Overload takes a different but equally debilitating form in small schools, as we shall see in the following section. In the final analysis, the barriers to be overcome are formidable: they consist of deep structural and cultural factors, some of which are in the tradition of the role, but others ironically added because of the growing importance of the role of the principal in reform solutions. To tackle this complex set of obstacles effectively is simultaneously an individual, group and system responsibility.

3
The Way Forward

AS WE TAKE this analysis forward into the Irish context, several implications can be noted. Although I am not an expert in Irish education, I have considerable experience in working with first and second-level principals around the country in workshops involving hundreds of principals, and have had a long-standing connection with my colleague, Professor John Coolahan, including involvement in his most recent proiect with Pádraig Hogan: *Teaching and Learning in the Twenty-first century (Education Department, NUI, Maynooth, 2005).*

My first conclusion at this juncture in the Irish Education Reform agenda is that the principal-ship needs serious attention that it has not yet received. The time is right to change this, and to follow through with action that will strengthen the role and impact that principals can have in school improvement in the twenty-first century.

The HayGroup's *(2003)* analysis of the Irish primary principals' role notes upfront that there is a difference in emphasis between the 1973 and 1998 statutory provisions for the principals' role, with the former stressing management and supervisory aspects of the role and the latter emphasising 'the learning, developmental, consultative and leadership aspects of the role'. *(p. 9)* Given what we have identified in the previous two sections as needed for substantial reform, and given my reading of the HayGroup report, it seams probable that principals are expected to carry out all aspects of the 1973 *and* 1998 provisions. This would mean that the current role is ham-pered or rendered less effective because of *role overload* and *lack of role clarity* (the latter, at least, in terms of what the core focus of the role should be).

This applies to both 'teaching principals' and 'administrative principals'. (Teaching principals are principals in small schools defined as having less than 180 students – typically seven or less teachers; they are allowed between 14 and 22 'administration' days per year for leadership/management tasks; 72% of school principals in Ireland are classified as schools of this type.) Recall my estimate that the problem is 30% individual limitation and 70% system; let us say that this is the case for administrative principals. For teaching principals the problem is more likely 10% / 90%, making it virtually impossible for the role to be performed as expected. But note, I am saying it is a major problem for both roles, that is, for all principals. Interestingly, teaching principals likely have more of an affinity for the focus on teaching and learning (given their involvement in direct-student learning) but less time to actually carry out other aspects of their leadership role.

The HayGroup identifies seven major elements in the statutory provisions, which they label as:

1. Leadership (vision of learning and development);
2. Teaching and Learning (establishing an environment for learning and development);
3. Resource Management;
4. Human Resource Management;
5. Policy Foundation/Implementation (educational and non-educational);
6. Administration (maintenance of records etc.);
7. External Relationships (Department of Education and Science, the Board of Management, and Parents).

It should be obvious that the combination of these roles is neither particularly clear nor does it provide the sharp focus we earlier identified that will be required. The main conclusion of the HayGroup report is:

> There is a strong perception throughout the ranks of the principal generally that the role has become extremely difficult if not impossible to deliver

> effectively. This perception appears to derive from the lack of clarity around the role and a lack of time and resources. *(p. 35)*

I agree. The HayGroup proceeds to make eleven recommendations with which I do not disagree, but I will argue that they do not represent a complete solution. Many solutions in the area of leadership development these days (and virtually all jurisdictions are so engaged) suffer from what I call 'the individualistic bias'. Let me qualify this by saying that frameworks, standards for leaders, and professional development – prior to and in the position of – contributes to but *is not capacity building*. The latter involves putting the ideas into practice on a daily basis. and entails changes in the culture of schools and the relationship between schools and the larger system. Capacity building above all requires 'learning in context', which simultaneously changes the individual and the contexts or cultures under which they work. To paraphrase the HayGroup recommendations:

