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Different worlds: The cadences of context

Exploring the emotional terrain of school principals' practice in schools in challenging circumstances

Jarlath Brennan and Gerry Mac Ruairc

Abstract

The centrality of emotions in the personal and professional practice of school leaders is by now well established in scholarship. Much of the investigation that has been carried out over the years provides a strong basis and rationale for the data presented in this paper. This study sought to explore the extent to which the socio-economic context of the school impacts the emotional timbre of interactions of school principals and to seek to establish how this group of leaders manage the emotional drivers of their different socio-economic contexts. This paper specifically focuses on principals perspectives on the impact children's social worlds and their associated lives have on how leadership practice is shaped, from the point of view of the playing out of emotions in school. Qualitative research using multiple, in-depth interviews and shadowing as research tools, was utilised to focus on the emotional experiences of the principals in the study. This approach enabled the research to come as close as possible to understanding the meaning principals make of their lived experiences from their subjective point of view. Most of the data presented here will explore the perspectives of leaders working in schools in some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised communities in Ireland.

Keywords: Socio-economic context; leadership practice; educational disadvantage; emotional impact; emotions in school life

Introduction

School principals are entangled in webs of social relationships that are unique in terms of their quality and in terms of the personalities and behavioural patterns of those involved (Layder, 1997). Emotions emerge from these enduring social

relationships, not only from the immediacy of the situation, but also from the history of interaction in the past and from perceived prospects for interaction in the future (Turner and Stets, 2005). They play a key role in the social survival of the school leader as they help to establish or maintain cooperative and harmonious relations with other individuals, while simultaneously establishing and/or maintaining a social position relative to others (Fischer and Manstead, 2008). Such social interaction requires a give and take, a constant series of transactions between people in a space delimited by unpredictability and uncertainty. This shapes the context faced by school leaders as they come into contact with others and have meaningful exchanges with them (Layder, 2004). These elements of context have emotional dimensions and implications that shade and nuance all interactions, and the centrality of this emotional sphere in the personal and professional practice of school leaders is by now well established in scholarship. Much of the investigation that has been carried out over the years provides a strong basis and rationale for the data presented in this paper. This study sought to explore the extent to which the socio-economic context of the school impacts the emotional timbre of the principals' interactions and to establish how this group of leaders manage the emotional drivers of their different contexts.

It became very clear early on in the research process that the complexity of context would generate a significant amount of data, and consequently it is necessary to

present the data from different elements of the context separately. Context is complex and its cadences shift endlessly in all of the types of schools represented in the research sample. Context was shaped by officialdom and by the increasing encroachment into leaders' lives of neo-liberal demands relating to accountability and 'being seen' to be doing what was required. Other contextual features related to staff management and the emotional turmoil of dealing with difficult staff. Parental demands too featured strongly in the principals' narratives, albeit with very different outcomes depending on the socio-economic profile of the parent. It was the impact of children on the emotional climate of the schools and the emotional labour of the school leader that was most striking, particularly when viewed from the perspective of the socio-economic context of the school. This paper focuses on principals' perspectives of the impact that children's social worlds and their associated lives have on how their practice is shaped from the point of view of the playing out of emotions.

Theoretical perspectives on the emotional terrain of leadership practice

Bourdieu's socio-political writings offer an expanded space for examining many aspects of practice in schools including how school principals' emotions are mediated by different socio-cultural contexts. The focus on practice in this study aligns with Bourdieu's focus on exploring the relationship between people's practices and the contexts in which these practices occur (Eder, 1993; Webb et al., 2002). His culturist focus on social class adds to the relevance of his work to the focus of this paper.

Bourdieu's conceptual trinity of field, capital and habitus (Devine and Savage, 2005: 13), all of which are part of a social class placement system (Silva, 2005), are by now well understood within scholarship in relation to education. What Bourdieu's perspectives provide is a framework that allows social-class context, the asymmetrical distribution of school outcomes, the practice of principalship and the role of the emotions to be explored as a combined focus.

Bourdieu's concept of field, is essentially a structural concept, derived from the socio-economic base (Devine and Savage, 2005). Fields are "the social space in which class can be demarcated" (Bourdieu, 1998: 32), and the "wider social clusterings of resources, positions and relations that provide the society-wide backdrop to localised encounters in specific settings" (Layder, 1997: 117). Education as a field is a subset of the broader class-based field. The action that occurs within the field will be influenced by particular structural characteristics, by the demand for a particular configuration of cultural, linguistic and symbolic forms of capital, and by the expectations that these capitals will be deployed in specific ways. Consequently, field is often viewed as a "contestation over values and beliefs, individual and collective desires, hope...and fear" (Blackmore, 2009: 116). What is not often fully explicated is the emotional impact of these field-specific encounters. However, it is reasonable to assume, given the emotional and affective constituents that frame the education of children, coupled with the deep rooted nature of the type of contestation that occurs in

the field of education (Devine, 2004; Dworkin, 2007; Reay, 2000;), that all aspects are characterised by a “frequently highly emotional process” (Bates, 2009: 165).

