Country Background Report United Kingdom

1. Background

The environment in which school leaders work in Northern Ireland today is unusually complex and challenging. There are many reasons for this:

- the very nature of schools and learning;
- socio-economic developments, including a significant decline in school-aged population;
- deeper changes in attitudes and expectations, not least among parents;
- the fragility of the local economy and its heavy dependence on a public sector whose funding is under severe pressure;
- the fact that Northern Ireland is emerging from thirty years of conflict and still learning how to make a complicated system of power-sharing devolved government work to best effect.

The Executive which governs Northern Ireland includes a Minister for Education with overall responsibility for the school system and the policy framework in which it operates, and this framework is undergoing profound change as an ambitious reform agenda is implemented. Intended to achieve a range of modernising objectives and, in the words used as the title for the Minister's central policy, to make 'Every School a Good School', the reform agenda currently includes:

- a revised and significantly different curriculum for pupils aged 4 to 16 characterised by significantly reduced course content, a very small statutory core and an emphasis on the development of a range of skills, employability, citizenship and the capacity to go on learning ;
- an entitlement framework for young people aged 14 to 19 guaranteeing them access to a wide range of both vocational and academic pathways ;
- a sustainable schools policy designed to enable a more coherent approach to be taken to the re-shaping of the schools' estate ;
- a radical reform of educational administration which will replace the numerous employing authorities responsible for most schools with a single education and skills authority that will employ all teaching and non-teaching staff,

- allocate funding, provide professional support and hold schools and their leaders more rigorously to account ; and
- the development of new types of schools, such as those designated as having specialist status, and much else, including the abolition of academic selection at age 11

Given this drive for the improvement of schools and standards of attainment generally, it is not surprising that the quality of school leadership has assumed an even greater importance.

It is also not surprising that those leading schools now feel that they are asked to cope with a remarkable amount of profound change in a context of very considerable uncertainty and that the number of those applying to lead them is as a result, significantly smaller than it was 5 or 10 years ago. To many, if not most, principals, the challenges, expectations and levels of accountability seem to have become much greater while the support and resources available to them seem to have declined.

2. Context

The Northern Ireland school system is unusually complex, partly because it has so many different sectors but primarily because it has such a divided society. In addition to the five education and library boards, which are broadly like local education authorities and both own and are responsible for managing what are known as 'controlled' schools and employing all those working in them, there is also a Catholic-maintained sector which has broadly similar responsibilities for its schools. Alongside these are 52 voluntary grammar schools which are selective, a growing number of integrated schools, which seek to bring Catholic and non-Catholic pupils together, and a small Irish-medium sector. In these types of schools, the governing bodies are the employers. There is no independent sector of any significance.

All except the very few independent schools are grant-aided by the Department of Education according to funding formulae based broadly on the numbers and ages of their pupils, but only a minority have fully devolved budgets and full responsibility for managing their own financial affairs. The great majority of schools are funded by and through the employing authorities which own them (or act on behalf of the owners) and their budgets and their freedom to manage their own affairs are at best partially devolved.

Between them, these grant-aided-schools, of which there are some 1,300, provide pre-primary education for children up to the age of 4+, primary education for those aged between 5 and 11 and post-primary education for those between 11 and 19. Young people are legally free to leave school at the age of 16, but the number who do so is small, the great majority of those aged between 16 and 19 remaining in some form of education and/or training, many of them in further education colleges.

All pupils transfer from the primary to the post-primary phase of their compulsory education at age 11 and most post-primary schools are either selective or non-selective, the former deciding which pupils they will admit, if over-subscribed, on the basis of their performance in tests of their academic ability taken in the autumn term of their final year in primary school and the latter not using any form of academic testing at all. These tests, set by the Department of Education, were taken for the last time in the autumn of 2008, but the future of academic selection is a hotly debated issue whose future remains unsettled. There are only a few genuinely comprehensive post-primary schools.

Pupils are formally assessed at the end of each key stage of their education. At the end of key stages 1, 2 and 3, when they are aged 8, 11 and 14, their levels of attainment in core subjects are assessed and reported by their teachers. At age 16, when they come to the end of key stage 4, they are assessed by formal public examinations leading to the award of a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and, if they remain at school, they are formally assessed again by public examinations at the end of each of their two years and awarded a General Certificate of Education

(GCE) at advanced supplementary and/or advanced level.

