

An investigation into the lived experiences of primary school principals in Ireland: The role of relational leadership

Educational Management
Administration & Leadership
1–21

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DOI: 10.1177/17411432261479421
journals.sagepub.com/home/ema



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Abstract

Despite recognition that the complexity of school leadership necessitates enhanced support and professional learning for both newly appointed and existing principals, the lived experiences of principals remain under-researched. This phenomenological study of primary school principals in Ireland offers a nuanced account of contextual challenges and conceptualises leadership as a relational, human-centred endeavour, moving beyond traditional leader-centric and policy-driven perspectives. Investigating the impact of relational leadership on the leader, this article considers how principals navigate tensions and opportunities through the relational aspects of both authentic leadership (AL) and transformational leadership theory (TLT). The findings reveal unexpected insights into how principals respond to pressure from the external expectations of the Department of Education and Youth's policy agenda and the internalised consequences. Principals were found to internally negotiate the tensions and opportunities for authenticity in relation to themselves and others by finding safe spaces that facilitate self-care and collective support. The findings build upon and contest aspects of TLT's four 'I's to include a fifth 'I', a principal's 'internalised leadership', as they conceal and isolate themselves and embody personal feelings while simultaneously endeavouring to be authentic, highlighting the emotional and psychological impacts of the principal's role.

Keywords

Transformative Leadership Theory, authentic leadership, phenomenology, internalised leadership, multi-modal methods

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Introduction

The landscape of educational leadership in Ireland is undergoing significant change, shaped by recent policy and guidance that increasingly promote varied conceptions of leadership, including distributed (Spillane, 2006), relational (Clarke, 2018; Uhl-Bien, 2006), transformational (Bass, 1985) and authentic (Avolio et al., 2004; George, 2003; Terry, 1993), whilst offering minimal practical guidance, support or feedback to principals in this endeavour. This disjuncture motivated this research's focus on principals' lived experiences and the personal and professional impact of their internal and external relationships in particular.

School leadership in Ireland is currently characterised by a convergence of challenges relating to preparedness, professional learning and sustainability. Principals are subject to increasing pressure to enact reform arising from both international policy agendas (OECD, 2008) and national frameworks (DE, 2022; DES, 2003, 2016), including Circular 0044/2019 (DE, 2019a), the first to promote leadership and management domains of effective practice and standardise approaches to recruitment in schools. Updated Looking at Our School (LAOS) frameworks (2016, 2022) emphasise leadership and management through school self-evaluation and are aligned with a reformed recruitment process that phased out seniority as a criterion, positioning all teachers as 'leaders of learning' (DE, 2019a, 2019b). The purpose of the LAOS documents was to improve educational standards and the quality of teaching, through clear standards of effective practice used by the inspectorate for school appraisal. The context is further complicated by socio-economic demands, a new primary curriculum, an undefined principal role and poor professional support amidst compliance structures. Principals report profound lack of preparedness (Murphy, 2023), inadequate professional learning, recruitment challenges, and feelings of loneliness and lack of belonging (Kelchtermans, Piot and Ballet, 2011), exacerbated by the pandemic (Harris and Jones, 2020). Despite advancements, lack of formal training or mandatory professional development persists; most pre-2018 appointees received no formal qualification and limited ad hoc support.

At the same time, market-oriented policy discourses frequently marginalise the principal's central relational role, foregrounding employability and broader neoliberal priorities. The Department of Education and Youth (DEY) encourages distributed leadership by developing leadership capacity of followers (Spillane, 2005, 2006); however, such implementation has been constrained by limited professional development, diverse definitions of leadership and blurred interpretations of the distributed concept (Hickey et al., 2023). These constraints are exacerbated by enduring hierarchical legacies within schools.

Systemic pressures contribute to a significant attrition crisis among principals, with many stepping down or taking early retirement, often citing personal reasons, though a significant exodus following the pandemic suggests professional pressures. A national survey found that 94% of school principals say workload is a challenge and 66% of serving principals have considered leaving their role due to ill health, stress or unmanageable workload (National Principals Forum, 2025). The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN, 2026) report cites leaders' health scores are double the negative average of the working population and that 97% cite excessive non-teaching workload as a major issue, prompting a 'sustainability' campaign focusing on recruitment, support and retention. Research by Hickey et al. (2024) highlights an upward trend in principal attrition and early retirement, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, with administrative burden, policy proliferation, workload intensity and concerns regarding well-being cited as key contributing factors (Hickey et al., 2024). Furthermore, 81% of deputy principals reported they would not apply for a vacant principal role primarily due to the anticipated negative impact on their health and

work–life balance, highlighting challenges to succession planning and leadership retention (IPPN, 2024).

Despite this, limited domestic research exists on principals' day-to-day experiences, particularly in relation to how leadership is experienced relationally and personally (Stynes, 2014). What exists is driven by the DEY through top-down large-scale stakeholder quantitative studies focused on policy ideals (Drea and O'Brien, 2003; Fitzpatrick Associated Economic Consultants, 2018) rather than on leaders' lived experiences or the relational dimensions of their role. The tensions and gaps between policy, practice and research underscore the importance of in-depth qualitative investigation in this particular context. More broadly, educational leadership research often foregrounds what leaders do rather than how they experience leadership in relation to others (Spillane, 2006). While many theories examine leaders' relationships and their influence on school culture and climate, attracting national and international attention (Bush, 2020; Buck, 2018; Fullan, 2019), this study takes a different approach. It focuses on principals' lived experiences of leadership, first generally and then specifically on how external and internal relationships impact upon their personal and professional lives.