A key element of field is the manner in which “the structure of the field, i.e. the unequal distribution of capital, is the source of the specific effects of capital” (Bourdieu, 1986: 246). These relations of difference, these distinctions, present in three fundamental guises as economic, social and cultural capital. Together they constitute patterns of advantage and disadvantage in society because of their existence in their own right and because of the ability to convert one form of capital to another. This can facilitate the accumulation of very effective and highly beneficial constellations of different capitals that are readily identifiable in the outcomes of most education systems. Valued forms of cultural capital in the education system endow the holder with a status and prestige, often leading to success in the system. The alignment of middle-class cultural capital with the field of education is very well established as are the persistent reproduction of patterns of inequality of experiences and outcomes in school systems. Recognition of the emotional consequences of these patterns of practice is a more recent extension of capital theory (for example, Reay, 2000) and of particular interest to the focus of this paper. Cultural symbols have the power to arouse emotions just as powerfully as a physical totem, such as a school flag or mission statement (Turner and Stets, 2005). These symbols and the emotions linked to them play a key role in the shaping and defining of an individual/group

habitus – the third concept in Bourdieu’s trilogy. Habitus is defined by Bourdieu as “a kind of practical sense for what is to be done...– a ‘feel’ for the game” (Bourdieu, 1998: 25). It is deeply class-based giving rise to largely unconscious orientations that shape taste and lead people to naturally choose things that fit with their class position (Silva, 2005). The school leaders’ unique emotional habitus contributes to the (re)production of a collective emotional habitus. Habitus is embodied; it is a socialised and structured body that has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or field and is expressed through durable ways “of standing, speaking, talking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu, 1990: 70). A key issue arising from a consideration of habitus, as it applies to schools, is the emotional impact on the individual leader when the private habitus, formed of embedded and embodied types of cultural capital, encounters an alternative or conflicting habitus. Because of the person-focused nature of schools (Fielding, 2006a; 2007) and the direct contact of principals with parents and children of different socio-economic contexts, the emotional habitus of the private and public sphere are tightly coupled. In political terms, the habitus produces a school community in which the “established cosmological and political order is perceived...as a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned” (Bourdieu, 1977: 166). The habitus allows the collective influences of a school community to enter into the actual practices of a school principal as he or she selectively draws from it in

conjunction with the subjective emotional tenor of encounters (Layder, 2009).

Habitus is the taken-for-granted part of the culture that guides so much of social action; it lies beneath cultural capital generating its myriad manifestations. Behaviour and interaction take place in the social setting of the school and are significantly influenced by the prevailing habitus. It is important however, to avoid overly deterministic views of habitus and to recognise that as a system a habitus is negotiated and mutable and always under review, even if the outcome does not change very much. In the context of a school system, negotiations are always framed by a range of demands from the broad range of stakeholders . It is here that the demands on school leadership become most acute and where balancing the views of many in arriving at an outcome can be a difficult task. This can be compounded by a context in which the range of demands are not aligned with each other or, in the case of very disadvantaged communities, where many of the prerequisites in terms of forms of capital and associated dispositions towards school are not what is expected. Leaders and teachers, in these contexts, are working with what is widely acknowledged as a cultural clash (Devine, 2004; Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Mac Ruairc, 2009; 2013;Reay, 2000; 2006; 2011). The implications on the emotional world of leaders arising from the specifics of this culturally contested space are an aspect of practice that requires further explication . It is this emotional dimension that provides the core

focus of this paper. The section to follow will explore current perspectives on how context and emotions are mediated in practice.

Context and culture

The socio-economic and local context of the school constrains and enables what principals' do and how they perform their leadership role. The relationship between a school and its environment is "complex, dynamic and reciprocal" (Wrigley, 2003: 19) and this socio-cultural context prompts an array of emotional responses (Wallace, 2010). The nature of a principal's personal and professional values shapes how a school leader interprets and responds to this context (Riley, 2009). This response however can be problematic, since "schools know far too little about the knowledge, skills and culture embedded in the communities they serve" (Wrigley, 2003: 151) and consequently the context often creates a lack of alignment of norms and expectations. This claim is particularly valid when applied to marginalised communities, and in Ireland this has a very specific relevance because of the broadly middle class backgrounds of teachers and school leaders (Clarke, 2009; Devine, 2011; Drudy, 2006; Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Keane and Heinz, 2015; 2016). It is not surprising, therefore, that in many cases models of deficit thinking continue to delimit the world of school for children in marginalised communities (Shields, 2009). To move beyond this often requires significant ontological disturbance. In engaging in this disruptive work, principals need to "reach beneath, beyond and within" [*italics in original*] the

micro-politics of their daily life and develop a broader perspective on leadership dynamics within their schools (Riley, 2008: 162). Reaching beneath abridges an understanding of the forces influencing the behaviour of children and staff; reaching beyond encapsulates a striving to capture the wider picture; and reaching within involves connecting to inner drivers, hopes, expectations, vision and passion. The school leader needs to take account of the unique political, social, cultural, economic, contextual and situational factors and the policy and practice within which leadership acts (Dyson, 2006; Jang et al., 2008; Leo and Barton, 2006; Lupton and Thrupp, 2013). This involves developing a composite understanding and appreciation of both the challenges and riches of daily life within a community (Riley, 2009).

