STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast

Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement

The James Kane Foundation

Mary Ann McCracken Foundation

Effective School Leadership in Disadvantaged Communities

September 2025

Prof Noel Purdy OBE, Dr Emilia Symington,
Dr Mark Ballentine, Dr Karen Orr,
Dr Glenda Walsh, Dr Katie Tate

Executive Summary

Aims of the Study

This small-scale study, funded by the James Kane Foundation and the Mary Ann McCracken Foundation set out to explore the characteristics of effective leadership in post-primary schools located in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland, and to explore the following key research objectives:

- To discern the key features of 13 high performing post-primary schools with over 50% of pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSME).
- To critically explore the motivation, values, support structures, and personal and professional characteristics of the school leaders in these schools.
- To draw lessons and offer insights for new and aspiring leaders working in similarly challenging contexts.

Methodology

The study focused on the 13 post-primary schools with 50%+ free school meal entitlement which sit at least five percentage points above the Northern Ireland trend line for pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs at grades A*–C including English and Maths. The selection is based on Department of Education attainment data for the immediate pre-Covid academic year 2018-19, as published in *Investing in a Better Future* (Independent Review of Education, 2023). With the support of the Department of Education, the 13 schools were identified as follows: Belfast Boys' Model School; Coláiste Feirste, Belfast; Hazelwood Integrated College, Belfast; Malone Integrated College, Belfast; Mercy College, Belfast; St Brigid's College, Derry/ Londonderry; St Cecilia's College, Derry/ Londonderry; St Colm's High School, Belfast; St Genevieve's High School, Belfast; St Joseph's Boys' School, Derry/Londonderry; St Joseph's College, Belfast; St Louise's College, Belfast; and St Mary's College, Derry/Londonderry.

The research design comprised two strands. In the first strand, quantitative analysis was carried out on publicly available and Department of Education-provided data relating to each of the 13 schools. The analysis revealed a number of shared characteristics including high levels of Free School Meal Entitlement and similar pupil attendance rates, but also significant variations in terms of school management type, suspension rates and Multiple Deprivation Measures for the school location. The analysis concluded that demographic factors alone could not explain the high performance of these 13 schools.

The second strand of the study consisted of in-depth, individual, semi-structured interviews with the leaders from the 13 selected schools. The interviews were conducted either in-person or via video call between January and May 2025 and typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Questions were organised under five thematic headings: Vision as Leader; Driving Success; Community Connectedness; Personal and Professional Values; and Future Direction and Advice.

Findings

From the analysis of the 2018/19 statistical information for the 13 schools in this study, it can be concluded that although the schools share the defining characteristics of high disadvantage (FSME >50%) and better-than-expected academic performance, they are far from homogeneous. The wide variation in SEN levels, ethnic diversity, staffing ratios and

particularly suspension rates highlights the importance of understanding local context and avoiding a 'one size fits all' approach to policy and practice in disadvantaged school settings. Furthermore, this diversity reinforces the value of school leadership that is attuned to context, responsive to pupil need and flexible in its approach.

Drawing on insights from the thematic analysis of the 13 interviews and in light of the review of the national and international research literature, five core themes emerged that collectively provide insight into what constitutes effective, sustainable and values-led school leadership in these contexts. These themes (Clarity of Vision, Championing Children, Connection, Character, and Continuation) underscore the human-centred and mission-driven nature of leadership in schools working to raise attainment and support holistic pupil development against a backdrop of significant structural challenges.

Clarity of Vision

A defining characteristic of effective leadership in disadvantaged contexts is the ability to craft, communicate and sustain a clear and compelling vision for school improvement. All 13 principals highlighted the necessity of articulating a shared direction of travel, whether this was fully formed at the outset of their leadership journey or evolved over time through collaboration and reflection. As one principal put it: *"It's my role to articulate [the vision, and] it's the role of teachers to ensure that education in the classroom is of a sufficient quality, every single day… But my role is to ensure, first and foremost, that the vision of the school permeates through everything we do."*

This vision was not seen as static, but something that must be regularly revisited and reinforced through daily leadership practices: symbolic, relational, and strategic. Staff meetings, corridor conversations, and whole-school messaging all contributed to maintaining clarity of purpose and momentum. The international research supports these findings, emphasising the importance of a "unifying vision" (Moral et al., 2020) and leaders who can inspire a sense of shared purpose among staff and students. In this study, vision served both as a compass for decision-making and a source of cohesion in schools managing diverse needs and complex challenges.

Championing Children

A second unifying theme across all interviews was a steadfast commitment to championing pupils, both academically and in terms of their personal and emotional wellbeing. School leaders were unequivocal in their belief that enhancing the quality of teaching and learning to raise attainment must remain central to their mission: *"Attainment is our bread and butter. You know, there's no point in having a school if you're not attaining well."*

To this end, principals described implementing rigorous data-tracking systems, monitoring attendance and progress, and using this data to tailor interventions and support. However, the commitment to excellence in learning was always balanced by a deep understanding of pupils' broader needs. Another principal explained: *"You have to be data driven, but you have to remember that behind all that data there's human beings, there's a child, there's a backstory of every single one of them."*

Curricular flexibility, relevance, and personalisation were prioritised, particularly for students with limited home support or cultural capital. Schools aimed to raise aspirations while also being realistic and supportive. As one leader noted: *"It's about saying to the pupils, this is possible. This is possible for you. Dream big."*

In short, the child was at the centre of every decision, confirming international findings that successful leaders in similar contexts integrate academic and pastoral strategies to meet pupils where they are (Demie, 2021; Medina et al., 2014).

Connection

A third key theme was the centrality of relationships: between principals and pupils, with staff, with families, and within the wider community. Many principals went to extraordinary lengths to build connections, such as interviewing each Year 12 or Year 14 pupil individually or making themselves visible in the corridors and playgrounds at break and lunchtime. As one principal explained: *"I treat every child in this school like it's my own child, and I want the best for my children, like any parent would."* Relationships with staff were likewise seen as vital. Recruiting the right staff (those with emotional intelligence and a relational mindset) was deemed as important as subject knowledge. One principal reflected: *"If you can't build relationships, you can't work here. It's as simple as that."*

Community connectedness also emerged as a powerful asset. Several principals emphasised the benefits of having staff who lived locally or were former pupils, noting the insight and empathy this brought: *"You're from the community, and you want the best for your community."* Principals who were not originally from the community described how they had intentionally invested time in understanding the local context, forging links with families, and developing trust. As one explained: "It takes a village, and we're part of that village. We can't do it on our own." These practices echo the literature's focus on "contextual literacy" (Gillett et al., 2016, p.600) and the school as being "part of, rather than apart from" the community (Michalak, 2009, p.394).

Character

While leadership skills and knowledge matter, the personal character and values of the principals were repeatedly cited as foundational to their effectiveness. Qualities such as humility, integrity, resilience, authenticity, compassion, and a willingness to listen were seen as indispensable. *"You don't need to have all the answers. But you do need to listen, learn, and surround yourself with people who challenge you."*

Many spoke openly about their personal faith as a source of strength and motivation. While there was no clear consensus about the role of school management type (e.g., Catholic maintained vs. controlled or integrated), several principals noted the importance of ethos and moral purpose, both to themselves and to the wider school community: *"I'm gonna put my hands up and say I'm a person of faith and a committed Catholic… Was the fight for education a huge part to play in it? I think so."*

This moral compass, whether religious or secular, underpinned a deep sense of responsibility for their pupils and communities. International studies similarly note that values such as service, social justice and dedication are frequently found among school leaders in challenging settings (Arthur & Bradley, 2023; Moral et al., 2020).