1. Establish processes to enhance the selection and assessment of candidates for the principalship with selecting 'leaders of learning' in mind;
2. Study and enhance the role of middle management with schools (e.g. deputy principal);
3. Clarify the role of principal so that an appropriate supply of well-qualified and motivated candidates are available;
4. Put in place a leadership development programme for principals (this recommendation is currently being implemented);
5. Consider mentoring opportunities for newly appointed and potential principals (this recommendation is currently being implemented);
6. Principals must acknowledge and embrace the need to provide constructive developmental feedback and coaching to staff;
7. All principals should be provided with development in key relevant skills;
8. A set of clear-cut policies and processes in the management of professional staff should be developed, particularly with underperformance in mind;

9 Duplication of functions, challenges and resources between small schools in adjacent geographical areas should be examined to enable schools to provide more effective management and service provision;

10 The respective roles and responsibilities of the principal and the Board of Management should be clearly defined and articulated;

11 Teaching principals should proactively organise their own teaching workload in a manner that enables them to fulfill their primary leadership accountabilities more effectively. *(HayGroup, 2003: 36-37)*

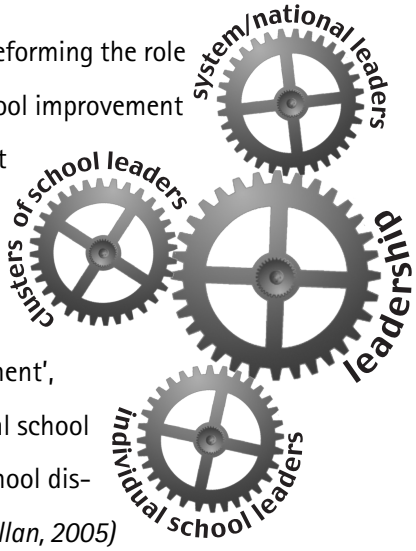
First, as far as I know – except for recommendations 4 and 5 – the government has taken little action on these recommendations despite the passage of three years in a time of urgent need to attend to the principalship. Indeed, many of the issues have been raised in earlier reports, such as the Report on the Primary School Principalship in 1999 and the 1995 White Paper. This inaction reinforces my conclusion that the development of the role of the principal in Ireland has been neglected, which I think amounts to a missed opportunity in the sense that improvements in the positioning of the principalship would have significant impact on both teacher and student learning. As long as the issues are neglected, the principalship will suffer – fewer people and fewer talented people will seek the principalship, and those that become principals will suffer more stress and/or otherwise be less effective on the job.

I might also put this discussion in the context of the development of collaboration in the teaching profession and the associated power of professional learning communities and schools learning from each other in clusters and networks. Ireland has a long tradition of valuing education and its teachers are held in esteem in society. There is also a tradition of teacher autonomy which has its strengths, The learning requirements of the knowledge society, however, requires teachers to collaborate. To be effective, teachers and schools must learn from each other. In addition to the obvious benefits of keeping up with the most effective teaching and learning practices, collaboration also strengthens social cohesion and collective commitment. Knowledge and commitment are powerful forces for continuous improvement.

In other words, the tradition of teacher and school autonomy must embrace new forms of

interactive professionalism. These forms are exemplified in the Project, *Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century*; they are embedded in this paper, which advocates principals and teachers working together to promote collaborative cultures within and across schools; my own workshop experiences in Ireland with more than 2,000 teachers, principals and system leaders over the past four years indicates strongly that many Irish educators are already going down this powerful pathway.

In essence, my conclusion in this paper is that principals working with teachers are essential to the development of collaborative cultures. Teaching continues to be one of the most sought-after professions for university graduates in Ireland. Many more graduates than can be handled present a rich pool of applicants for vacant teaching positions in schools. Not so for the principalship. Over the past ten years the number of applicants for vacancies has steadily declined in the country from a ratio of 5·5 applications per vacancy in 1996 to 2·3:1 in 2005. Most alarmingly, the decline has been steepest in the last three years, descending rapidly from 3·5:1 in 2002 to 2·3:1 in 2005. This puts future school improvement in serious jeopardy. One of the consequences of low rates of application is a corresponding drop in applicant quality. Evidence suggests that a lot of talented 'leadership material' is seeking career fulfilment and promotion in universities, etc., but avoiding school principalships. Whilst good teachers do not always make good principals, poor teachers *never* make good principals.