Context, resources and outcomes

In deprived working class areas, people who are the victims of poverty and inequality lose faith in their own abilities and in their self-worth, perceive themselves as failures and are derided, stigmatised and blamed, and may infuse and project their negative emotions onto the school. Principals working in these communities need to understand their school context within the wider economic and political framework (Wrigley, 2003). The mechanisms of exclusion that establish relations require principals to look beyond embodied practices and interrogate affective politics of fear (Zembylas, 2009). Preparing leaders to work in culturally diverse and low socio-economic areas requires principals to reflect on and scrutinise their own sense of self

as classed, gendered and racialised in order to consider what it means to be ‘the other’ in culturally diverse and low socio-economic schools. It is through reflection on one’s own positioning that an ethical consciousness about difference can lead to its inclusive articulation through the cultural practices of schooling (Blackmore, 2010); the process and outcomes of engaging in this form of reflexive practice are emotionally laden. Consequently leadership that requires a deliberative stance on social justice carries added emotional complexity; it requires a critical emotional reflexivity that sustains principals’ emotional resistance against unjust policies and educational practices (Zembylas, 2010).

The unacknowledged pathologisation and diminishing of schools in challenging circumstances that serve communities recognised as being economically and socially “disadvantaged”, or a working-class “underclass” or a majority “minority” student population increases the stigmatisation of such schools, “making them less desirable than positions in more affluent communities” (Jacobson et al., 2007: 295). Leadership of schools in challenging circumstances requires engagement with community perspectives, a “strong value base, including social justice” (Wrigley, 2003: 6) and an ability to “change people’s beliefs and values from self centred to other centred” (Theoharis, 2008: 16). Investing in the social infrastructure of the school, creating a happy environment that celebrates achievements, and providing spaces of security and reinforcement are crucial (Chapman, 2004; Gunter, 2006; MacBeath et al., 2007;

West et al., 2005). Principals who work in challenging circumstances often have a desire to make a difference, this is a passion that drives and sustains them emotionally; it excites, motivates and energises them. “The emotional charge is high, the costs are high but so are the rewards” (Pratt-Adams and Maguire, 2009: 123). They have an emotional commitment to their schools, demonstrate an inner toughness, and cope by displacing and not acknowledging some of the emotional complexities and demands of their work (Pratt-Adams and Maguire, 2009). The anger, despair and frustration of others that emerges in difficult contexts arising from a sense of failure, insecurity, exclusion or marginalisation are features of the dark underbelly of leadership that are rarely mentioned in the research trajectory on emotions that often champion a more individualistic approach to leadership (Blackmore, 2011). No one exists in isolation; principals affect and are affected by the context in which they work (Steward, 2014). To ignore the social context of the school is to uncouple the emotions of principalship from the conditions of their social construction.

Methodology

By focusing on the extent to which emotions in the doing of school leadership are influenced by the socio-economic setting of the school, the priority was to intentionally sample principals from both disadvantaged and middle class Irish primary schools. A theoretically informed sample, consisting of four principals from

disadvantaged schools and four principals from middle class schools, was selected to allow for in-depth analysis. In addition to the socio-cultural setting of the school, the sample varied in terms of gender, length of stewardship, school type, school size and whether the principals were recruited from inside or outside the school. An overview of the sample is provided in table 1.

Table 1: Overview of study sample

Principal (Internal/ external appointment)	School Name	School Type	School Size (Number of students)	Length of tenure
Ciaran (External)	Dooney Rock Primary	DD Band 1 Urban	100-200	5-14 years
Dympna (Internal)	Innisfree Primary	DD Band 1 Urban	100-200	5-14 years
Julie (Internal)	Bricklieve Primary	DD Band 1 Urban	400-500	1-5 years
Sheelagh (External)	Carrowmore Primary	DD Band 1 Urban	200-300	5-4 years
Patrick (Internal)	Dartry Primary	Middle Class Urban	400-500	5-14 years
Judith (External)	Glencar Primary	Middle class Urban	400-500	5-14 years
* ¹ Michael (External)	Ben Bulben Primary	Middle class Primary	>500	>15 years
Ruth (Inside)	Ben Bulben Primary	Middle class Primary	>500	Newly Appointed (replaced Michael)

¹ Michael (principal of Ben Bulbin) retired during the course of the study and was replaced by Ruth who also agreed to participate in the study.