Continuation

Looking ahead, the principals were united in their desire to support future leaders and strengthen the talent pipeline into school leadership, particularly in disadvantaged areas. They emphasised the need to enhance Initial Teacher Education (ITE) by better preparing teachers for the social and emotional complexity of working in these contexts. As one principal lamented: *"We've got teachers coming in and they haven't a scooby doo… You've got to be pastoral."* Support for early-career teachers through mentoring was also seen as crucial. One

leader described the need for *"lifeguards"* in schools to help newly qualified teachers stay afloat. Some schools had designated mentors for newly qualified teachers to improve retention and build leadership capacity.

Principals also reflected on the demanding nature of the role and the need for succession planning: *"You will burn out eventually. You need people with new ideas… There's a time limit to being a principal."* They called for new pathways to leadership, including secondments, phased retirements, and structured mentoring, to ensure that leadership experience is not lost but rather shared and transferred. As one principal concluded: *"There absolutely needs to be a mechanism by which the system benefits from the experience of principals."*

These recommendations thus align with current policy directions in Northern Ireland, including the *A Fair Start* action plan (Purdy et al., 2021), *Aspiring to a Better Future* (Independent Review of Education, 2023) and the *TransformEd NI Strategy for Educational Excellence in Northern Ireland* (Department of Education, 2025), which advocate for increased professional development opportunities for aspiring and experienced principals, accredited leadership pathways, and collaborative models of leadership development.

Conclusion

This study highlights a model of leadership grounded in purpose, compassion and connection. In the face of considerable challenges, the 13 principals interviewed are leading schools that are not only improving outcomes in disadvantaged communities but also nurturing the wellbeing, confidence and aspirations of pupils and staff alike. The evidence from the current study lends further weight to recent calls for greater investment in leadership training, mentoring and succession planning within our most disadvantaged educational contexts. At the same time, it serves as a timely reminder not to assume that all disadvantaged schools are identical. The schools in this study, while all serving communities with high levels of social and economic need, differ significantly in their contexts, challenges and approaches. The findings therefore offer a uniquely contemporary insight into the diverse realities faced by highly effective school leaders, each one fostering pupil aspiration, providing high-quality, relevant and meaningful learning experiences, using robust attainment data to monitor and plan for achievement, and championing each individual young person to fulfil their potential and thrive, regardless of background.

Acknowledgements

The research team at the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU), Stranmillis University College, Belfast, would like to thank all those who participated in this research project, and in particular the principals/acting principals of the 13 post-primary schools selected: Belfast Boys' Model School; Coláiste Feirste, Belfast; Hazelwood Integrated College, Belfast; Malone Integrated College, Belfast; Mercy College, Belfast; St Brigid's College, Derry/ Londonderry; St Cecilia's College, Derry/ Londonderry; St Colm's High School, Belfast; St Genevieve's High School, Belfast; St Joseph's Boys' School, Derry/Londonderry; St Joseph's College, Belfast; St Louise's College, Belfast; St Mary's College, Derry/Londonderry.

The research team are also indebted to the project's expert reference group of Sir Robert and Lady Rosemary Salisbury, Kathleen O'Hare OBE, and Dale Heaney (Department of Education), as well as officials at the Department of Education's Analytical Services Unit.

Finally, we are grateful to the James Kane Foundation and the Mary Ann McCracken Foundation for funding this important and timely research.

To cite this report:

Purdy, N., Symington, E., Ballentine, M., Orr, K., Walsh, G. & Tate, K. (2025). *Effective School Leadership in Disadvantaged Communities*. Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement, Stranmillis University College.

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Chapter 1: Review of Research and Policy

1.1 Introduction

Although there is no single agreed definition of the term, schools deemed as "disadvantaged" are commonly characterised by several key feature, These include a higher proportion of pupils receiving free school meals, a higher number of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN), a lower socio-economic background of the pupils and their families, a higher percentage of care experienced pupils, and a higher percentage of pupils who are newcomers,[1] with English as a second language (Allen et al., 2018, Allen & Sims, 2018; Riley, 2013; Gu & Day, 2013; Demie, 2021).

The challenges faced by disadvantaged schools are significant and multifaceted. Moral et al. (2020) discuss some of these challenges, including the presence of less well qualified teachers, lower attainment rates in external examinations, less focus on developing and coordinating the curricular offer to ensure this is attractive and engaging to students, and behavioural problems. Moreover, it is reported that disadvantaged schools often face issues of educational underachievement. Hutchinson (2016) highlights that schools with poor Ofsted inspections typically have a higher proportion of pupils on free school meals compared to those with better inspection outcomes.

One of the main themes emerging from the research literature on disadvantaged schools is the focus on social justice and how schools can be used as vehicles to close the attainment gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds (Archambault & Garon, 2013; Gillett et al., 2016). Passy and Ovenden-Hope (2020) emphasise the idea of 'fairness' in education, and how schools can work to mitigate against the educational underachievement of children in disadvantaged communities. Pashiardis and Johansson (2021) argue that:

> "a successful school is one that can facilitate mobility in a society…everybody gets a fair chance to develop irrespective of the socio-economic background they come from" (p.697).

Effective leadership in disadvantaged schools has the potential to overcome these barriers and promote social justice, ensuring that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, are provided with the opportunities to succeed.

1.2 The Context of Disadvantaged Schools

To effectively address the challenges faced by disadvantaged schools, it is crucial for leaders to understand the unique context in which their schools operate. Leithwood and Riehl (2005) and Pashiardis and Johansson (2021, p.701) highlight the need for leaders to be 'contextually literate' to allow them to read the distinctiveness of the context in which a school is situated. Gillett et al. (2016) further elaborate on this concept, explaining that:

[1] A term used by the Department of Education to describe a pupil who has enrolled in a school but who does not have the satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum, typically the children of international immigrants and refugees (see Harris et al., 2021, p. 27).

> "at the broader level, this 'literacy' entails familiarity with the socio-economic, demographic, cultural and historical composition of the community, which governs the intake of the school. At the school level, it means acquiring data about students' achievement and progress, turning it into useful information and ultimately into strategies for action" (p. 600).

Gillett et al. (2016, p.600) argue that this 'contextual literacy' is an 'especially crucial consideration in schools facing challenging circumstances.' Indeed, the importance of adapting to the individuality of each school setting is noted with much of the literature acknowledging that no two settings are the same, with Muijs et al. (2010, p.156) arguing that 'certain approaches may be more suited to specific contexts.' Furthermore, the importance of examining the context of schools to understand the approach of the leaders is frequently highlighted (Alqahtani et al., 2021; Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023; Gillett et al., 2016; González-Falcón et al., 2020; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Pashiardis & Johansson, 2021). Klar and Brewer (2013, pp.800-801) thus argue that for school leaders, 'it is the understanding of how to lead in concert with one's local context that determines the success of their leadership efforts', emphasising the importance of contextualising leadership strategies to meet the specific needs of their schools.

Pashiardis and Johansson (2021) further extend this concept of contextual literacy, suggesting that successful leaders must also be aware of the wider international context in which they operate:

> "Successful and effective school leaders are aware of the broader context in the internal and external environment in which they operate, as well as of the international trends in education so that they can be adaptive and learning in order to lead" (p.701).