Theoretical background

Theoretically, the study is underpinned by the relational elements of two interconnected leadership constructs: transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) and authentic leadership (AL) (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Transformational leadership theory (TLT) advocates for 'leaders and followers who raise each other to higher levels of morality and motivation' (Burns, 1978: 20) and has remained an influential leadership construct over the past five decades, despite attracting sustained scholarly critique (Yukl, 1999; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). Its leader-centrism ensures it shares 'family resemblance' (Eaton et al., 2024: 139) to other approaches gaining popularity such as AL (Ahmed, 2024). TLT evolved for school leadership, becoming the 'most effective model' to engage followers emotionally and intellectually (Northouse, 2016). Challenging heroic or autocratic norms, person-based influence moves followers to achieve 'more than expected' (Bass and Riggio, 2006). Its educational value lies in its focus on long-term vision and developing followers into leaders and moral agents, aligning with LAOS domains (DE, 2022) in the context of this study.

TLT has been criticised for lacking conceptual clarity (Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013) and failing to account for contextual factors (Currie and Lockett, 2007). While it is often understood as an idealistic and individualistic theory of leadership, propagating a binary relationship between leader and followers (Eaton et al., 2024), this study foregrounds relational and collective aspects (Currie and Lockett, 2007) through investigation of the lived experiences of school principals. TLT acknowledges the role of relational and social engagement and human-centred approaches serving the collective good (Wilson Heenan et al., 2023; Shortt, 2018), requiring school principals and their staff to transcend self-interest (Avolio et al., 2004). Nevertheless, the expectation to forsake interests and achieve 'more than expected' exerts significant pressure on principals, contributing to 'chaos and complexity' amidst the undefined roles, sustainability crises and policy ambiguity (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011) in Ireland as outlined earlier.

At TLT's core are 'four I's' (Bass, 1985), inspirational motivation, idealised influence, individual consideration and intellectual stimulation, providing a framework for understanding human-centred aspects of the principal's role in practice. Traditionally linked to individual leader influence upon individual followers rather than groups or organisational processes (Yukl, 1999), recent research correlates them with collective principles like clear vision and developing people (Leithwood

et al., 2020). Educational leadership research emphasises TLT's duality, balancing staff needs with those of the leader:

- Inspirational Motivation inspires followers to internalise a shared vision, requiring leaders to acknowledge dependency and express appreciation, fostering a two-way dyadic relationship (Thoonen et al., 2011; Graen and Canedo, 2016).
- Idealised Influence (charisma) involves modelling authentic, ethical leadership, even when risky. Leaders must be respected, but principals often 'do not know what to do' (Harris and Jones, 2020), as seen during the pandemic.
- Individualised Consideration means genuine interest in staff needs, fostering strong relationships requiring 'time, commitment and continuity' (Abbott and Bush, 2013: 600). This often prioritises follower needs, increasing principal workload and stress.
- Intellectual Stimulation encourages challenging the status quo and fostering new thinking and learning. It aligns with distributed leadership, empowering collaborative problem-solving. However, a tension exists in the expectation for leaders to stimulate followers without reciprocal staff responsibility or consideration of the leader's own capacity.

The four 'I's recognise the importance of the relational aspect of leadership, yet many international studies examine only one side of the relationship: what leaders do (Bass, 1985, 1998; Hauserman and Stick, 2013; Uhl-Bien, 2006) whilst ignoring the impact of leadership upon the leader. Moreover, the 'exceptional form of influence' (Northouse, 2016: 175) embedded in TLT can lead to over-reliance on the principal, eroding team development and creativity in practice. Indeed, followers are often portrayed as passive recipients of leadership influence within TLT and practice (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), with little regard for their capacity to resist, challenge, or actively shape the leadership relationship.

Understanding leadership as fundamentally 'grounded in relationship' (Bennis, 2007: 3) involving interconnections, mutuality and interdependency between individuals and groups is central to notions of relational leadership and intrinsically embedded within the original conception of TLT (Eaton et al., 2024). Nevertheless, nurturing reciprocal relationships (Clarke, 2018; Uhl-Bien, 2006) through shifting to shared models is not unproblematic in practice (Murphy, 2019). Building high-performing teams relies on a shared vision, good relationships and high trust (Abbott and Bush, 2013), demanding considerable 'time, commitment and continuity' (Abbott and Bush, 2013: 600). Trust management is complex (Kilinc et al., 2024), requiring leaders to be credible and honest (Sergiovanni, 2001), nurturing respect and mutuality (Clarke, 2018). The dark side of transformational leadership is well-documented (Tourish, 2013), exposing toxic school behaviours like bullying, gossip and slander, profoundly impacting staff well-being and school culture (Fahie and Devine, 2014; Mannix McNamara et al., 2021; Riley, 2015). Such behaviours may arise from unintentional unethical motivation or hostile leader-member exchanges. At the same time, integrity and a commitment to nurturing followers cannot simply be assumed, as idealistic notions of transformational leadership presuppose. The pressure on unsupported leaders to sustain ethical, relational leadership therefore remains an ongoing concern.

This foregrounds the importance of how leaders demonstrate truthfulness in their relationship with the self and others, a central concern within the emergent literature on AL (Ahmed, 2024). Drawing upon the influential work of Kernis and Goldman (2006), AL has been conceptualised to combine self-awareness, internalised moral perspective, balanced processing and relational transparency (Walumbwala et al., 2008: 94). It is characterised by strong ethical beliefs grounded in values and integrity, and a deep sense of purpose and commitment (Terry, 1993; George, 2003).