Interviewing on multiple occasions was an important element of the research design as it enabled the researcher to access the emotional complexities of school leadership, capturing authentic emotions, mapping emotional praxis, penetrating cover stories and unravelling emotional strategic and communicative action. The researcher engaged in a “shadowing” of the principals in the Designated Disadvantaged (DD) band one primary schools, bearing intimate witness to their routine activities for one day (Czarniawska, 2007). Fifty interviews averaging fifty minutes in duration were conducted with participants and digitally recorded. Individual interviews ranged from nine minutes to two hours and twenty four minutes. All transcribed interviews were imported directly into the qualitative software package QSR NVIVO 9. Data were coded using a paragraph-by-paragraph approach, and organised into a structured code system based upon the emerging themes. Analysis was open to conceptual discovery with some nodes emerging from the data; other nodes were assigned based on established concepts determined before data collection as detailed in the previous sections of this paper. The findings presented here relate to the impact children’s different social worlds have on the emotional world of the school leader, and to how the reality of children’s lives impacts on the formation of the local “feel” or habitus of the school. In taking on the social contexts of the children in the data presented here, leaders display how the emotional dimension to their practice impacts on their work

as leaders, and on the decisions they make and the directions they take in their schools.

Findings

Children's Lives and the Emotional Landscape of Leadership

One of the key messages emerging from the multiple interviews that formed the data set for this study relates to the manner in which leaders' engagement with children influences their emotional engagement with their practice. The different emotional responses among the leaders in this study were directly linked to and formed by the social context of the school. The emotional investment of self was evident in principals' engagement with children at a personal level. Principals consistently referred to the importance of children to the emotions of principalship. This was shared by all participants in the study, irrespective of the socio-economic context of the school. There was, however, a significant difference in the manner in which principals spoke of their emotional work with children in middle-class schools when compared to designated-disadvantaged schools. Principals in middle-class schools described how their children were aligned with the dominant school culture and moved seamlessly between home and school; they were a source of positive emotions

and emotional sustenance. Principals in DD schools have a much more varied range of emotional responses arising from their interactions with children, and these patterns of practice create demands for different leadership activity. This domain of practice is one of the areas that distinguish leadership in a school in a disadvantaged area from leadership in a school in a more affluent community. Attending to the emotional aspect of the school, in terms of managing the emotional triggers of a range of education partners in the marginalised community, as well as managing the emotional responses of self and others is a significant component in the day to day work of the leader. The following section will focus on the range of leadership practices among this group of principals, identifying three key areas of practice: the centrality of a safe school and quest for emotional calmness; the emotional consequences of the clash of cultural and symbolic capitals; and the explicit role leaders play in constructing and monitoring the emotional scaffolding within the school in order to create and stabilise a positive emotional atmosphere.

Children in Middle-Class Schools — Looking at the Fish in Water

In middle-class schools children were a source of positive emotion for principals. For Patrick, children were at the centre of “why we are here”; difficult decisions made were based on “what is the best for the child” (Patrick, Dartry School), and seeing “them enjoying themselves” was a reminder during “difficult” periods that “it’s worth it” (Patrick, Dartry School). Similarly, Ruth considered children to be “the heart of it

all” (Ruth, Ben Bulben Primary), and Judith was “absolutely mad about the children” whose “willingness to do well” inspired and motivated her to do the “best I can for them” (Judith, Glencar Primary). School events such as Communion, Confirmation, Science Week, Biodiversity Week, Seachtain na Gaeilge [Irish Language Week], talent shows, school plays and sports achievements were a source of pride and were described by Judith, Ruth and Patrick as full of “positive emotions”, “absolutely tremendous”, a “huge success”, “good mayhem”, the “best feeling”, “brilliant” and “very emotional” as you “enjoy the warmth of it”, it creates a “really positive atmosphere in the whole school” and it “makes you happy”. Children in these middle-class schools “come to school ready for school, they come eager to learn [...] behaviour is never an issue” (Judith, Glencar Primary), “their behaviour was excellent” (Patrick, Dartry Primary,); as one principal commented “I can count on one hand the number of children who have been to my office during the year for negative things” (Patrick, Dartry Primary,). While this provides only a snapshot of the emotional synergies between the schools and the children, it is a very explicit picture of the impact of home/school continuity. The evidence also points very solidly to a key emotional dimension; to the manner in which previous work on the similarities between forms of cultural capital and the habitus of the school creates a further trajectory of engagement and continuity for this group of students (Bourdieu, 1998; Bernstein, 2000). There is a sense of mutual validation of the world of school by the

children and in turn of the children by the principal, all of which is enhanced, enriched and reinforced by a positive emotional energy,

Safety first

In DD schools, principals had a more explicit and varied personal and emotional connection to the children in the schools. Their attentiveness and emotional responsiveness were derived from a range of sources, but chiefly from the need to create a safe school and a positive emotional climate in the school for the children.

that's what our place is all about really [...] that openness where there could be kids in the hall having breakfast or a child who can't face going into a classroom and needs somebody to talk to or to go sit in the garden with [...] that's really important. (Julie, Bricklieve Primary)

The idea of ensuring children's safety and creating a positive emotional climate in the school was the most prevalent aspect of each of the leaders' visions for their schools. It was the main transformative impetus that framed key elements of school practice.