Incorporating a contextual understanding of both local and global trends allows school leaders to make informed, relevant decisions that are more likely to lead to successful outcomes in disadvantaged school environments.

While there is a growing body of international research literature focusing on the qualities and characteristics of school leaders in disadvantaged settings, Munoz-Chereau et al. (2024) argue that this field is still under-researched, particularly within the context of Northern Ireland.

1.3 Leadership Styles

The importance of effective leadership in disadvantaged schools is consistently highlighted in the literature, as it is a key factor in driving academic success and addressing the unique challenges faced by these schools. Research indicates that leadership plays a critical role in overcoming the barriers posed by socio-economic disadvantage and improving student outcomes. Various leadership styles are discussed, and the literature notes the importance of implementing aspects of these various frameworks within disadvantaged contexts. This includes *pedagogical leadership* which places a focus on the improvement of teaching and learning practices (Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023). Pashiardis and Johansson (2021) discuss the role of this leadership style, for example, and highlight the importance of teachers using this framework to set high expectations and to monitor and evaluate the progress of both students and teachers. They also argue that by carrying out pedagogical dialogues with

teachers, principals can enhance teaching practices within the school to foster a learning environment that prioritises the academic development of the children. Other literature also advocates for this leadership style in disadvantaged schools and argues that principals should be involved in the reality of the classroom so as not to lose sight of this perspective and to maintain a focus on academic attainment (González-Falcón et al., 2020).

Another leadership style discussed in the literature is *transformational leadership* which advocates for both social justice and democracy, through creating a more equitable learning environment (Archambault & Garon, 2013; Demie, 2021; Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023; Santaella, 2020). For instance, Archambault and Garon (2013) offer a focused discussion of this leadership style within disadvantaged school contexts and identify the importance of this to help deal with social inequities. Indeed, in much of the literature focusing on disadvantaged schools this leadership style is identified as an important framework for ensuring better equity and allowing schools to structure their learning in a way that fights prejudice, provides equal opportunities and ensures that all students can achieve academic success. When implementing *transformational leadership* in disadvantaged schools, the literature also notes the importance of recognising the reality of the difficulties faced by students from disadvantaged environments, understanding the knowledge that staff members have of these difficulties and using this knowledge to promote and implement strategies which encourage change and social justice (Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2010). *Servant leadership* is also identified in the literature as an important leadership style in disadvantaged school contexts (Duran & Cemaloğlu, 2024). This style focuses on building trust, fostering a collaborative environment and prioritising the development of the wider team. It is also characterised by qualities including dedication and self-sacrifice. Moreover, this leadership style also advocates for a child-centred approach and focuses on nurturing the students as individuals, which Duran and Cemaloğlu (2024) deem to be essential for improving conditions and expectations within disadvantaged schools.

In the literature, however, a clear emphasis is placed on developing *distributed leadership* within disadvantaged schools, focusing on collaboration and extending the leadership capabilities of the school beyond the principal (Hanafin et al., 2018). Indeed, Moral et al. (2020) state that:

> "…the collaborative and distributed models will extend leadership in the organization and ultimately impact on the school academic capacity through an open dialogue between principals and teachers and shared decision-making on issues related to teaching-learning processes." (p.112)

Discussion of *distributed leadership* stresses the importance of developing a senior leadership team in schools to support the principal, as well as the need to develop a subset of 'middle leaders', including heads of department and a management team (Munoz-Chereau et al., 2024; Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023; Gu & Day, 2013; Demie, 2021). Benefits of *distributed leadership* discussed in the literature include greater staff engagement, stabilising teams, building trust, creating a sense of collective responsibility and collaborative decision-making, a sense of ownership and autonomy, encouraging a continued commitment to the goals of the school and allowing the staff to develop their leadership potential (Munoz-Chereau et al., 2024; Santaella, 2020; González-Falcón et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2019; Moral et al., 2018;

Moral et al., 2020; Gurr et al., 2018; García Torres, 2019; Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023).

However, although much of the literature focuses on the concept of adopting a *distributed leadership* model in disadvantaged schools, Muijs et al. (2010) argue that school leaders in disadvantaged contexts do not always adopt this leadership model in the early stages of improvement. Rather, they found evidence in their case study schools of 'strong top-down leadership by the head (with the SMT), at least in the earlier stages of their headship' (p.151) as they seek (at times) to safeguard the school and drive forward urgent change. They also note the need for firmness, control and independent decision-making from the head teacher as they 'impose their vision' of improvement for the school. This form of highly centralised leadership is seen as necessary to address the challenges faced by schools, particularly those that need 'turned around' (Muijs et al., 2010, p.156). Muijs et al. (2010) found evidence that headteachers were then able to move towards a *distributed leadership* style when the initial work of improving the school has been carried out, which they describe as 'tight leadership at the start followed by a loosening up once improvement has occurred' (p.152).

This shift is supported by Day et al. (2010) who argue that in the initial stages of school improvement, over half of the headteachers in their study had been more 'autocractic' (p.16) in the early phase, building trust across the senior leadership team, before moving towards a broader distribution of responsibilities in the medium and final stages of improvement. As one secondary head explains: 'For the first five years of leadership here, I was more autocratic because I needed things to be done. I kept people in the loop but didn't involve colleagues. The next five years I started to delegate leadership across the senior leadership team and middle managers' (p.17). Moral-Santaella and Raso-Sánchez (2023) emphasise that leadership in disadvantaged schools is complex and often requires a blend of leadership styles to be effective, with principals needed to adapt their approach as circumstances change.

1.4 Leadership Qualities

When discussing what makes a successful principal in disadvantaged schools, much of the literature refers to the 'International Successful School Principals' Project' (ISSPP) e.g., Duran & Cemaloğlu, 2024; Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023; Santaella, 2020; Moral et al., 2020; Klar & Brewer, 2013. The ISSPP was launched in 2001 to conduct research on successful school principalship. Themes and characteristics of successful school leaders emerging from this work included: setting directions and developing well-defined school goals; developing people including the professional development of teachers; refining and aligning the organisation and building a collaborative culture; and improving the teaching and learning programme by focusing on the coordination, development and monitoring of the curriculum.

Many of these themes and characteristics have also been identified in the literature focusing specifically on leadership in disadvantaged schools. Qualities deemed as important for leaders in these settings include humility, adaptability, integrity and energy, while Duran and Cemaloğlu (2024) note that many principals in disadvantaged schools also demonstrate a number of paternalistic leadership qualities including dedication, sacrifice, service orientation, intrinsic motivation, and the ability to influence stakeholders. Furthermore, Moral et al. (2020)

discuss qualities deemed to be important for school leaders in disadvantaged schools, and conclude that leaders should be 'consultative and approachable, provide support… (be) caring and attentive, understand the needs of staff and students, have strong vision and values and (be) firm, fair, flexible and resilient' (p.110), with Santaella (2020) adding that such principals led by example.