AL demands modelling ethical behaviour through idealised influence (Bass, 1985): leaders should ‘walk the walk’ and positively model effective practices, even within complex or risky situations. The effectiveness of a leader’s idealised influence relies on followers accepting this influence, which is facilitated when the leader is perceived as credible, legitimate and honest.

The pursuit of AL presents significant challenges for principals in practice. For instance, the competing demands of accountability, policy implementation and organisational management can constrain principals’ ability to enact these core components of authenticity, creating tensions between personal values, professional responsibilities and institutional expectations. This was acutely apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, where principals faced immense pressure to devise plans and inspire confidence despite a lack of clear guidance, leading to calls for a self-care safety net (Dempsey and Burke, 2020). The IPPN’s (IPPN, 2026) concern about the unsustainability of leadership in its current form is directly linked to this imbalance.

The emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) of authenticity is evident as feelings are managed for public display. Internal emotional conflicts are largely unaddressed by external professional learning, which focuses on conflict management over proactive relationship-building. The psychological impact is significant, with high stress levels reported in Irish studies (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Murphy, 2019; Mannix McNamara et al., 2021). Pressure to lead with the heart (Murphy, 2019) has profound emotional implications, exacerbated by lack of support for conflict management, challenging behaviours and leadership distribution exacerbating the sustainability and attrition crisis through stress and burnout. The challenges of integrating their own values and integrity within professional roles demonstrate the emotional demands of maintaining authenticity in a challenging and often unsupported environment.

Despite the complexities, Terry (1993) emphasises that AL is relational and developmental, suggesting that experiences shape and change who leaders become. Authenticity is therefore a useful concept to understand an account of becoming and being a principal that is both holistic and deeply relational: acknowledging that the principals’ identity is formed in dialogue with others (Taylor, 1991), in agreement or struggle with their recognition. From this perspective, understanding the ‘authentic leader’ demands understanding the ways in which school principals inter-relate with themselves, others and the broader context.

The introduction and theoretical background have illuminated the complex policy context of educational leadership in Ireland and the dominant theoretical perspectives of distributed and transformational leadership embedded within policy reform. It highlights implementation gaps in practice, particularly regarding notions of principals’ relational and lived experiences that require further investigation. Transformational leadership is inherently relational, yet its impact on leaders’ personal realities is profoundly underexplored. Similarly, there is a paucity of research integrating contextual and personal dimensions within AL scholarship (Ahmed, 2024), reinforcing the rationale for this study’s design. Key tensions in the Irish context stem from a lack of professional support, over-reliance on policy-driven distributed leadership without practical guidance and principals neglecting their own well-being while striving for authenticity and ethical conduct to meet others’ extensive needs. A comprehensive understanding of educational leadership in this context therefore requires a qualitative lens, foregrounding principals’ experiences.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm, employing a diary-interview method (Zimmerman and Wielder, 1977). While previous studies have explored leadership from the followers’ perspective (Hauserman and Stick, 2013; Leithwood and Riehl,

Table 1. Data collection cycle.

Research phase	Aims and objectives
Reflective diaries	Reflective diaries, completed over 3 self-selected days within a 3-week period, enabled participants to document salient professional experiences. Data were analysed using thematic analysis The diaries constituted an initial data source, capturing participants' lived experiences of leadership and informing the development of subsequent interview questions
Interview 1	Informed by the diary data and underpinned by the TLT framework, the first round of interviews focused on the relational dimensions of leadership. This phase also facilitated rapport-building. Photo-elicitation was introduced to participants
Transcribing and initial coding, memoing	Interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality. Initial coding and memoing were undertaken, initiating thematic analysis
Interview 2 including photo elicitation	The second round of interviews sought to further interrogate the relational aspects of leadership and to clarify emerging themes. Photo-elicitation supported deeper exploration of meanings that may not be accessible through verbal articulation alone
Transcribing, coding and thematic analysis	Data from the second interviews were transcribed and subjected to a more systematic coding process. Thematic analysis was iteratively refined across all data sources
Member checking	To enhance credibility, final transcript PDFs were returned to participants for review and verification

TLT: transformational leadership theory.

2005; Sergiovanni, 2001), this research sought to develop a deeper understanding of principals' perspectives on leadership, with particular attention to their lived experiences and the diverse perspectives through which leadership is enacted and understood. Recognising that reality is multi-layered and open to multiple interpretations (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), and drawing on Crotty's (1998) view of research design as a 'plan of action' (p. 7), this study developed a clear rationale for its methods and analysis, which were explicitly understood as neither objective nor value-neutral (Ravitch and Riggan, 2012: 7).

Adopting a phenomenological approach, data was generated through a bricolage of methods (see Table 1). This began with 3 weeks of reflective diaries capturing rich data on principals' everyday experiences, which informed the questions for two phases of semi-structured interviews. The data was further enriched by photo-elicitation to capture principals' lived experiences of leadership (Bartlett and Milligan, 2021). The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2021) to inform and refine interview questions, supported by iterative memoing and multimodal materials, combining creative bricolage methods to enhance sense-making (Kincheloe, 2005). For instance, the participants' self-selected images that represented their experience of leadership provided insightful data on the relational phenomena (Kara, 2020).