This focus places the creation of a positive emotional culture at the centre of leadership practice in these schools. Everything else was mapped back on this core value. Dympna believed her moral purpose was “to make the school a safe and happy place for children”, to “listen to the voice of the children”, “building leaders in classrooms” and facilitating the children to “make things happen”, in order to “really, really empower them” (Dympna, Innisfree Primary). Julie regarded the children to be “the most important thing”, and also placed importance on “making sure that they are safe and that they are treated with respect” (Julie, Bricklieve Primary). “Acknowledging their existence” (Julie, Bricklieve Primary,) and ensuring that “they are safe number one, that they are happy and that we give them good experiences in school” framed her ethical imperatives and connected to the arousal of positive or negative emotions (Julie, Bricklieve Primary). For Ciaran, “What’s most important? The child”, he got a “kick out of [...] happy kids”. Getting to this point was not always an easy task in the context of very difficult and very disadvantaged communities. Achieving this sense of safety at times had a “draining” effect on the principal: “you are worrying that the kids are safe in school, you’re worrying that nothing is going to happen to them” (Julie, Bricklieve Primary).

Life is shit enough for some of them, for a lot of them, it really is and just to make school a safe place, that’s it, a safe place for them, that they can get food, they can be acknowledged, they are not dealing with any hassle or violence [...] just that they are made to feel welcome and respected. (Julie, Bricklieve Primary)

One of the problems that are faced on a regular basis by many schools in disadvantaged areas relate to dealing with children's emotional outbursts, which often threaten the safety of other children and sometimes staff. The episode below from Bricklieve is an example of the impact of this type of challenge on the sense of safety in the schools and the emotional tightrope that sometimes prevails.

He lost it yesterday [...] I met one of the SNAs² and she had a guitar case and I said 'Are you taking up the guitar now?' 'Oh' she said, 'No I am using it for protection I needed it there now' [...] and I said 'What happened?' [...] The next thing I could hear this screaming coming out of the secretary's office, so I went in and there were two teachers and the secretary there. They all left and I was there and Bob (upset child) was there and he was roaring like a lion and I said to him, 'What's wrong Bob?' So he said, 'I dunno, I dunno' and he was roaring at me. I calmed him down and the next thing I noticed a piece of wood on the ground, he had actually kicked the table so hard ... he actually broke it, the secretary's table [...] That was total aggression and frustration on his part ... that's coming in from home too. (Julie, Bricklieve Primary)

Emotional intensity and complexity

The emotional capital that students bring with them to school can have a direct influence on the particular configurations of behaviour that arise. The socio-cultural context prompts an array of emotions. Class-disadvantaged people experience more episodic stressors. It is difficult for children to focus on school when their families and neighbours are dogged by material anxieties. Children who suffer from poverty and inequality may infuse and project their negative emotions onto the school.

² A Special Needs Assistant (SNA) refers to adult support staff provided specifically to assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. SNAs do not have a teaching/pedagogical role.

Leadership has additional emotional intensity and complexity when children's emotions of anger, despair and frustration, arising from a sense of failure, insecurity and marginalisation, surface. Leadership work is hard emotional labour, particularly when a school's environment is being charged by children's distress.

The extent to which an emotionally calm, safe school can be achieved, as an end in itself, was explored in the data analysis. It was clear from the data in the middle-class schools that this was not an explicit part of practice but rather an assumed part of every day life. Other recent studies in Ireland have identified the time and energy spent on this regulative aspect of school (Bernstein, 2000) as a limiting factor in terms of school expectations: "we don't have much time for curriculum here" (Author, forthcoming). In this study too, the effort in achieving the safe and calm atmosphere depleted the resources available, in terms of time and energy, for use to enhance learning. Dympna was very emotionally engaged with this aspect of her practice. Teachers "talking about children in terms of self-fulfilling prophecies", "labelling children" and making "derogatory comments about children" triggered the arousal of negative emotions; "I don't tolerate it" (Dympna, Innisfree Primary). An explicit focus on learning was not evident in her narrative. Ciarán was the only participant who extended his view of practice to the learning domain. It is interesting too that Ciarán was the only school leader in the study who continued to engage with teaching on a daily basis. His focus on learning, therefore, is based on contemporaneous

experience of classroom life. In his interactions with children, he strives to “kill them with praise” in order to cultivate a positive, learning-focused atmosphere in classrooms, which zoned in on “promoting the team and pulling together”, creating a sense of cohesion and a sense of belonging. He did his utmost to “imprint it on the kids’ minds that you don’t bloody give up” (Ciarán, Dooney Rock Primary). He fostered the idea of constantly moving children forward with their learning, “always seeing the next little gap”, facilitating the learning of children “in little steps” (Ciarán, Dooney Rock Primary), doing “the basics well”, and exposing the children to a “broad spectrum of activities and interests” (Ciarán, Dooney Rock Primary). He organised clubs after school, focusing on literacy and numeracy; promoted summer courses to occupy the children and extend their learning opportunities; and prioritised being in classes over the office. Ciarán put his “heart and soul” into making a difference for the girls in his care, and he had a tenacious commitment to enacting social justice; he referred to “the energy that I have put into this place”, which at times was a “killer” when he could not change things fast enough (Ciarán, Dooney Rock Primary). Although the sample in this study is small, there are indications from the findings for the sample that the need to keep learning at the core of leadership is not always achieved. The literature on schools in challenging circumstances is singular in its agreement that high expectations relating to learning are key transformative factors with respect to overall student outcomes. This may be an area