In terms of overall performance, the Northern Ireland school system has much of which it can be proud. It significantly out-performs the rest of the United Kingdom at GCE Advanced Level and at the top end at GCSE, but concerns have grown in recent years about a number of aspects of the system's performance:

- its failure to deliver basic skills to many pupils ;
- the major challenges that remain in raising the levels of basic literacy and numeracy despite very substantial investment in these areas since 1998 ;
- the evidence that some 750 young people leave school every year with no formal qualifications of any kind and that up to 3,000 leave with very few;
- the relative underachievement of boys at all stages ;
- the variations in pupils' levels of achievement within as well as between schools ; and
- the indications that overall levels of attainment at GCSE and GCE A Level seem to have reached a plateau and remained there for the past decade

It is in the context of these and other similar concerns that the government's reform programme needs to be seen.

3. School leadership concepts and practices

The conceptual framework

Principals in schools in Northern Ireland have historically enjoyed both high status and very considerable autonomy, not least in what was to be taught and learned in their schools, and, while they have less room for manoeuvre now than used to be the case, they continue to have a good deal of freedom.

The processes by which principals are appointed vary from sector to sector and, indeed, within sectors, much depending on the role of the employing authority. Governing bodies play an

increasingly significant part in the decision-making in all schools and it will be with their governing bodies that principals will work most closely after appointment.

So far as their roles and responsibilities are concerned, terms and conditions of service agreed in 1987 and amended since set out the duties, rights and powers of principals and vice-principals, while matters such as the framework for determining both their starting pay and pay progression and for annual performance review are also based on agreements between the employing authorities and the teacher unions.

It is important to note that the terms and conditions of service for principals and vice-principals describe their duties and rights in very broad terms, listing the matters for which they are responsible and the authority they have to act, but offering no detailed statement of what principals are expected to focus their attention on. How they exercise their powers and carry out their duties varies considerably, much depending on each school's particular context, the experience, values, personal qualities, interests and style of each principal and the nature of his or her relationship with the school's governing body. The level of autonomy which school principals enjoyed in previous years may have been significantly diminished, but it remains high, primarily because there is no clear and agreed framework of accountability. Each principal must therefore seek to agree with his or her board of governors how best to lead the school and what his or her priorities should be.

What principals decide to pay attention to is, though not determined, increasingly shaped by the revised National Standards for Head teachers in Northern Ireland, which were adopted by the Department of Education in 2005, and by the Education and Training Inspectorate's reports to the Department which now comment on the quality of leadership and management in every school inspected, but the most powerful influence on the ways in which they work and the priorities they set comes by way of the Department of Education circulars and/or statutory orders that lay an increasing number of legal obligations on governing bodies which they commonly transfer to the principals to whom they look for the educational leadership of their schools. Boards of

Governors have, for example, a statutory obligation to prepare and publish a range of policy statements dealing with everything from child protection to admissions, to draw up development plans which set the strategic direction for the school, establish targets for pupils' achievements, write and issue annual reports to parents, establish a system for annual performance review for all members of the teaching staff and much else. Given that such a lot has been asked and expected of governing bodies which are, for the most part, made up of interested and supportive lay people who have little detailed knowledge of educational matters, it is not difficult to understand the central importance attaching to the relationship between governing bodies and their principals.

The focus on teaching and learning

The biggest challenge for school leaders now may be that which arises from the reform agenda referred to earlier, itself a reaction to the perceived limitations of what was previously in place.

Until a relatively short time ago, they were expected to work in an environment which, while characterised by competition between schools, was relatively controlled and predictable: enrolments remained relatively steady, parents were broadly supportive, schools were recognisably similar, there was a statutory curriculum which set down what courses were to be offered at each stage, what programmes of study were to be used and what content they were to contain, and the results of formal public examinations provided a yardstick of the progress they were thought to be making.
In such an environment, it was not unreasonable for employing authorities and governing bodies to look to appoint school leaders who seemed likely to be sound and reliable managers and for those applying for such posts, headships in particular, to think in much the same ways.