Mindful of bias and preconceptions, this insider interpretative study sought to make the 'familiar strange and interesting again' (Erickson, 1986: 121) through reflective diaries. Participants often used brief, in-the-moment diary reports and anecdotes to recount leadership events (Heidegger, 2007), generating autobiographical accounts that informed the development of interview questions

and provided individual context. Although the study has narrative elements, its primary focus is on exploring the impact of leadership on the leader.

Whilst recognising that lived experience is unavoidably shaped by context and is unified with the self (Gadamer, 1976), containing ‘an unmistakable and irreplaceable relation to the whole of one’s life ... and constantly accompanying it’ (Gadamer, 1976: 58), this study encouraged participants, through prompts and careful questioning, to revisit prior assumptions and judgements. Similarly, we identified ‘sensitising concepts’ (Patton, 1990) brought to the study regarding the lived experience of being a primary principal and used memoing to support critical reflection whilst attending closely to what stands before us. This application of hermeneutic phenomenology sought to explicitly incorporate the researchers’ own interpretation, contrasting with the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl (1970) in which the researcher sets aside or ‘brackets’ their experience as they focus on the research participants’ pure description of their experiences.

Participants and procedures

A larger sample size than traditionally used in phenomenological research (Creswell and Creswell, 2018: 186) was sought to account for the phased reduction of participants throughout the research phases: from 24 diaries to 6 participants for interviews. Initially, permission to access the participants was granted by the gatekeeper directors from a local education centre and national management stakeholders.

Male, female, teaching and administrative principals from different contexts were recruited to purposefully include a wider range of school contexts and principals’ roles, to enhance the richness of the data and illuminate ‘meaningful differences in experiences’ (King et al., 2019: 57). Of the 30 participants recruited, 3 withdrew and 3 diaries were unreturned, resulting in 24 returned diaries (see Table 2 below). Six participants also completed two interviews (see Table 3 below).

Given the focus on relational leadership, the quality of the interview data was enhanced by background knowledge gained from 24 participants’ initial reflective diaries and ongoing contact via letters, messages and photo sharing. Two interviews with each of six participants were conducted, informed by the diary transcripts and reflective memoing (see Table 1).

Data analysis

Data analysis focused upon how principals perceive and experience leadership in general, firstly through diary descriptions and then through interviews and photo-elicitation descriptions. The latter explores interpretations of how relational leadership is exercised. Consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology, the data was read repeatedly to understand principals’ meanings. For instance, we sought to ‘saturate’ some of the themes, patterns and categories of information that had emerged from the 24 diaries alongside our own sensitising concepts. Saturation was attained through elaborating and refining categories and enabling concepts emerging from the data to inform interview questions to nurture ‘analytic sensibility’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Constant comparison was adopted as a dynamic, iterative and relational sense-making process whereby researchers recursively sift through data to ‘continuously compare’ experiences (Merriam, 1998: 179), incidents, comments and other forms of data to identify commonalities, determine what is meaningful and establish what is most salient to the phenomenon under investigation. Although constant comparative methods were conceived initially as a systematic, objective approach to data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), it is understood here as an ongoing, back-and-forth process analysing human engagement, looking for relationships and connections in meanings (Patton, 1990). Unexpected

Table 2. Diary participant profile.

Diary number	Gender	Highest qualification	Years of teaching experience	Years of principal experience	Teaching or administrative principal	Total enrolment	School type	School structure	Context	DEIS status	Number of staff
1-24	17 female 7 male	5 degree 5 postgrad 11 masters 3 doctorates	535 years	245 years	11 teaching 13 administrative	4792 Pupils	19 co-ed 3 girls 1 boys 1 mixed	15 vertical 3 senior 1 special 1 infant 3 junior 1 developing	16 urban 8 rural	3 DEIS	496 staff

Follow-up interview: 18 of the 24 agreed to follow-up interviews. DEIS: Delivering Equality of Education in Schools.

Table 3. Interview participant profile.

Pseudonym	Gender	Highest qualification	Years of teaching experience	Years of principal experience	Teaching or administrative principal	Enrolment	School type	School structure	Context	DEIS status	Number of staff
Brian	Male	EdID	31–40	20+	Administrative	215	All boys	Vertical	Urban	Yes	23
Mary	Female	MSc	31–40	15–20	Administrative	207	All girls	Vertical	Urban	No	18
Claire	Female	MSc	11–20	20+	Administrative	367	Co-Ed	Vertical	Urban	Yes	35
Sean	Male	BEd	11–20	0–5	Teaching	36	Co-Ed	Vertical	Rural	No	6
Ruth	Female	MSc	11–20	5–10	Teaching	140	Co-ed	Vertical	Urban	No	12
Lynn	Female	BEd	31–40	10–15	Teaching	167	Co-ed	Vertical	Urban	No	12

DEIS: Delivering Equality of Education in Schools.

themes emerged, revealing patterns in how principals experience and express leadership. These findings intersected with other inferences and highlighted how assumptions shape understanding, enriching the data. This explorative and reflective process demonstrates the careful attention given to data collection and the inductive thematic analysis, consistent with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach.

Findings

‘Concealment’, ‘embodiment’ and ‘authenticity’ emerged as overlapping themes when interrogating the data phenomenologically (Saldaña, 2021) building upon the established four ‘I’s of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985). The findings illuminate how leadership is internalised, impacting beyond the surface level personal and professional lives of principals to include the concealed, embodied and isolated ill-being experienced by principals as they simultaneously endeavour to be authentic and act in a publicly prescribed way.