of practice that requires further exploration in the Irish context in the light of the Department of Education and Skills policy drivers over the past fifteen years that have repeatedly required schools to engage with learning as the prime driver of school practice. It may be necessary for future policy development in this area to ensure that leaders in schools in disadvantaged communities are given additional support in order to develop their role in achieving an enhancement and enrichment of learning.

Different worlds: the emotional impact

Each of the principals leading schools in disadvantaged communities in this study shared a sense of the difference between the world of school and the lived experiences of children in their communities. These differences prevailed even in the context of the negotiated habitus of each of the DD schools. All schools shaped their cultures to include the needs and demands of their student profile. There was evidence of significant leeway in the manner in which many of the core embedded practices and valued forms of cultural capital expected in schools, e.g. homework, punctuality, books and resources, uniforms, etc., were mediated by each of the schools in recognition of the difficult circumstances that children experiences in their home lives. Notwithstanding this, there was a significant emotional toil for the school leaders in keeping this negotiated space open and fluid. The focus on care and on emphasising the positive was a strategy that was clearly evident in the data. In most cases the deficit thinking that is often evident in the discourse of disadvantage was

absent from the leaders' discourse, but still evident in the practices of some of the teachers mentioned in the data.

For Dympna, there was a “social mix and mismatch” between “teachers with middle class expectations, middle class beliefs coming from their own middle class environment” and “the kids who are coming from the complete opposite” in terms of “cultural expectations, norms, beliefs and traditions”, which had an emotional impact (Dympna, Innisfree Primary). Dympna's capacity to connect with children's lived realities created inner emotional turmoil as she attempted to resolve their contrasting social–emotional narratives with teachers.

Teachers going absolutely mad because children come to school constantly without pens and copies. Give them a pen and a copy [word used in Irish schools for exercise book], how much is that going to cost? I'll give you fifteen, they could go home to a house of absolute chaos [...] you go out to houses and they are absolutely filthy or there is no place to sit and do the homework or you might have someone coming down here saying he hasn't done his homework for weeks and weeks and weeks [...] have some kind of awareness that there may not be a kitchen table or that there isn't a mammy looking over his shoulder as he is doing his homework, there is a mammy who can't read or write, there is a mammy who is not there. (Dympna, Innisfree Primary)

The need to work from a clear understanding of the emotional context of the school and the emotional realities of children in the school was a key part of Dympna's leadership. Dympna regulated her own emotions and managed the emotions of staff in her efforts towards emotional coherence (Crawford, 2009). Setting the emotional tone within the school, Dympna had to “remind” teachers that “they are children, you

can't be so hard on them, give them a break", that if "their emotional needs are not met, then their educational needs are not going to be", "be positive with him, praise him, catch him being good, be empathetic with him" and "celebrate their culture" (Dympna, Innisfree Primary). At times, children's emotions affected children-teacher relationships, and Dympna had to change teachers' beliefs and values from being self-centred to child-centred in order to guide teachers' emotional responses in the classroom. She actively engaged in emotionally sensitising the staff to the children's emotional needs and to the emotional impact of the expectations in school for "ways of being" that are very difficult for children to achieve.

Julie was also very aware of the extreme disadvantaged nature of the children's home realities:

Going into some of the houses and seeing absolutely no furniture or wallpaper ripped off the walls and holes in the walls and no food in presses [cupboards] and things like that, that's beyond my comprehension, but I know it's factual, I know it's a fact.

The extreme levels of economic deprivation directly impact on all other forms of capital. Poverty, hunger, poor housing all convert to many children lacking the typical indicators of school-supportive forms of cultural capital in their homes, typified by the type of question asked of students in the PISA student background questionnaire (OECD, 2012). The data in this study point clearly to very identifiable emotional consequences to these economic, cultural and symbolic discontinuous contexts.

Active Leadership/Emotional Scaffolding: Building the emotional world of the school

In order to sustain this positive energy in schools, leaders are required to be very present in the children's school lives and in the emotional dimension to their patterns of engagement with school. Entirely absent from the data among this group of principals was the idea of "the principal in the office" model of leadership as either preferred or realised. Leadership in these schools was very hands-on and directly involved with the children. There is a very strong sense emerging from the data of this connected form of leadership, explicitly framed by clearly understood emotional engagement. Dympna's descriptions are particularly relevant here as she captures the activity of emotional scaffolding, which was a feature of each of the leaders' practices, but articulated particularly clearly in Dympna's narratives.