But the environment now is very different. Though still characterised by competition, it is much more complex and demanding, primarily for the following reasons:

- demographic decline makes the continued existence of some schools uncertain and greatly sharpens competition between them;

- attitudes to schools and their leaders are more challenging as respect for authority generally declines;
- schools are becoming less like each other as new models emerge and as their curricular provision becomes more directly related to the particular needs of the pupils they serve;
- the reform agenda lacks coherence, policies supporting collaboration jostling those which endorse competition;
- there is no longer a statutory curriculum : school leaders now have to decide what curricular provision is appropriate for their pupils, what range of courses or pathways their schools should provide, how, where and with what they can best meet their pupils' aspirations and needs, what can be done to improve the quality of learning and teaching, how the potential of new technologies can best be harnessed, where they should look for partners and whether any kind of line can be drawn between their schools and the world beyond their gates

In such a context, employing authorities and governing bodies increasingly look for leaders. They want and hope to appoint men and women who:

- can think and act strategically;
- have the capacity to shape and articulate a compelling vision for school improvement and secure support for it across the community;
- know what high quality learning and teaching are and how they can be achieved;
- understand how to build alliances and partnerships with other providers ;
- will lead change and improvement;
- can represent their schools to their communities and beyond

Being a sound and efficient manager is still necessary, but it is no longer enough. Schools now want and need leadership of a very high order and across a demanding range of areas if their aims and purposes are to be achieved.

Re-structuring and re-culturing school organisations

The challenges facing principals and schools now, the range of issues within and beyond their boundaries they are expected to address, the higher levels of accountability with which they must live and the sheer complexity of their roles and responsibilities have combined to convince virtually everyone that school leadership can no longer be a one-person job.

Almost every school, however small, now has a leadership or management team of some kind and more and more of them look to teachers to work together in formal or informal teams of different kinds. Team leaders or co-ordinators have been appointed and are commonly rewarded financially for the additional duties they take on, and principals themselves look more and more to formal and informal networks for information, advice and support.

Movement towards a more distributed model of leadership is gathering pace, but it does not offer principals an easy path. There are difficult questions about distributing leadership that remain to be answered, but the trend is clear and, as it develops, it will begin to re-shape and re-culture schools very considerably. More of them are already moving away from strongly hierarchical models towards flatter systems. More of them are moving from allocating responsibilities to teachers who are paid to take them on more or less permanently towards flexible team-based roles and fixed-term responsibilities that may be reviewed, revised or replaced. And more of them see that the introduction of the revised curriculum for pupils aged 4 to 16 and the entitlement framework for those aged 14 to 19 offers opportunities for leaders to work with their teaching and non-teaching colleagues to focus their energies and attention on enabling deeper and more worthwhile learning to take place and for all the young people to succeed. The hope is that, as teachers acquire or develop the skills to achieve these outcomes, they can and will transfer their skills into other roles and the overall capacity of their schools will be increased as a result.

Establishing and negotiating the direction of school development

In a circular published in 2005, the Department of Education required governing bodies in all grant-aided schools to prepare and publish three-year school development plans: it also detailed the matters which such plans were to include.

Governing bodies were advised that they were expected, among other things, to:

- provide a statement of their school's ethos ;
- offer a summary of the strategies for learning, teaching and assessment and an assessment of the general progress made by pupils and their standards of attainment ; assess the teaching provided by the school and outline the arrangements for the professional development of the teaching staff ;
- outline the management structure in the school ;
- summarise and assess the strategies for promoting pupils' attendance, good behaviour and discipline ;
- describe the curricular and extra-curricular provision made for pupils ;
- assess the provision made for pupils with special educational needs and for the pastoral care of pupils generally and the school's links with parents and the wider community ; and
- assess the school's accommodation, its current financial position and the extent to which its key targets had been met

It is important to note that it is on governing bodies that the obligation to prepare and publish such plans has been laid, and it is clear that this duty is seen at system level to be a key component of the drive for school improvement. It remains open to every school and its leaders to seek to maintain what they regard as their distinctive ethos and values and, indeed, to decide not only the shape of the curricular provision they regard as appropriate for their pupils but also how, when, where and by whom these pupils should be taught and much else, but the emphasis put on development planning demonstrates that those with overall responsibility for education in Northern Ireland want not just to see improved outcomes but also to be given the evidence that schools are working intentionally to achieve them.

System leadership and collaboration

In 2006, the Department of Education announced the introduction of an Entitlement Framework, essentially a curriculum for all school pupils aged between 14 and 19. Its fundamental aim is to give these young people a much wider choice of pathways from age 14 onwards and it is expected that, when the framework is fully in place in 2013, they will not only have guaranteed access in their local areas to a minimum of 24 courses at age 14 and at least 27 when they reach 16 but that at least one-third of the courses available to them will be academic, one-third will be vocational and the other third may be either vocational or academic or a mixture of both.