One of the most prominent characteristics identified in the literature as essential for successful leaders in disadvantaged contexts (Santaella, 2020; Demie, 2021; Moral et al., 2020) is the 'passion' leaders must have for education and how they direct their dedication and commitment to the job to boost the achievement of all students, with principals in one study seeing themselves as 'instruments for the service of society' (Moral et al., 2018, p.40). The discussion of the importance of 'passion' among school principals in disadvantaged schools is coupled with a discussion of the need to have a clear vision for the school and to set clear goals, as much of the literature notes the importance of this for maintaining the morale and passion of the staff (Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023; Gillett et al., 2016; González-Falcón et al., 2020). Strategies for maintaining the direction and goals of schools include regular staff meetings to help provide direction, focus and support (Archambault & Garon, 2013; Santaella, 2020), while González-Falcón et al. (2020) also note the importance of informal catch ups with the staff.

The need for resilience for school leaders is also discussed in the literature (Munoz-Chereau et al., 2024; Santaella, 2020; Gu & Day, 2013). This quality is considered important for managing and navigating the challenges and demands of disadvantaged schools, while Gu and Day (2013) note that support from colleagues and strong leadership are also important for the resilience of all school staff. In their work on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in German schools, Beckmann and Klein (2023) also argue that in times of crisis schools need 'organisational resilience' (p.151), a theme also identified by Harris et al. (2021) who note the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland, discussing how this 'led to massive disruption to education, through long periods of home-schooling and cancelled examinations which…are likely to have widened educational disparities' (p.4) and which required considerable resilience on the part of school leaders. Developing and implementing a behaviour management policy was also seen as crucial to the success of leaders in disadvantaged school settings, as it was believed this would help minimise the disruption in the teaching environment, help with student development and help mitigate against the stress experienced by many teachers (Arthur & Bradley, 2023; Munoz-Chereau et al., 2024; Michalak, 2009).

A further key quality identified in the literature as important for successful leadership in disadvantaged schools is the prioritisation of relationships. Pashiardis and Johansson (2021, p.697) state that, 'model leaders are people-centred, good at developing relationships, modelling appropriate behaviour and establishing relational trust'.

One of the most prominent examples of relationships discussed in the literature is the professional relationships between educators. Here discussions centre on the need for school leaders to develop quality relationships with their staff, the need to focus on their individuality and promote collegial support (Michalak, 2009; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Moral et al., 2020) and the need to create a nurturing and supportive school culture and environment (Chiong et al., 2017; Klar & Brewer, 2013). The importance of a positive school environment and strong working relationships are evident, as Gu and Day (2013) argue that staff 'benefit from the support of strong school leadership and the collaborative school cultures which good leaders

create, shape and transform' (p.30). Furthermore, Muijs et al. (2010) argue that motivating staff and building relationships in disadvantaged schools are particularly important as they argue that staff in disadvantaged settings have to 'work harder to keep these schools successful than those working in less challenging contexts' (p.153). The example is given of the role of extra-curricular activities which play a key role in promoting social inclusion but which often require staff to work far beyond the normal school hours, as one head explains:

> 'It takes real commitment from all staff. For example, the local football team drew 2-2. Now they're having the replay in their cup game. Already, the staff have said we'll take them. But the game could finish at half past eight if it goes to extra times and penalties. Already, staff will have been in school since 7.30, there is a football game after school, then they are going straight to the game and then back at 7.30 tomorrow morning. It takes real commitment, above and beyond the call of duty.' (Head) Muijs et al. (2010, p.153)

Effective professional relationships discussed in the literature are characterised by individual support, peer observations, external courses, shared values and learning through shared experiences (Allen & Sims, 2018; Chiong et al., 2017; Moral et al., 2018; Klar & Brewer, 2013). Mentoring is also considered an important strategy with one study reporting on how experienced teachers in a school assisted new teachers by passing on the expertise they had developed (Ramalho et al., 2010). Examples are also provided in the literature of teachers and principals supporting their colleagues by delivering workshops on various topics to benefit teaching practices within the school (Brown et al., 2019).

Finally, recognition by senior leadership and fostering a culture of appreciation is essential in maintaining staff morale (Gu & Day, 2013; Pashiardis & Johansson, 2021). Particular strategies discussed in the literature include 'pizza break times', 'doughnut days', a staff buffet at the end of each term, time off to attend family events and a 'duvet day' every term' (Arthur & Bradley, 2023). Good communication and strong interpersonal skills are also identified as important qualities for developing professional relationships (Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023). This includes feedback and reflective practices which are identified as a key feature of leadership (Munoz-Chereau et al., 2024) as this encourages critical thinking and is thought to lead to a subsequent improvement in the quality of teaching. Constructive feedback is also considered important, as this is reported to encourage 'collective reflection' and allows the teaching staff to gain insights into their teaching methods and identify areas of improvement (Moral et al., 2018, p.42).

The literature discusses a number of benefits which could stem from these professional relationships in disadvantaged schools, including continuing professional development for the teaching staff, allowing them to continue to upskill, and thus creating what Santaella (2020) describes as a 'professional learning community' (p.161). It is also argued that a strong culture of professional development in schools helps to develop a collaborative and supportive environment, creating a staff community, increasing staff morale, motivating and encouraging the staff, and helping the staff maintain their passion and commitment to the job (Demie, 2021; Gurr et al., 2018; Michalak, 2009). It is noted that effective leadership is an important factor in retaining teachers in disadvantaged schools (Chiong et al., 2017; Gu & Day, 2013). This is regarded as essential for improving the success of disadvantaged schools, as Allen and Sims (2018) argue that, 'teacher quality is amongst the most important school-based determinants of pupil attainment' (p.441). Retaining quality staff is therefore essential, as the highest turnover

of staff typically occurs in schools serving 'areas of disadvantage' and this can have a negative impact on pupil attainment (Arthur & Bradley, 2023; Allen et al., 2018; Hobbs, 2016; Slater et al., 2012).

Given the importance of retaining quality staff and fostering a collaborative environment, it is crucial that principals in disadvantaged schools receive professional training that supports their leadership development. However, there is limited research on principal training in these contexts. One key study evaluating the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership (PIL) programme investigated the impact of targeted in-service principal professional development. The study found that the principals who had participated in the PIL programme had significantly higher student achievement in their schools, and that the benefits were greatest in schools that served the state's most economically disadvantaged students. The study also found that principals' participation in the PIL programme led to a reduction in staff turnover in their schools (Steinberg & Yang, 2022). However, there are a number of limitations with the study's findings, particularly with the subject-specific focus on improvements in mathematics, which may limit the generalisability of the results across all subjects or school contexts. While Steinberg and Yang's research has obvious relevance to the current study, it also highlights the need for further research to explore the nature and effectiveness of principal training with particular reference to school leadership in disadvantaged communities.

1.5 Educator-child relationships

Another key feature of successful leadership in disadvantaged schools identified in the literature is a focus on educator-child interactions and a moral responsibility on the part of school leaders to have a commitment to improving the outlook and opportunities for students. Indeed, teachers are described in one study as 'change agents' (Ramalho et al., 2010, p.47) who play an important role in shaping the lives of their students. Qualities such as compassion, patience and empathy are considered important for this role, while the need to create an inclusive and positive school culture is also discussed in the literature, underpinned by the belief that all pupils can succeed against the odds (Munoz-Chereau et al., 2024; Gillett et al., 2016; Demie, 2021). The need to focus on the individuality of the students to ensure they are all known and valued on a personal level is also highlighted (Demie, 2021), while Gurr et al. (2018) discuss the importance of a 'student-centred' approach (p.30).