This leads me to recommend that major attention be focused on reforming the role of principal, not in its own right but as the key catalyst to enable school improvement in the context of the national education goals of the country. I want to be clear: the context of reform is national education policy. The question is what is the role of the principal in this context, and do current conditions make it possible to play that role? What is needed for system reform is a deliberate investment in 'tri-level development', that is, co-ordinating and developing what has to happen at the local school and community level, the regional level (recognising there are no school districts in Ireland), and the level of the state. *(Barber & Fullan, 2005; Fullan, 2005)*

In such a model there is something in it for all levels. For politicians and the public, current policies are not yielding success. If they allow autonomy at the classroom and school level ('let a

thousand flowers bloom'), substantial improvement does not occur. If they tighten up the system toward greater accountability, this too does not result in more than short-term modest gains. It is time to establish a blend of policy-led and bottom-up development — what I call capacity building – with a focus on getting better outcomes, such as more engagement of teachers and principals in collective efforts to improve teaching and learning. Such an approach will yield results for which the public is increasingly impatient given the sizeable financial investment in education. These outcomes will include greater engagement in learning on the part of students as teachers and principals work together to improve schools.

For teachers, principals and local communities, the quid-pro-quo solution (greater investment by the government in capacity-building in exchange for greater *collective* commitment and performance) offers the best chance for reducing frustrations and for experiencing success in their own and – hence – in students' development.

The lever that connects local and national levels — that is, that links local and national interests — is leadership. Thus the new approach should centre around leadership. I have grouped the recommendations according to whose responsibility it is to take action. These include three groups: government, IPPN, and individual principals and teacher leaders. No group should wait for the other to act, and as the action unfolds, all three need to be involved in whatever deliberations and action outcomes take place. The over-arching theme across the recommendations is to raise the bar for the principalship, to improve the conditions for carrying out the role, to challenge principals who are not performing well, and – in short – to build the quality of school leadership as a force for improvement.

Recommendations for Government

The goal is to dramatically increase leadership across the system

The purpose of all the recommendations is to raise the bar for making the principalship a stronger force for improvement in the Irish education system. The underlying basis of the suggestions are based on a broad conception of leadership across the profession, which includes teacher leadership, middle-level leadership, principal leadership and other consultant roles. The goal is to dramatically

increase leadership across the system. Organisational and system change needs to be the focus, and a critical mass of leaders working on this agenda is required for the status quo to be transformed. Further – and this is key – the establishment of the new role of the principalship should be pursued in a manner that builds the rapport among the IPPN, the teachers unions and the government. System development, to be successful, must involve the key system elements.

1 Establish a formal process to review the role

Establish a formal process to engage all parties in the debate on redefining the role of the principalship to ensure that it is clear that the highest priority be placed on the role of school leaders in developing the capacity of the school to improve teaching and learning within and across schools. This omnibus recommendation should include in its terms of reference the subsequent three recommendations.

2 Revise the contract for principals

Address explicitly the formal contractual nature of the role of the principal. This would include such matters as:

2.1 Provide significantly more leadership/non-contact time for teaching principals, including the expectation to participate in clusters of schools;

2.2 The teaching principal and the administrative designations need updating or, indeed, replacing as labels, especially the administrative label;

2.3 Offer new principalships on a 5–7 year contract;

2.4 Establish an appropriately attractive pay scale for principals;

2.5 Allow deputy principals to be appointed from outside as well as inside the school;

2.6 Professionalise and strengthen selection procedures for appointing principals, including providing guidelines and training for those making decisions;

2.7 Consider how people who select principals are chosen.

3 Focus on recruitment and retention

Establish policies and actions aimed at cultivating, recruiting and retaining future principals. Recommendations 1 and 2 will go some way towards making the principalship more attractive, thereby increasing the quality of the pool of educators interested in the position. There then needs to be opportunities to develop leadership capacities prior to and in the role. Recognising the successes of the Leadership Development for Schools, this programme should undergo regular review in the context of the recommendations of this paper. Formal mentoring programs for cohorts of teachers as possible future principals would be one example of developing a pool of strong leaders. If the practice of 'leaders developing other leaders' that I discussed earlier gets established among incumbent principals, there would be a pipeline of future leaders constantly being developed. Clustering of schools as in recommendation 4 would provide another mechanism for widening the circle of learning. In any case, overall there needs to be a system for cultivating and supporting the development of future school leaders, as I discussed earlier.