The schools these young people attend are not under an obligation to provide these courses themselves but to enable their pupils to have access to them, which means that the great majority of schools will have to collaborate much more with each other than they have in the past if they are to make this policy objective a reality. Only a very small number of the largest post-primary schools would be able to offer such a range of pathways in a sustainable manner, and most of them seem to be convinced of the value of collaborating with other providers to make wider access available rather than stretch their own resources too thinly.

Encouraged by funding from the Department of Education, post-primary schools across Northern Ireland began to build partnerships with those near them in the past few years and to work more closely in area learning communities. This process is in its early stages and school leaders report that they find it difficult to see how collaboration with what are often competitor schools can be taken further. They recognise that the policy context in which they work is much more supportive of competition between schools than it is of collaboration and, they understand that, until this tension is resolved, it is likely that the potential of collaborative area learning communities to impact on what is provided for young people will remain limited.

If collaboration does in time become the dominant feature of both the post-primary school system, its culture will become very different, and the concept of system leadership and the notion of different models of partnership between

schools and, indeed, of schooling will have a much greater chance of becoming a reality. Meanwhile, the available evidence suggests that principals value the contacts with their peers that the area learning communities provide and the opportunities they have had as a result to look more closely at how they might best meet the needs of all the young people in their areas.

Examples of good practice in leadership

Much depends on how the notion of 'good practice' is defined and the extent to which the following are thought to exist in a school:

- a strong and widely shared sense of identity and purpose ;
- clearly stated and broadly agreed values and aims;
- high expectations and focuses on achievement for every pupil ;
- curricular arrangements which consistently meet the needs and ambitions of all their pupils;
- structures and processes designed to enable every pupil to achieve at the highest possible levels ;
- the capacity to sustain these high levels of performance over time ;
- skilled and effective leaders;
- hip that is widely distributed across the staff as a whole ;
- a strong committed to continuous improvement and to continuous professional development as the means of achieving it ; and
- a belief in self-review and reflection and the ability to learn continuously from them

If such criteria are used, the indications are that, while there are not many schools in Northern Ireland that meet every one them, there are some that do and a lot more that come close. Many of these schools are set in challenging locations, often in areas with limited social capital, but they have shown an ability to transform young lives for the better by opening doors and windows for their pupils that would otherwise have remained shut. The leaders of these schools are characteristically modest and self-effacing, giving the credit for what is achieved to others, praising their staff and pupils and describing themselves as facilitators rather than leaders. They are held in

the highest regard in a community which, for all its tensions, still values education, and they command enormous personal and professional respect. What distinguishes them is their strong sense of moral purpose. They are determined to make the lives of their pupils and, often, of the communities which they serve much better than they would otherwise have been.

4. Recruiting and educating school leaders

In Northern Ireland there is no immediate crisis in the supply of school leaders, but the age profile of principals generally shows that 55 per cent of them are over 50 and that 75 per cent of principals in post-primary schools are in the same category. A high proportion of serving principals will be retiring in the next five years and almost half the total number is likely to have retired within the next decade. There is concern that some of those with the greatest potential may not seek to fill leadership posts in the future and, while there is a broadly sufficient pool of talent to meet leadership needs in schools generally, there are particular anxieties about the number of applicants for headships in small rural primary schools, the under-representation of women in senior posts, especially in post-primary schools, and the attractiveness of leadership posts in primary schools and of teaching as a profession as a whole for men.

Successful applicants for senior leadership posts, including principalships and vice-principalships, are almost always graduates with a teaching qualification and experience in a variety of leadership posts is usually an essential criterion. Although it is not yet a mandatory requirement for headship posts, the Professional Qualification for Headship (NI) has increasingly been seen as conferring an advantage on those who have it. Built around the 6 key areas for headship and the professional knowledge and actions required by head teachers laid out in the National Standards for head teachers (NI), the qualification and the associated National Standards (NI) represent the only system-wide attempt at planning for succession into senior school leadership posts. Schools, according to their schemes of management, retain considerable autonomy in

appointing principals and/or in identifying teachers with talent in leadership and/or in promoting their continuous professional development.