When discussing educator-child relationships, much of the literature notes the importance of improving the academic attainment of students to widen their opportunities when leaving school, and improved academic outcomes are considered an important indicator of successful leadership in disadvantaged schools (Lumby, 2015; Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023). An important strategy for improving academic results and engaging the students in their work, is a focus on improving the curricular offer and tailoring this to suit students' needs and interests. Indeed, it is argued that this helps increase student engagement and that a well-designed curriculum has a subsequent impact on academic attainment (Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023; Demie, 2021; Gurr et al., 2018; Passy & Ovenden-Hope, 2020). An interesting observation related to the importance placed on academic achievement, is the analysis of performance data. This is increasingly considered important for tracking and monitoring the attainment and progress of students and is viewed by many principals as a useful

tool to help identify groups at risk of underachieving, also allowing administrators to make decisions relating to resource allocation in schools (Demie, 2021; Medina et al., 2014; Moral et al., 2018; Ramalho et al., 2010; Klar & Brewer, 2013).

Although an importance is placed on academic results in the literature as an indicator of successful leadership in disadvantaged schools**,** the importance of pastoral care is also stressed. Indeed, when discussing educator-child relationships, much of the literature acknowledges an increasing belief that the success of schools not only refers to academic success, but rather, it also encompasses aspects of students' emotional development (Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023; Demie, 2021; Brown et al., 2019; Beckmann & Klein, 2023; Medina et al., 2014). This is evident as much of the literature refers to various aspects of the emotional development of children and the importance of focusing on this within the school environment as Gurr et al. (2018), for example, specifically mention the importance of focusing on the mental health of children. Creating a safe and nurturing environment is also identified in the literature (Michalak, 2009), while the personal, social, emotional, and physical aspects of children are also highlighted as important qualities to foster within the school environment (Reynolds & Warfield, 2010). Klar and Brewer (2013) also note the importance of encouraging children and creating a nurturing and positive school environment by recognising their achievements, while the involvement of students in the student council is also considered an important strategy for encouraging their interaction and allowing their voices to be heard (Brown et al., 2019).

1.6 Relationships with families

Establishing relationships with parents and engaging with them on a personal level is also identified as an important foundation for becoming a successful leader in a disadvantaged school (Hanafin et al., 2018; Gillett et al., 2016; Demie, 2021), with Michalak (2009) arguing that these relationships are often the 'foundation for future successes' (p.391). The research highlights the importance of any interactions with parents being founded on trust and based on effective two-way communication (Demie, 2021). These positive interactions can take many forms, ranging from parental involvement in the classroom, parent teacher meetings and parental involvement on the board of governors and parent-teacher associations to allow their opinions to be heard (González-Falcón et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2019; Hanafin et al., 2018; Gillett et al., 2016). One study referred specifically to the 'open door policy' a school adopted for parents (Demie, 2021, p.106). The need to be inclusive of different socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic and educational backgrounds is also highlighted when discussing educator-parent relationships, with one study focusing on the marginalised Traveller community in Ireland and the steps taken to include their culture in the school ethos and encourage parental involvement (Hanafin et al., 2018). A number of other studies also discuss the idea of school leaders needing to adopt a more culturally inclusive leadership approach (Medina et al., 2014; Hanafin et al., 2018) due to the variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds typically found in disadvantaged schools, with one study recommending 'distributed culturally responsive leadership' (Brown et al., 2019, p.457).

1.7 Community relationships

Developing relationships with the wider community is also discussed in much of the national and international research literature, espousing 'a view of the school as being part of rather than apart from the community' (Michalak, 2009, p.394) and noting the importance of the staff knowing the community in which they work. Gillett et al. (2016) argue further that principals in their study, 'saw their schools as constituting a central pillar of their communities and took every opportunity to maintain strong and meaningful connections with them' (p.598). The impact of developing positive community relationships is also highlighted by Medina et al. (2014) who report on how perceived community responsibility and teacher-staff cohesion can directly influence educational expectations and lead to higher academic standards in schools (p.94).

Much of the research literature also reports on how many schools develop stronger links with their local community to improve the reputation of the school in the wider area and to build external networks for the benefit of the school (Lumby, 2015; Riley, 2013; González-Falcón et al., 2020; Gurr et al., 2018; Klar & Brewer, 2013). The direct involvement of the local community is frequently noted in the literature, with one study discussing the involvement of members of the local community as volunteers within the school as first aiders and fire marshals and becoming an important part of the wider support staff (Riley, 2013). Involvement with local charities is also discussed as an important means of community engagement (Klar & Brewer, 2013), while connections with local organisations are also discussed as important for funding opportunities (González-Falcón et al., 2020; Gurr et al., 2018; Klar & Brewer, 2013). Passy and Ovenden-Hope (2020) also discuss how schools in their study expanded links with local businesses to generate meaningful work experience opportunities for their students. Other examples of supporting the community include the involvement of teachers at local conferences where they are able to share ideas on curriculum and student engagement, while an example is given of one school 'lending' experienced teachers to other local schools which were having problems with recruitment. (Passy & Ovenden-Hope, 2020).

1.8 The Northern Ireland Policy Context

Within the Northern Irish educational policy context, there has been a sustained focus on addressing educational underachievement linked to socioeconomic disadvantage for many years (see Purdy, 2022 for an historical overview), and increasingly, there is a recognised need by government that school leadership requires additional investment. Following a series of reports highlighting the underachievement of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., Borooah & Knox, 2015; Leitch et al., 2017; Equality Commission, 2017; Henderson et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2021), the Northern Ireland Executive committed to establishing an expert panel to examine educational underachievement in Northern Ireland as one of their key commitments agreed in the *New Decade, New Approach* political settlement of January 2020 (Smith & Coveney, 2020). The subsequent Terms of Reference demanded that an Expert Panel "examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background" and "give particular consideration to the long-standing issues facing working-class, Protestant boys, and specific actions to address this particular gap". The final report and

action of the expert panel, entitled *A Fair Start*, was published on 1 June 2021 and made a total of 47 costed recommendations across eight key areas (Purdy et al., 2021).

Significantly for the current study, Key Area 7 ("Supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school leadership" made three core recommendations: (7i) for "DE, EA and ETI to develop a collaborative co-designed model with school principals to share effective practice on tackling educational underachievement", (7ii) to "develop new professional qualifications for leadership" (replacing the discontinued PQH qualification), and (7iii) a third action for employing authorities to work with school boards of governors to "improve the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of the recruitment and selection of school principals." Thwarted by budgetary constraints, progress has however been slow in delivering on these actions.

The theme of school leadership was also highlighted in the final report of the (broader) Independent Review of Education. In *Investing in a Better Future* (Independent Review of Education, 2023), there is a further acknowledgement of the need for "clear developmental pathways" for school staff to ensure that they are better prepared for leadership at all levels, including as school principal. The report suggests that "These pathways should include opportunities such as short-term secondments and work shadowing, and working with leaders in fields other than education" (p.66).

Most recently, the new ministerial strategy for educational reform in Northern Ireland, *TransformEd NI* (DE, 2025a) has very clearly identified the need for a new "culture of professional development" (p.29) and has highlighted that "school leadership is crucial to the success of high-performing education systems" (p.33), second only to classroom teaching in its influence on pupil learning. The strategy notes that school leadership is often not viewed as an attractive role and that there has been a reducing number of applications for leadership roles in schools in Northern Ireland (a point already made in *A Fair Start*). As also highlighted in *A Fair Start*, the ministerial strategy notes the lack of any professional qualification for headship or recognised support programme for existing, experienced principals. Significantly, *TransformEd NI* therefore commits the Department of Education to: "Develop a replacement qualification for headship to support our newly appointed and aspiring principals; Strengthen the provision of school-to-school support through a leaders of education programme; Develop a professional learning programme for existing, experienced principals; and Review, strengthen and invest in professional learning for middle leaders." (DE, 2025a, p.35).