Internalised leadership: Concealment

Concealment occurs as principals habitually remove themselves from situations, conceal their true selves and act in ways that separate their personal and professional lives including the wearing of masks or hiding to conceal their genuine emotions. Diary 10 reports *‘hiding anxiety and apprehension’* in fear that staff will not support them if they are incompetent. In both the photo-elicitation and subsequent interview, Sean reflected on a principal *‘hiding in an office’* and the tendency for principals he knows to *‘hide behind the role of a principal’*, leading to staff being *‘scared to talk’* with them. Idealised influence (Bass, 1985) and emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) are evident as principals manage internal and external expectations, regulating their emotions to produce a publicly observable facial and bodily presentation of self (Terry, 1993). For instance, Brian navigates a difficult situation by maintaining *‘professional distance’* during a challenging incident in which children were left without a teacher after a staff member refused to provide cover. He purposefully removes his mind from it, deploying the habit of concealing the *‘inside-out’* (Covey, 2020), concluding *‘the only thing that has made me less cross is pushing it aside and putting a bit of distance between the event and now’*. Brian purposefully attempts to remove negativity from his consciousness, drawing on the Native Indian saying to *‘feed the good wolf in my head’* reflecting that his anger *‘does take over if you feed that aspect of your personality’*. The relational demands of the role challenge each principal differently, yet all reflect a tension between appearing authentic and concealing their true selves.

Internalised leadership: Embodiment

All participants explicitly referenced their bodies incidentally. Not only do leaders aspire to embody their leadership in a profound, somatic meaningful manner, but they also suffer physical consequences (Levine, 2010). Echoing Brian’s analogy of a ‘good wolf’ in his ‘head’, all participants, unprompted, reference parts of their bodies in the diaries and interviews illuminating the toll of being a principal. Ruth felt *‘sick to the pit of my stomach’* before a difficult conversation with a staff member and Sean described an email being *‘stuck in my head all day’*. Many report poor self-care choices, such as emotional eating and putting on weight in times of ongoing stress. Ruth recalls not eating lunch prior to a meeting as she was feeling *‘anxious’*, *‘nauseous’* and *‘horrendous’*. Following intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985) of her staff and challenging of the status quo,

she found herself 'second-guessing' herself on the drive home, as the event 'played on my mind' while at home and in bed. Notions of Noddings' (2015) ethical care are evident here with caregiving rather than receiving care being prioritised.

Many principals describe being tired and sleep deprived, including being 'awake all night' (Mary) and 'tired all day' (Claire), finding it 'hard to function due to exhaustion'. Participants conceal this physical tiredness from staff: Brian feels that 'leadership is for the strong, not the weak', and Sean says you 'need a thick skin' to handle the 'bucket of anxiety'. Principals frequently reported feeling tired and busy, yet none linked workload itself to bodily effects. Rather, interactions with others carried embodied consequences. This underscores the limits of quantitative workload data (Fitzpatrick Associated Economic Consultants, 2018; IPPN, 2026), which overlook the emotive toll of relational challenges, and points to a missing fifth 'I' in Bass' (1985) TLT framework, internalised leadership that is embodied, explored later in this article.

Internalised leadership: Authenticity

Principals value authenticity in an environment where they feel constantly under surveillance. The data revealed that principals endeavour to act with authenticity through their relational interactions and as they sought to be honest about their leadership enactment. They model idealised influence (Bass, 1985) as principals critically shared their successes and failures as leaders from a personal and professional perspective. The Socratic authenticity of knowing thyself is a timeless admonition evident in human psychology and philosophy, such as Heidegger's (2007) understanding of authenticity as a way of being in the world. The participants' ontological position is often in flux. The tension of enacting policies, serving staff whilst being true to them and acting ethically is a balancing act permeating the data.

So it is sometimes a good thing to make a decision. That's not always the most popular decision. But if it's the right decision. (Sean)

We know what's the right thing, but it's not easy. It's not an easy thing. But anyway, we'll get there. (Lynn)

Reflecting the individual consideration of TLT (Bass, 1985) the data revealed how the principals acknowledge the challenges and opportunities of being known and seen as a human while unconsciously concealing their own true selves. For instance, during the interviews, they often deviated away from what Rogers (1967, 1980) describes as fully functioning to focus on the empowerment of staff rather than what disempowers them.

The principals find themselves 'in the crossfire' (Sugrue, 2003) between keeping themselves and staff 'intellectually stimulated' (Bass, 1985) and up to date with educational transformation at macro levels and then enacting top-down policies. Mary, in her administrative leadership role, tries to influence staff and is aware that she cannot role-model good teaching practice from her current position:

some of my staff... have no idea what I was like in the classroom ... unless I have an opportunity to duck in and do a little bit here or there, they still have no idea. So, it's, you know, it's challenging ... (Mary)

Data demonstrates how principals become principals experientially by walking the walk of 'idealised influence' (Bass, 1985). All six participants incidentally discuss the transition into

principalship in their practical experiences: Lynn reports she ‘*learns on the job*’ and Brian reflected upon his second principal appointment to understand this process of ‘*becoming*’:

... part of the job that’s hard in the beginning is to try to, to get to grips with and know everything, which is probably why becoming a principal in a second school is so much easier to becoming a principal in the first school that you might take over. (Brian)

The phrase ‘becoming a principal’ evokes Bennis’ (1989) work on becoming a leader, particularly his assertion that no one can teach you how to become yourself (p. 55). Brian, who is nearing retirement, reflects a gradual shift towards greater self-tolerance and acceptance of others, alongside a quiet confidence to, in his words, ‘*pick one’s way around obstacles*’. As he explains, ‘*I think as you get older, you do see how tolerant people are, because you’d become a lot more tolerant of yourself and others*’. Brian’s account illustrates the dialectical tension between understanding the self as internally realised (Bennis, 1989) and Taylor’s (1991) conception of authenticity as dialogically constituted, suggesting that professional identity emerges through ongoing negotiation between internal self-understanding and relational engagement.