The challenge of developing good practice in school leadership in general and headship in particular across the Northern Ireland system has been central to the work of the Regional Training Unit which serves all the different employing authorities. The Unit has developed a suite of programmes that are designed to meet the management and leadership training needs of principals and senior staff in schools and colleges and is currently constructing a leadership pathway by and through which teachers with the appropriate talent and skills may progress in leadership roles, both in individual schools and for the benefit of the whole NI system as a whole.

The diagram that follows describes the nature of this suite of professional development programmes in greater detail.

The leadership pathway model – Regional Training Unit
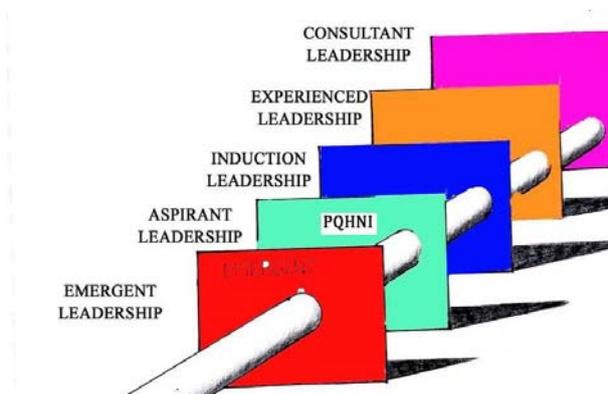
Initial teacher training in Northern Ireland is delivered by the two local universities and their constituent training colleges. This is followed by an early professional development stage in which the school in which the beginning teacher works mentors and supports their progress against competences drawn up by the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland. The leadership pathways model illustrates various stages in the development of school leadership throughout a teacher's career. Northern Ireland was one of only 5 school systems reporting to the OECD

Improving School Leadership Project of 2008 to provide for leadership development from pre-service through induction to in-service training.

5. Challenges, areas of innovation and underlying evidence

The 2008 OECD report, 'Improving School Leadership', begins with a powerful statement of the way school leadership is now perceived: 'As countries are seeking to adapt their education systems to the needs of contemporary society, expectations for schools and school leaders are changing. Many countries have moved towards decentralisation, making schools more autonomous in their decision-making and holding them more accountable for results. At the same time, the requirement to improve overall student performance while serving more diverse student populations is putting schools under pressure to use more evidence-based teaching practices. As a result of these trends, the function of school leadership is now increasingly defined by a demanding set of roles which include financial and human resource management and leadership for learning (…). In many countries, principals have heavy workloads (…) and it is getting harder to replace them. Potential candidates often hesitate to apply, because of overburdened roles, insufficient preparation and training, limited career prospects and inadequate support and rewards. These developments have made school leadership a priority in education systems across the world.'

All of this could have been written about school leadership in Northern Ireland today because all of it applies. The challenges facing school leaders now are formidable. A whole generation of serving principals will leave the profession in the next few years and all the available evidence suggests that there are significantly fewer potential candidates prepared to consider applying to take their places. That there is a crisis of recruitment is broadly accepted. Two key questions arise:

- one has to do with how those leading schools now can be helped to develop the capacity to meet the expectations that government and society have of them and their schools;

- the other concerns the best ways of encouraging and persuading those with the potential to lead schools in the future to consider headship and apply to become principals

One recent writer about these matters, who has an extensive understanding of school leadership across the United Kingdom, suggests that the very fact that the education system in Northern Ireland is going through a period of unprecedented change creates 'an opportunity to develop a more collaborative approach to school leadership (…)' and goes on to argue that 'a holistic school leadership transformation programme is needed.'

He believes that such a programme should involve:

- the promotion and implementation of new models of school leadership and the development of system-wide leadership roles ;
- a re-examination of the system of rewards and incentives for school leaders ;

- a significant investment in leadership capacity by, for example, examining succession planning as a matter of urgency, promoting cross-sectoral and business secondments, refining and extending the professional training and support provided for both potential and serving school leaders;
- a systematic and intensive communications strategy aimed at challenging received wisdom about how school leadership should look, explaining the benefits of new models of leadership, attracting new entrants into the talent pool and re-engaging parents and learners

This writer ends by pointing to the opportunity that the creation of a single education and skills authority affords to enable these and other issues relating to school leadership to be addressed. How, when and by whom they are considered remains to be seen, but it is abundantly clear that school leadership will assume even greater significance if the intentions of the reform agenda are to be realised.