While to some extent echoing the actions proposed in *A Fair Start* in terms of the general emphasis on school leadership training and support, the recommendations of the Independent Review of Education (2023) and the latest ministerial strategy (DE, 2025a) fail to make any specific recommendations related to post-primary school leadership in non-selective schools in disadvantaged communities, where the attainment gap remains high and where the challenges are arguably most acute. Nonetheless, the announcement in June 2025 by the Education Minister, Paul Givan, of a £31 million investment over a three-year period in a new Teacher Professional Learning Fund is to be welcomed as a commitment to facilitating high-quality professional development for educators at all stages of their career, including (it is hoped) support for aspiring, newly appointed and experienced school principals working in disadvantaged communities (DE, 2025b).

Chapter 2: Methodology

This research study set out to explore the characteristics of effective leadership in post-primary schools located in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland. The study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the success of these schools, particularly those with a high proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Specifically, the study focused on identifying key leadership practices, values, and support structures that contribute to positive educational outcomes in these challenging contexts.

2.1 Research Design and Methodology

The study involved both quantitative data analysis and qualitative interviews. It focused on 13 post-primary schools identified in the final report of the Independent Review of Education (*Investing in a Better Future)* as high performing despite 50%+ free school meal entitlement. These schools sit at least five percentage points above the Northern Ireland trend line for pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs at grades A*–C including English and Maths. See Figure below taken from *Investing in a Better Future* (2023, p.29) where the 13 selected schools represented by green dots.

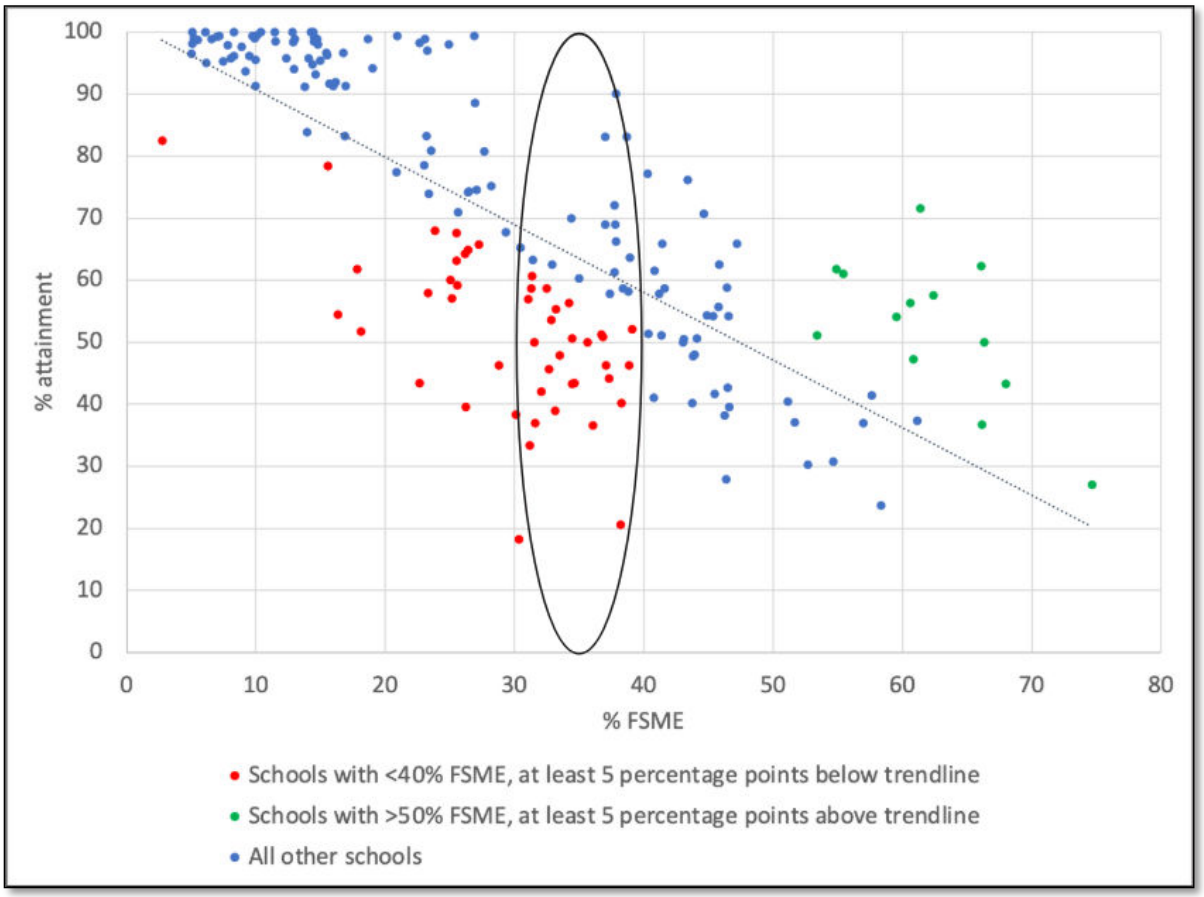


Figure 2.1. The 13 post-primary schools identified (as green dots) in the final report of the Independent Review of Education (*Investing in a Better Future*) as high performing with 50%+ free school meal entitlement (Independent Review of Education, 2023, p.29).

With the support of the Department of Education, the 13 schools were identified as follows: Belfast Boys' Model School; Coláiste Feirste, Belfast; Hazelwood Integrated College, Belfast; Malone Integrated College, Belfast; Mercy College, Belfast; St Brigid's College, Derry/ Londonderry; St Cecilia's College, Derry/ Londonderry; St Colm's High School, Belfast; St Genevieve's High School, Belfast; St Joseph's Boys' School, Derry/Londonderry; St Joseph's College, Belfast; St Louise's College, Belfast; St Mary's College, Derry/Londonderry.

To guide the study, a small advisory group was formed, consisting of senior Department of Education officials and former post-primary school leaders with experience in disadvantaged settings. This group provided insightful feedback on the research instruments and emerging findings and helped ensure that the study remained relevant to policy and practice.

Strand 1: Quantitative School-Level Data Analysis

The first strand of the research involved analysis of publicly available and Department of Education-provided data relating to each of the 13 schools. Variables included:

- Percentage of pupils with FSME
- Percentage of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN)
- Numbers of newcomer pupils
- Numbers of Looked After Children (LAC)
- Attendance and exclusion rates
- Teaching staff absence/stressors and teacher-pupil ratios
- Multiple Deprivation Measures (MDM) for the school locality
- School management type
- Leadership structure and staff qualifications

The analysis included descriptive and bivariate analysis and sought to identify any shared characteristics or patterns that could explain the schools' academic performance.

Strand 2: Semi-Structured Interviews with School Leaders

The second strand of the study consisted of individual, semi-structured interviews with the leaders from the 13 selected schools. The interview protocol was initially informed by the five key themes of effective leadership identified in the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services' report on *What's good about leading schools in challenging circumstances?* (NCL, 2010) (Leadership vision and moral purpose; Strategies for raising achievement; Engagement with families and communities; Staff development and support; Personal resilience and reflective practice), but later refined and expanded with the support of the project advisory group.

