

The Deputy Principal: Some Indicative Challenges

On the work of deputy principals in Irish primary and post-primary schools

This article builds on and develops research reported in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2023* on the work of deputy principals in Irish primary and post-primary schools. We present on themes developed from analysis of 120 survey responses and subsequent interviews with 10 deputy principals, focusing on three issues: tasks and time; communications and relationships; tensions and stresses.

Introduction

This article builds on and develops research reported in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2023* (Jeffers et al., 2023) on the work of deputy principals in Irish primary and post-primary schools. Here we present on three themes developed from analysis of 120 survey responses (49 primary, 71 post-primary) to an online questionnaire and subsequent interviews with 10 deputy principals (five primary, five post-primary).

A published report (Jeffers et al., 2024) offers a comprehensive literature review and an account of the research methodology and the extensive data directly from the voices of deputy principals. Here we offer three key points arising from this scoping study that could benefit from attention by practitioners and policymakers.

Tasks and time

The experiences of working at primary and post-primary level are quite different: more than 90% of primary deputies have full-time teaching duties, whereas their post-primary counterparts generally don't. There are also similarities: both groups identify long lists of tasks, often unanticipated but important for the smooth functioning



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of the school, as features of deputy principalship. Both groups derive satisfaction from similar aspects of the job: seeing children and young people develop and flourish; being part of a team; making a difference.

The practicalities of maintaining a smooth working day in school are generally regarded as central to the deputy's position. These includes timetabling, arranging substitution for absent staff, other scheduling and planning, student and staff safety, nurturing a caring and trusting environment, monitoring and responding to student behaviour and discipline, and so on. As schools have become more inclusive, some primary deputies also take on the role of special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), which brings increased responsibilities.

Extensive tasks and demands can exhilarate but also frustrate. Many report feeling that there is never enough time to respond adequately to all the administrative, management, and leadership responsibilities and expectations associated with the role.

Sile works in a primary school with about 375 children:

It's almost like I'm all things to all people, but I don't have time to listen. So I feel like I can never be fully present with the children I'm teaching. They're compromised in the school of this size, because inevitably there are issues that have to be sorted out. I'm never fully present to my colleagues, because when I'm trying to arrange things and do things for them, I'm trying to do it after school. When I'm trying to do it, they're not available, and I'm never fully present to the principal because obviously I have to prioritise the children I teach. (Sile, primary, interview)

Our data on the multiplicity and range of tasks resonate with research findings across the world. In this study and internationally, deputy principalship is strongly associated with a vagueness or lack of definition of the role (Tahir et al. 2023). But this may not be such a bad thing. Loose role definitions can give schools flexibility so that a deputy principal's position can be shaped to both address the context of a specific school and complement the skills and competencies of the incumbent principal and, increasingly in larger schools, fellow deputies. When aspects of our research were shared with educational leaders at a seminar in Maynooth University in September 2024, a message of 'Don't over-define the role' was loud and clear.

From the data, most deputies indicate a nuanced awareness of how each school's history, context, and culture shape their priorities and challenges. Responsiveness to the unexpected is a critical feature of the role and very dependent on local knowledge.

Communications and relationships

Deputy principals are at a critical intersection in a school's formal and informal communications traffic. The role involves intense collaboration with staff, the leadership and management team, parents/guardians, and students. Developing and maintaining professional relationships, while juggling a multitude of tasks, can be challenging.

Nearly half a century ago, Lortie (1975, p.56 ff.) identified key characteristics of teaching, including 'individualism'. For some at second level, navigating their way from a highly structured individual timetable to a less predictable and more responsive role as part of a school's senior management team can present fresh challenges.

The term 'distributed leadership' features prominently in the international literature on school leadership and in recent Irish policy documents. But the near-invisibility of the deputy principal in the discourse on distributed leadership is striking. While the *Looking at Our School* documents (DES, 2016a, 2016b; DE, 2022a, 2022b) signify a noticeable difference in awareness of deputies' existence, it is not easy to see much advancement in role clarification. While the evidence points to deputy principals being a key asset in schools, it also suggests this is sometimes underappreciated and even hidden.

Many respondents and interviewees recognise the value of teamwork – 'We can put our heads together to create the best outcome' – but also how this is not always easy to sustain. Effective teamwork can be nurtured by clear, open communication and conversations. Cillian, one of three deputies in a large post-primary school, talks about the value of the principal and deputies sharing their thinking as they travelled together for a day of professional development:

Those moments are golden because there is no distraction. . . . What we tend to actually talk about is the vision for the school. (Cillian, post-primary, interview)

In the complex web of communications and relationships, the data reinforce the idea that for a deputy principal, a good working relationship with the principal is vital, characterised by frank professional conversations, with both parties working towards a shared vision for the school. Without that, a school will be in trouble.

Tensions and stresses

Juggling multiple tasks and maintaining positive relationships almost inevitably leads to tensions, stresses, even contradictions, for deputy principals. One informant, talking about special educational needs provision, said, 'We are left

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to mediate the failures of the system to parents/guardians'; another said that if asked to sum up their job in two words, it would be 'unfinished conversations'. At a time of significant change in Irish society and schooling, including moving from a traditional, hierarchical, authoritarian model to a more inclusive, participative, and collaborative one, deputy principals need to be aware of these trends and clear about their own values. They should also be supported and guided towards these new interpretations of their role.

Tensions can also arise in communications. An ability to engage in professional educational conversations, including difficult, challenging, and conflictual ones, is crucial. This facility extends across the diverse members of the school community, including teachers, special needs assistants, administrative staff, students, parents/guardians, and community interests.

Participants in the research indicate that being part of an in-school team that works well together can reduce the stresses and tensions of the position. Some are critical regarding opportunities for ongoing professional development, while others express appreciation of the professional networks provided by various partners. That some deputy principals need more formal professional development in leadership, as some aspire to become principals but lack structured preparation for the transition, is a notable theme in the literature (Kwan, 2009; Grant, 2014).

At primary level, deputies recall the benefits that arose when, during the Covid-19 pandemic, they were released from teaching duties for 5–16 days, depending on school size. Increase in such administrative support could not only lessen stress but also increase effectiveness of the leadership exercised by deputy principals.

While the position of deputy principal involves a combination of administrative, management, and leadership activities, sometimes the boundaries are unclear; it might be best viewed as an overlapping and interacting continuum rather than three distinct types of activity.

Conclusion

A deputy principal 'occupies a position of vital importance within the senior leadership team in a school' (DES, 2018a). Many job descriptions state that a crucial task of the deputy is to cooperate with the principal in the fulfilment of their role and to deputise in their absence (ibid.). Participants in this scoping study point to significant satisfactions in the job. However, a combination of systemic structures, school-specific difficulties, and personal limitations can restrict, frustrate, and challenge. Here we have focused on three issues: tasks and time; communications and relationships; tensions and stresses. The full report explores these and related issues in more detail.

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