Dympna's passion was "seeing the boys, seeing them happy"; she invested herself emotionally in developing a positive relationship with the children and believed "schools have to be positive" (Dympna, Innisfree Primary). While she would "take absolutely no bullshit from them" (Dympna, Innisfree Primary), she believed disruptive "kids aren't wrong, they are behaving like they are behaving for a reason", and she focused on "finding their strengths, finding their talents" (Dympna, Innisfree Primary). In getting to the "root of behaviours", Dympna found children were

“crying a lot more than I have ever seen [...] crying over nothing, huge emotional responses” which was painful for her as she wondered:

Are they crying because the thoughts are so negative in their heads, it’s the only way they can express themselves [...] are they depressed? ... You know it is a very strong emotional reaction [...] they would be in convulsions [colloquialism for being very upset, characterised by intense crying] over nothing. (Dympna, Innisfree Primary)

Attending to the children’s feelings in these situations, Dympna reported how “I just feel sorry for them” (Dympna, Innisfree Primary), at times she “went to sleep [...] thinking about a child and that’s it then, you never leave school and that can happen [...] that’s just more of your emotional responses” (Dympna, Innisfree Primary). Working with the “challenging behaviour” of children took an emotional toll on Dympna, but it was also a source of positive emotion as she spent time “looking at their social and emotional needs [...] listening to them and analysing their mood”, going through “all the reasons which I think they are so amazing”, addressing “the things we have to work out”, and providing them with “incentives” in order to “make this child’s life better between now and half two” (Dympna, Innisfree Primary). This required a delicate emotional balancing act.

Managing emotions – leadership in the round

In some case the principal was active in forming an emotional climate within the school that was directly connected to the individual's fown emotional base and feel

for the emotional timbre of the context (Crawford, 2009). Dympna, for example was emotionally sensitive to the children in the school, constantly “pre-empting, assessing the atmosphere” (Dympna, Innisfree Primary); if she walked out to the yard or into a classroom she would “know by four or five faces that I was going to see them at some point”, she could sense “anxiety”, a “low mood” or “feel a high energy level” (Dympna, Innisfree Primary). Dympna recognised that positive emotions lead to positive thought processes, positive behaviours and a positive learning environment. She responded to children’s emotions by empowering them and focusing on the positive; for example when there were issues the yard [playground]:

Each class would come up with ten rules, they would bring them to the student council, the student council would pick out the four best new rules, your name will be put beside the rule, the rules will be laminated [...] and the whole atmosphere on yard completely changes. (Dympna, Innisfree Primary)

The children contributed to an emotionally charged environment that Dympna was able to identify. She empathised by seeing the world through the children’s eyes, examined the underlying causes of the emotions, and responded by managing the emotions, by taking appropriate action both at a collective level and an individual. This was a key strength of Dympna’s leadership style. School transformation and human transformation are two sides of the same coin (Harris, 2007); Dympna worked with the emotions of children to effect change in the emotional environment of the school. She found that managing the children’s emotions was “so complex because

there are so many home environmental factors [...] dynamics amongst themselves, hierarchies of boys in classrooms, needs” (Dympna, Innisfree Primary), and there was an intensification of emotional upset amongst the children as the economy continued to crash:

...it has escalated. Just the level of neglect and with shoes, torn socks, holes in them ... they just look ... like Oliver Twist some of them and filthy and exhausted [...] and they won't engage with anyone [...] a child saying I am tired and another child saying I am hung-over. (Dympna, Innisfree Primary)

Dympna responded to the changing emotional needs of the children by focusing on

...all this breathing and yoga and meditation and changing their outlook, I do a word a week [methodology used in some Irish schools to build positive self-esteem) in assembly and it is always positive, happiness, success, outlook [...] just trying to breathe it in into the school. (Dympna, Innisfree Primary)

Connecting to children and creating a positive emotional climate required real, active commitment from the leader backed up by constant and consistent work. There are times when it is difficult to see how the type of connected leadership that engages with the real lives of children and actively leads the emotional world of the school is captured in some of the discourse and scholarship relating to leadership. This paper and others that will emanate from this study highlight a clear imperative to get the heart back into the narratives of what schools leaders do, lest we reduce perspectives on the function of leadership to the delivery of outputs.

Concluding comments

consequences. Emotions have the power to develop or destroy relationships (Beatty & Brew, 2004); they are vital to understanding the minutiae of interpersonal encounters, as well as broader patterns within the school. Emotions are dispersed differentially across segments of society (Barbalet, 1998); the emotional experience and practice of principals in relationship with parents and children differs in middle class and DD schools. Principals' personal and professional values shape how they respond to the socio-economic and local context of the school and the social relations and activities of schools are influenced by the emotional capital children bring with them into the schoolroom.