While Brian appreciates sustained tolerance with his leadership, throughout her first interview Mary explicitly sought to portray herself as a ‘competent’ leader. However, as trust built and Mary became more comfortable during her second interview, she started to acknowledge that she is ‘only human’ and does not have all the answers.

And allowing people to see that you’re a human being, you know, that you don’t have all the answers. And you know, but it’s not all perfect at that. You’re just trying the best you can. (Mary)

Such expressions of vulnerability and recognition of limitations in knowledge, skills and understanding demonstrate integrity and a desire to be truthful with oneself and others, qualities identified as central to AL (Ahmed, 2024). Interestingly, while Brian valued being seen as ‘only human’ all the time, Mary equated competence with having all the answers and appeared only willing to value ‘imperfect leadership’ (Munby, 2019) in moments when she herself was uncertain.

The impact: Loneliness, isolation and silence

Having considered three internalised influences above, this section illustrates the personal impact and ways principals negotiate and navigate the challenges. The principal diaries and interviews revealed insights into their isolation and loneliness, resulting from their desire to be authentic yet hiding away, concealing how they are and embodying the tensions. All the chosen photo-elicitation images evoked these emotions. Lynn reported that if she is feeling emotional or stressed, ‘*sometimes I do say jokingly to them (staff), you know, stay out of my way today*’. Perhaps Lynn’s self-awareness of her emotional state encourages self-isolation. Saying this ‘jokingly’ masks genuine emotions whilst preserving the relationship. Similarly Claire reports being ‘*not allowed to feel overwhelmed, isolated or alone*’ and, describing the role of the principal through personification as ‘*a lonely chair*’, removes herself, or indeed conceals her link to isolation:

there’s no doubt that it’s a lonely chair ... it’s a lonely seat. I think the aloneness, the sense of isolation, could not be felt by anybody else. Unless, you’ve been in the seat. You know, I think, it’s palpable, it’s raw, and it’s very lonely. (Claire)

The principals navigate this challenge by purposefully investing in aspects of ‘self-presentation’ (Goffman, 1959), striving to be ‘*seen as competent*’ (Claire) or ‘*human*’ (Claire, Mary, Ruth, Brian) as opposed to un-human, lonely and isolated! Mary said:

Experience has taught me that I am a person. Above all else, I’m a person, I’m a human being. So, it is no harm to let people know that. (Mary)

Mary’s account indicates an openness rather than a concealed view of her role, illuminating the tension between transparency and concealment Rogers (1967) cautions against ‘acting in a way on the surface when I am experiencing something quite different underneath’ (p. 17). Concealing the true feeling of isolation, or in Mary’s situation of being a human, is a tension, or, as Rogers (1967) asserts, not being yourself is not conducive to building relationships. The individualised consideration (Bass, 1985) of TLT is one-sided in these situations. The fact that principals only perceived themselves to be ‘human’ when recounting difficult situations is concerning, given their significant influence on school culture and climate.

Some principals reported being silent when they get home, reflecting and ruminating on conversations, and being unable to engage with family and friends to the point that leadership can ‘*take over your whole life*’ (Claire). Diary participants reported eating alone at school. Some described isolating themselves from others and social events, saying they used to socialise with staff, but ‘*don’t go anymore*’ (Brian). The principals are mindful that their voice carries significant influence, yet this coexists with a need for silence. While principals are expected to articulate an inspiring vision and secure commitment through visible, vocal leadership (Bass, 1985; Uhl-Bien, 2006), they are left feeling isolated and lonely.

One principal recounted reporting a relational issue through stakeholder channels; the advice was to ‘*let it go*’ (Claire). Similarly, Mary unbalanced power relations and sought to protect her personal well-being and professional relationships, reflecting ‘*it’s not easy to let things like that go. And I think part of the learning is... sometimes you just have to let it go*’ (Mary). Stakeholders’ expectations of staff and subsequently principals’ expectations ‘from’ and ‘of’ staff seem unattainable from the lens of the participants, for example, Sean said:

You could have a negative influence as well as a positive influence. You’d like to think you’d have a good influence on your staff, a positive one, but you could never be 100%. (Sean)

To further corroborate the data on silence, loneliness and isolation, the multimodal dimension of the interviews revealed insights into experiences of relational leadership. Sean was drawn to a black-and-white image that depicts a blurred shadow-like silhouette of a human moving, with no identifying features or no visible facial features. The figure is elongated and indistinct. Sean describes it as representing an autocratic principal, alone in the office and making decisions. Sean further suggested that this isolated person had chosen an autocratic environment so that he saw himself as a ‘*hero*’. He implied that isolation might be chosen when ‘*principals choose to lead from the front*’. Sean experienced this type of leadership in his previous school and referenced its negative impact on him and his colleagues, which is evident in Mannix McNamara et al.’s (2021) work. Finally, Ruth, too, was uncomfortable with the image:

It made me feel really sad. I just kind of thought, Oh, there is somebody there with their head down. And they are doing this journey on their own... in the shadows... being a principal can be a very isolating role. (Ruth)

The public appearance of the principal illuminates a trouble-free life, a strong person who conceals the limitations of the role and models the idealised influence (Bass, 1985). Ironically, the principals in the study model concealment. Claire describes feeling *'allowed to be busy and under pressure'* but *'not allowed to feel overwhelmed, isolated or alone'*. She explains that instead of modelling imperfect leadership (Munby, 2019), she wears a 'mask' to convey a strong, influential, controlled leader. Similarly, Ruth said, *'I don't think you would have picked up how nervous I was from the meeting'*. The principals' accounts depict the private enactment of concealed, unshared leadership, an approach long discouraged by the education system in favour of distributed leadership models that emphasise the involvement of others (Hickey et al., 2023; Spillane, 2006).