4 Develop strategies based on clusters

One version would apply to small schools; another to schools with 'full-time' principals. There is already considerable activity and interest in clusters in the country (see, for example, Ray McInerney's *(2005)* recent Master's thesis). As McInerney and others have found, there are many forms of clustering, many different labels (federations, networking, collobaration, etc.), and many different purposes being served. I would especially highlight establishing strongly purposeful clusters that focus on the core of improvement and get deeply at matters of improving the learning cultures of participating schools. One study of networks in England *(NCSL, 2004)* found that effective networks have four characteristics:

4.1 They are designed around a compelling idea or aspirational purpose;

4.2 They focus on pupil learning;

4.3 They create new opportunities for adult learning;

4.4 They plan and have dedicated leadership and management.

This list, of course, is entirely congruent with the ideas in this paper. Cluster work must proceed carefully so that the purposes are clear, and the implementation is of high quality (*see also* New Horizons for Smaller Schools, *St Patrick's College and IPPN, 2005*). The good news is that there is a strong appetite among educators in Ireland for this work, some good initial experience to draw on, and a rapidly increasing presence around the world in funding strategies designed to build lateral capacity across schools. So a corollary of this recommendation is to draw on the knowledge base that already exists in Ireland and internationally.

Recommendations for IPPN

1 Be a more proactive participant . . .

in the agenda captured in the four recommendations for government. This will require action leading up to any strategic discussion, contributing to the deliberations themselves and then participating in quality implementation and evaluation;

2 Foster a strong sense of quality . . .

among members, including the recognition that sometimes weak leadership is at the heart of poor performance in some schools. Over the years, professions have gained their respect from the public not by asking for it but by *claiming* it through the delivery of a quality service and constant focus on transparency and accountability – something valued by the public and other elements in society. It will be no different in raising the bar of the principalship in the twenty-first century;

3 Engage in 'thought leadership' . . .

3.1 Take the debate forward through open honest dialogue on key issues like under-performing principals, teachers and schools;

3.2 Balance the negatives re. school leadership with positive proactive initiatives encouraging young teachers to become principals;

3.3 Start focusing energy on cultivating greater involvement of deputy principals and assistant principals in IPPN;

3.4 Build relationships with the academic community in the teacher colleges and universities;

3.5 Look to international best practice for good ideas and best positioning of the principalship;

3.6 Be courageous – championing the new school leadership role will be unpopular with some. Push the future with those who most fear change.

Recommendation for Individual Principals

Ever since our series *What's Worth Fighting For* trilogy, I have been an advocate of individuals and small groups taking action in new directions in addition to whatever the system may or may not be doing. Peter Block *(1987)* captured this powerfully in his phrase, 'Cultures get changed in a thousand small ways, not by dramatic announcements emanating from the boardroom'. *(p. 98)* This advice seems especially appropriate for all those educators in Ireland who wish to team up so as to achieve and to sustain major improvements from the classroom to the policy level. Official policy is often a consequence of good practice that already exists and, thus, can spur additional activities in new and promising directions.

Finally, the advice by Abrahamson *(2004)* in *Change without pain* (actually, change without as much pain as usual) seems especially appropriate for the Irish situation. Abrahamson says that too many systems attempt 'creative destruction' in order to radically transform the system by attempting to replace the old culture with the new one. Such approaches, he notes, rarely work and cause severe disruption and further decline. Instead, for most situations he recommends 'creative recombination', which entails building on and surfacing valuable latent cultural norms and using them to craft needed change.

Last Word . . .

THIS PAPER IS intended to build on the strong educational traditions and practices in the Irish system. But I have also said that assertive action is required at this juncture in the development of the system. There is proof beyond reasonable doubt that quality leadership and quality learning go hand in hand. It is time to strengthen this powerful bond through action. I hope the ideas presented in this paper will contribute to this critical debate and to the action that must accompany it.

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