The interviews were conducted either in-person or via video call and typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Participants were the principals (or acting principals) of the 13 post-primary schools identified above. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for open-ended discussion while ensuring consistency across key thematic areas. This structure enabled the research team to explore both commonalities and unique insights across participants, with flexibility to pursue emerging issues in greater depth. Questions were organised under five thematic headings:

- Vision as Leader: Participants were asked to describe their initial motivations for becoming a principal, their vision for the school, and how they communicated and embedded that vision. Follow-up questions explored how they navigated the first 100 days in post and any lessons learned.
- Driving Success: This section examined how principals defined and measured school success, including academic outcomes, attendance, ethos, and post-school destinations. Questions also focused on quality assurance in teaching and learning, staff recruitment and development, and the cultivation of positive relationships and school culture.
- Community Connectedness: Participants were invited to reflect on the role of the local community in school life, including the extent and nature of community engagement, the benefits and challenges of such engagement, and how school management type may influence relationships with the community.
- Personal and Professional Values: This theme explored what motivated the principals, the values they brought to their leadership, and how they would describe their leadership style. Probes included concepts such as distributed leadership, empowerment, and visionary thinking.
- Future Direction and Advice: Finally, the interviews concluded with questions about the participants' future aspirations, the potential for their leadership experience to influence the wider education system, and any advice they would offer to new or aspiring leaders in similar contexts.

By grounding the conversations in these thematic areas, the interviews provided a comprehensive understanding of leadership practice in disadvantaged school settings, while still allowing room for the participants' personal narratives, challenges, and reflections to emerge.

The sample was diverse in terms of gender (eight female, five male leaders) and geography (seven in Belfast, five in Derry/Londonderry, and one in Newtownabbey). Schools also reflected a range of management types: nine Catholic maintained schools, one controlled school, one Irish-medium maintained school, and two grant-maintained integrated schools. The school leaders were comprised of 11 principals and 2 acting principals. The majority of participants were highly experienced leaders, with many having worked in their current schools for over a decade. Some had progressed internally through various leadership roles, while others had moved from other schools. These career paths were explored in relation to their perceived impact on leadership style and school culture.

2.2 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA, 2024). Ethical approval was secured from the Research and Scholarship Committee at Stranmillis University College. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study and gave informed consent prior to their interviews.

Confidentiality was ensured through the anonymisation of participant data and the use of pseudonyms where required. All data was stored securely on encrypted, password-protected servers accessible only to the research team.

2.3 Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the first strand was analysed using descriptive statistics and comparative methods to identify trends across the sample. The qualitative interview data was

transcribed and analysed thematically. Coding was both deductive (based on the five key interview themes) and inductive (allowing new themes to emerge from the data). Thematic patterns were identified relating to leadership vision, resilience, distributed leadership, staff support, and community relationships. These themes formed the basis for the emerging conclusions about what makes leadership effective in these settings.

2.4 Research Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into effective school leadership in disadvantaged contexts, it is not without limitations. For example, the study focused solely on the perspectives of school leaders, which provided rich and detailed accounts of leadership practice. However, future research could be strengthened by including the voices of pupils, particularly in understanding how students perceive leadership and what they value about their school experience. Including young people's perspectives would offer a more holistic understanding of school culture and the relational impact of leadership.

Chapter 3: Quantitative Results – Analysis of School Data

As detailed in Chapter 2, the 13 schools were selected based on pre-Covid 2018/2019 GCSE attainment data cited in the Independent Review of Education's final report *Investing in a Better Future* (Independent Review of Education, 2023, p.29).

In the following sections, summary statistics for the 13 schools are presented and discussed, first at a group level (with mean scores) and then by individual (anonymised) school.

3.1 Summary statistics (mean scores)

The 13 schools are all located in either the greater Belfast area or in Derry/Londonderry, as shown in Figure 3.1. The total enrolment is 10,465 pupils, with a mean of 805 (range: 430 – 1477). Of the 13 schools in this sample, 9 are Roman Catholic Maintained Schools, 2 are Grant Maintained Integrated Schools, 1 is an Irish-medium School (Other Maintained) and 1 is a Controlled School.

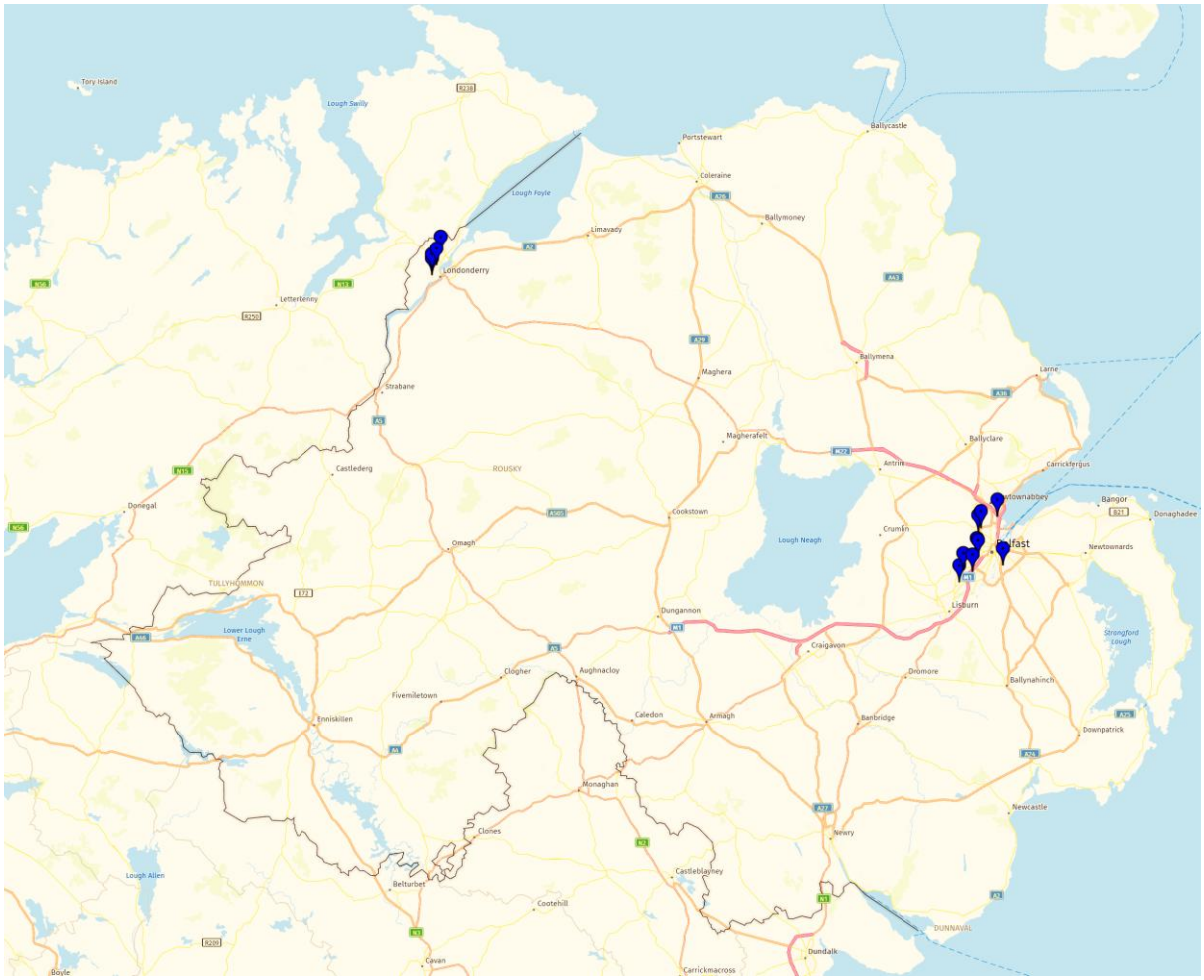


Figure 3.1. Location of the 13 schools.