Concluding comments

Relations with children influence the emotions of principalship and the social context of the school influences the emotions of principalship (Wallace, 2010). In this study, principals strove to keep children at the centre of their work (Lynch et al., 2012). The emotional experience and practice of principals in relationship with children differed in middle-class and DD schools. Children were a source of positive emotion and emotional renewal for principals in middle-class schools providing evidence of the high degree of cultural continuity between children's cultural worlds and the school

environment (Bourdieu, 1977; 1998). The extent to which this continuity incorporates an emotional dimension supports the work of Reay (2000) in extending the previous notion of capital to include an emotions capital thereby allowing the emotional consequences of patterns of equality and inequality to be explicated. Principals in DD schools had a connection to their children that was also inherently emotional, albeit derived from the perspective of cultural difference. Having awareness of a mismatch between teachers' middle-class beliefs and the children's lived and emotional realities impacted on the emotions of leaders in their work, with teachers seeking out "emotional coherence" (Crawford, 2007). The principal's unique emotional habitus impacts the collective emotional habitus of the school, guiding behaviour. It impacts the (re)production of a collective emotional habitus, social integration and cohesion within the school. The importance of context for what happens in schools is determined in part by the meaning given to it by principals. There is a fine line between highlighting the constraints imposed by poverty, social class, immigrant or traveller status and learning difficulties so that schools can be equipped to deal with them better and allowing these factors to become an excuse for low expectations. The data reveal that principals need to reflect and scrutinise their own sense of self as classed, gendered and racialised (Blackmore, 2010) and need to "reach beneath, beyond and within" in order to develop an understanding and appreciation of both the challenges and riches of daily life within a community (Riley, 2008: 162). There is

clear evidence in the study of deliberative action on the part of the participants in the study to take account of and ‘control for’ in very meaningful ways the lack of economic capital and the different forms of cultural capital that exist within the school community.

The principals in these schools invested in their emotional selves in setting the emotional tone, developing a positive relationship with the children, sensitising staff to children’s emotional needs and guiding teachers’ and children’s emotional responses in the classroom. Fostering emotional awareness and literacy in children and providing the emotional conditions necessary to support pupils in the safe discharge of destructive emotions while focusing on the positive is an emotional form of work. Many principals in schools in disadvantaged, high-poverty areas invested their heart and soul to make a difference in the lives of the children as they provided a secure emotional base for all in their schools in their pursuit of social justice. Emotion was at the core of their care orientations. Dealing with a charged emotional environment as children bring their vulnerabilities and fragilities to school can have an emotionally numbing effect; it drains leaders’ emotions. Leadership is an emotional practice. This study reinforces the work of Zembylas (2010), who asserts that leadership for social justice carries added emotional complexity.

This study found that the emotions of principalship reflect the socio-economic advantages and disadvantages of the communities and families they serve (Thrupp

and Lupton, 2011). Consequently, as the findings of this study indicate, the emotional practices and the associated activities and social relations of schools are not entirely the product and agency of teachers and school leaders. They are influenced by economic, social and cultural capitals that students and parents bring with them and by students' and parents' "emotional capital" (Reay, 2004) which produce particular configurations of behaviour, relationships and expectations around education. It is clear from the different experiences of the principals in this study that to ignore the social context of the school is to uncouple the emotions of principalship from an essential condition of their social construction. Many factors contributing to the emotional habitus of the school are not school caused. You cannot "bleach context from their analytical frame" (Slee and Weiner, 1998: 5). The possession, distribution or ownership of particular constellations of cultural/discursive, economic and symbolic forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; 1990; 1998; Layder, 1997; Reay, 2000; 2006; Reily, 2009), enter into the constitution of the social setting of schools and frame the social encounters that take place within them. The degree of availability, accessibility or absence of each factor either enable or constrain people's behaviour, playing a significant role in the structuring of self-identities (Layder, 1997). This affects the schoolhouse of emotions and the emotional realm of principalship.

This paper analysed the emotions of principals as they played out upon the school stage with children. Schools are peopled places (Loader, 1997). School leadership is

people-intensive in character (Goldring and Greenfield, 2002). Principals, teachers, parents and children are all in powerful relationships with one another, and children are at the core of this context as so much of the impact of school practice is mediated by and for the children themselves. The culture of a school is created and sustained, for better or worse, in part, by the emotions of the participants. Principals play a central role in the emotional relationships that exist in schools (Crawford, 2009). At times, the personal and professional are difficult to separate when the task of principalship is fundamentally person centred (Brennan and Mac Ruairc, 2011). Principals in this study employed an array of emotional strategies to manage self and others in interaction. The approaches and manner in which relations are realised differently (Fielding, 2000a; 2000b; 2006a; 2006b; 2007) lead to different emotional consequences. Emotions have the power to develop or destroy relationships (Beatty and Brew, 2004); they are vital to understanding the minutiae of interpersonal encounters, as well as broader patterns within the school. Emotions are dispersed differentially across segments of society (Barbalet, 1998); the emotional experience and practice of principals in relationship with parents and children differs in middle class and DD schools. Principals' personal and professional values shape how they respond to the socio-economic and local context of the school and the social relations and activities of schools are influenced by the emotional capital children bring with them into the schoolroom.

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