Discussion

These findings illuminate the complexity of translating normative leadership ideals into everyday practice within demanding and under-resourced organisational contexts. They deepen understanding of recent Irish research (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Fahie and Devine, 2014; Mannix McNamara et al., 2021; Riley, 2015), highlighting the challenges principals face and reinforcing calls for urgent support (Murphy, 2019) through targeted professional and personal development. Although schools implemented strategies from the Wellbeing Charter in 2025 (Government of Ireland, 2018), current policy initiatives prioritise the well-being of others over critical reflection on principals' own practices (Lindley, 2022). While leadership isolation is recognised in the literature (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012), this study provides evidence of the relational toll of the role, with some principals giving so much of themselves that they become depleted of energy, hide, isolate and become silent.

The findings extend Bass' (1985) four 'I's by unpacking lived experiences and investigating the implications that enhance or inhibit relational leadership in practice. The synthesised findings show that principals in the study use the four 'I's of TLT (Bass, 1985) but lack the fifth 'I', 'internalised leadership'. This work therefore builds upon Bass' (1985) framework and offers considered and reflective insights into the benevolent and relational side of leadership. The fifth 'I' that emerged in this study illustrates tensions in the principal's 'individualised consideration' (Bass, 1985).

The important fifth 'I', internalised leadership, can be linked to Murphy's (2019) idealistic notion of leading with the heart, as principals reported leading with kindness and care, similar to Sergiovanni's (1992) virtuous school. However, the consequences are more internally destructive, because embodied concealed leading affects the head, stomach, skin, weight and sleep, resulting in physical and psychological ill-being. While findings of concealment and embodiment need further investigation to ascertain the prevalence of ill-being, theory-building upon the internalised fifth 'I' would further validate this. For instance, internalised leadership can be understood as the embodied cost of holding AL's internal dimensions, self-awareness and an internalised moral perspective, in place while simultaneously attending to TLT's externally oriented idealised influence and individualised consideration.

Tensions arise between 'internalised leadership' and the 'idealised influence' (Bass, 1985) of leaders projecting an external veneer of being a role model but internally being concealed, feeling isolated and silently concealing the truth. At times, the idealised influence is inauthentic, with a positive, life-affirming influence instead being publicly displayed. If supported and validated, internalised leadership could become more introspective and reflexive rather than concealed and embodied in ill-being. Theoretically, this tension suggests that idealised influence (Bass, 1985) and relational transparency (Walumbwa et al., 2008) may be structurally difficult to sustain simultaneously under conditions of organisational strain: the more principals are expected to model

composure and certainty, the more relational transparency is likely to be suppressed. Rather than undermining established understanding of TLT or AL, these findings draw attention to the gap between theoretical ideals and their enactment in everyday practice.

The findings illustrate that the participants demonstrate great external 'individual consideration' (Bass, 1985) and care 'of' and 'for' the staff, children, parents, other principals, and stakeholders through their relational leadership during and after school. However, the care 'of' and 'for' staff seems more dominant in the data than the care 'of' and 'for' the parents and children. Though the ethics of giving to others while depleting themselves has internal consequences (Noddings, 2015), the participants know their self-care matters and establishing care systems takes time, experience and policy drivers. Temporality is relevant regarding the length of experience that participants have before establishing ways of protecting themselves, corresponding to the gap and lack of professional learning received once appointed and the time it takes to create trusted safe spaces. Care or lack of care becomes an issue when thoughts of attrition accumulate, and principals feel overwhelmed, leading to embodied ill-being, occupational stress and concealed burnout, contributing to the leadership crisis (IPPN, 2026).

AL calls for principals to integrate their own values and integrity within their professional roles. The findings illustrate the onerous nature of this task, compounded by issues of workload, lack of self-care and the emotional demands of maintaining authenticity in a challenging and often unsupported environment. In reality, authenticity is often masked, the public persona disguised, to '*protect the staff from leadership challenges*' (Ruth), '*hiding in the office*' (Sean) and '*sometimes if I am stressed I try not to show it*' (Lynn). Interpreted through Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) four components of AL, these accounts suggest a selective enactment of authenticity rather than its absence. Principals' continued self-monitoring, noticing and naming their own stress even while suppressing it, as Lynn describes, indicates that self-awareness remains active; what falters under organisational pressure is relational transparency, the willingness to disclose that internal state to others. Furthermore, leaders face particular challenges influencing others who lack similar self-awareness. The presence of 'dark' (Tourish, 2013) or toxic behaviours within school cultures can hinder the development and practice of AL, underscoring the need for further research in primary school contexts.

The principals in this study are acutely aware of the duality of their personal and professional identities. Participants struggle with being themselves and being authentically 'human', which seems achievable in safe spaces, predominantly with other principals. Professional platforms, networks and local peer support communities that enable the sharing of concealed, isolated and silenced lived experiences may help principals find a voice to unmask their humanness. Such professional development should generate self-awareness of the impact that modelling inauthentic leadership has on aspiring leaders. If principals' 'idealised influence' (Bass, 1985) means they role model ill-being, hard work and poor self-care, how can it inspire others to see the joy of leading? Furthermore, inauthentic practices impact the culture and climate of the entire school, including the children's learning (Mannix McNamara et al., 2021).

The narratives depict becoming a principal as an ongoing, relational process grounded in holistic ways of knowing that resist both an 'original-to-be-discovered' and a 'self-created' notion of the authentic self. This underscores the importance of engaging with principals' embodied knowing as a basis for developing self-awareness, attending to how they expose and reshape both habits of mind and habits of being. Barnett (2007), for example, articulates an ontological substrate to becoming authentic and 'true to oneself', suggesting this involves becoming less encumbered by external voices while enhancing agency, as individuals come to take hold of their lives in their own way (p. 42). In this sense, it is also vital to recognise the histories and possibilities that

principals carry with them, acknowledging what MacIntyre (1984) describes as ‘the unity of a human life’ (p. 216). This echoes previous critiques of TLT (Currie and Lockett, 2007) which identified the influence of pre-existing ethical frameworks and identities that professionals in public services bring to their leadership or followership. Becoming, then, is a process of becoming oneself: a striving to move forward, directing one’s energies along a self-determined path, even amidst the ‘swirling waters’ that threaten to deflect it (Barnett, 2011: 62).

The limitations of this important study must be acknowledged. It captures only a snapshot of Irish primary principals’ experiences in 2021/2022, filtered through their perceptions of leadership in schools post-COVID-19. Language interpretation and transcription may not fully convey nuances. Its Ireland-specific context, conducted in partnership with a UK University, limits generalisability, but was tempered through engagement across Irish universities and policy networks. Finally, the phenomenological approach, informed by personal and autobiographical perspectives, required continual reflexivity to manage insider bias while embracing the interpretive value of lived experience.

Conclusion

This study has developed an understanding of how relational leadership is experienced by a group of primary school principals in Ireland as they build relationships through interconnections, interactions and interdependence between individuals (Clarke, 2018), whether with themselves, with others, or within leader–member and leader–group dynamics (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Although relationships are central to the social and relational processes between leaders and others, little is known about how workplace relationships form and develop (Mannix McNamara et al., 2021), and the relational dimensions of leadership investigated here remain under-researched.

Many theories explore leaders’ relationships with others and the transformational leader’s impact on school culture and climate, which gains national and international attention due to its complexity (Bush, 2020; Buck, 2018; Fullan, 2019; Sergiovanni, 2001). Added to that, policy documents advocate principals to enact concepts and models of leadership, such as distributed (Spillane, 2006), relational (Clarke, 2018; Uhl-Bien, 2006), transformational (Bass, 1985) and authentic (Avolio et al., 2004; George, 2003; Terry, 1993), with little guidance, support or feedback from policymakers. This study has pursued an alternative line of enquiry: its central focus is on principals’ lived experiences of leadership, first generally, then more specifically on the personal and professional impact of the relational aspects of their external and internal relationships in practice.

The study used AL and TLT as a framework to better understand the relational lived experiences of principals from their perspective. It has interrogated what it is like to be a primary school principal, drawing upon diverse literature (Goffee and Jones, 2015; Hochschild, 2012; Munby, 2019; Murphy 2023; Stynes, 2014) with a particular focus on the human aspect of the role (Goffman, 1959; Goleman, 1996; Rogers, 1967, 1980). As transactional notions (Bass, 1985) are fading, and more benevolent conceptualisations of leadership are rapidly emerging, principals struggle to manage their workloads and often struggle to lead benevolently. The most recent solution offered to principals is co-leadership (IPPN, 2026) by decommissioning historical legacies of autocratic singular models towards more democratic ideals.

This study’s original contribution lies in the development of the concept of ‘internalised leadership’ which foregrounds the internal, concealed, embodied and isolated ill-being experienced by principals as they simultaneously endeavour to be authentic and act in a publicly prescribed way. Over two decades after Drea and O’Brien’s (2003) IPPN-initiated study of principals’

challenges, these findings reaffirm the importance of attending to ethical care (heart) (Noddings, 2012; Sergiovanni, 1992), cognition (head) and physical labour (hands) in Irish primary school leadership. The implications of such ‘internalised leadership’ warrant further investigation. Augmenting the four ‘I’s of TLT with ‘internalised leadership’ allows for a more nuanced account of leadership experiences among primary school principals in Ireland, extending Stynes’ (2014) work by incorporating the role’s relational and internalised dimensions. This advances large-scale Irish research by Hay Group, Drea and O’Brien (2003), Darmody and Smyth (2016) and Fitzpatrick Associated Economic Consultants (2018) by moving beyond depictions of work-life imperfections to elucidate how principals navigate leadership tensions and opportunities, and how these are internalised within their lived experience.

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Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences Research Ethics Subcommittee at Liverpool Hope University on 5th May 2021. Evidence of approval can be provided upon request.

Consent to participate

All participants were provided with detailed information about the study and gave informed, written consent prior to participation.

Consent for publication

Informed, written consent for publication was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Consent forms are held by the authors and are available upon reasonable request.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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