Table 3.1 below provides mean scores and the range (minimum – maximum) for a wide range of metrics, using data from 2018/19. For instance, the statistics highlight that the 13 schools have a mean score of 52.3% pupils achieving 5+ GCSE (or equivalent) A* to C (inc. English and maths) in 2018/19 (range 27.0 – 71.6%).

In addition, the 13 schools have a mean of 62.3% pupils with FSME (range: 53.4 - 74.7%), a mean of 38.6% pupils with SEN (range: 15.5 – 84.4%), a mean of 2.7% newcomer pupils (range: 0 – 16.9%), a mean of 91.1% pupil attendance (range: 89 – 92%), a mean pupil/teacher ratio of 14.8/1 (range: 13.2 – 16.6/1), and a mean of new pupil suspensions of 10.8% (range: 0 – 38.4%).

Table 3.1. Means of common variables for the 13 schools (based on 2018/19 data).

Variable	Mean_x	Min	Max	Range
% Achieved 5+ GCSE (or equivalent) A* to C (inc. English and Maths)	52.3	27.0	71.6	44.6
Total Enrolment	805.0	430.0	1477.0	1047.0
FSME_%	62.3	53.4	74.7	21.3
Total SEN_%	38.6	15.5	84.4	68.9
SEN_Stages 1 - 4_%[2]	31.7	3.7	73.0	69.3
SEN_Stage 5_%	7.0	2.9	11.8	8.9
Newcomer_%	2.7	0.0	16.9	16.9
Absence_%	8.9	8.0	11.0	3.0
Unauthorised Absence_%	3.5	0.6	6.0	5.4
Attendance_%	91.1	89.0	92.0	3.0
Pupil Teacher Ratio	14.8	13.2	16.6	3.4
New Suspensions_%	10.8	0.0	38.4	38.4
Expulsions_%	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.3
Full-Time Equivalent Teachers_n	54.7	30.4	99.9	69.5
Teaching Emp Count_n	55.0	30.0	105.0	75.0
Teaching Absence Days_n	515.5	65.0	1129.0	1064.0

[2] N.B. The 2018/19 data refers to the former 5-Stage SEN Code of Practice in use at the time.

3.2 Summary statistics (by individual school)[3]

Summary statistics for each of the 13 schools are shown in Figures 3.2a – 3.2h. In each case the schools have been anonymised (Schools A-M). The statistics are based on 2018/19 data in line with the GCSE scores cited in the Independent Review of Education's *Investing in a Better Future* (2023).

Figure 3.2a. Summary statistics for each of the 13 schools: ***Total Enrolment_n***.

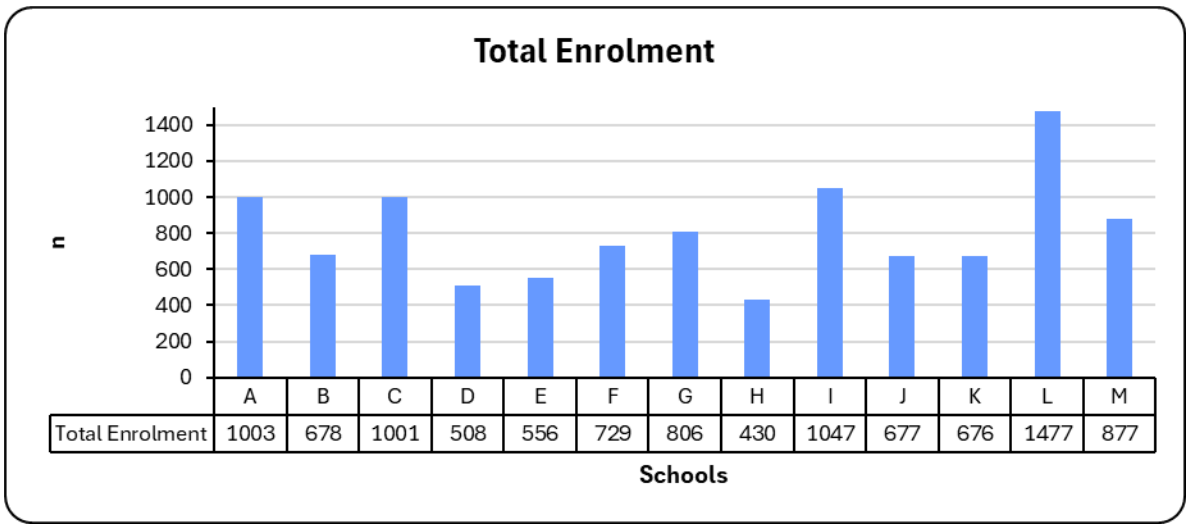
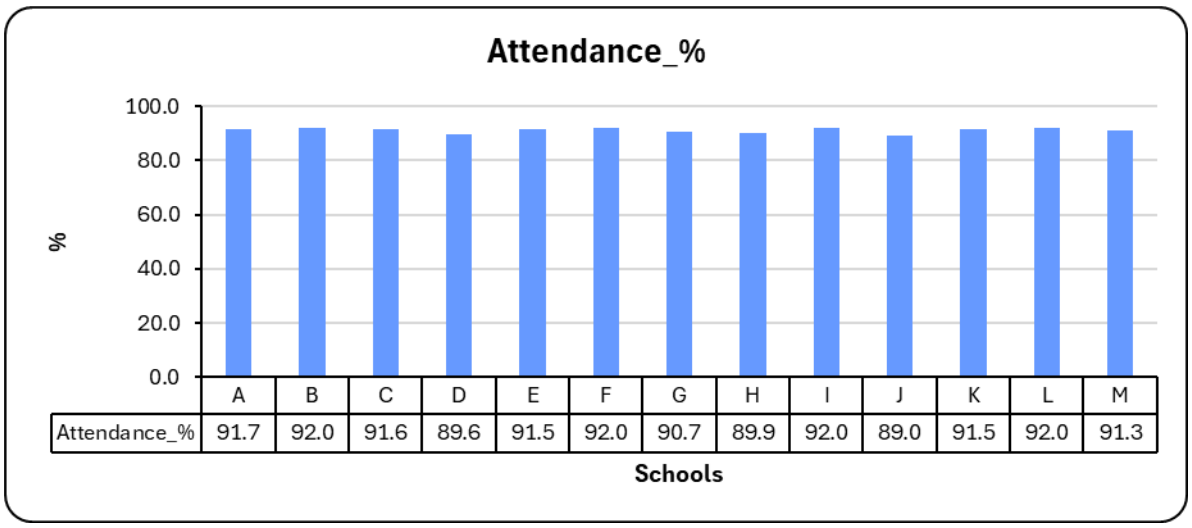
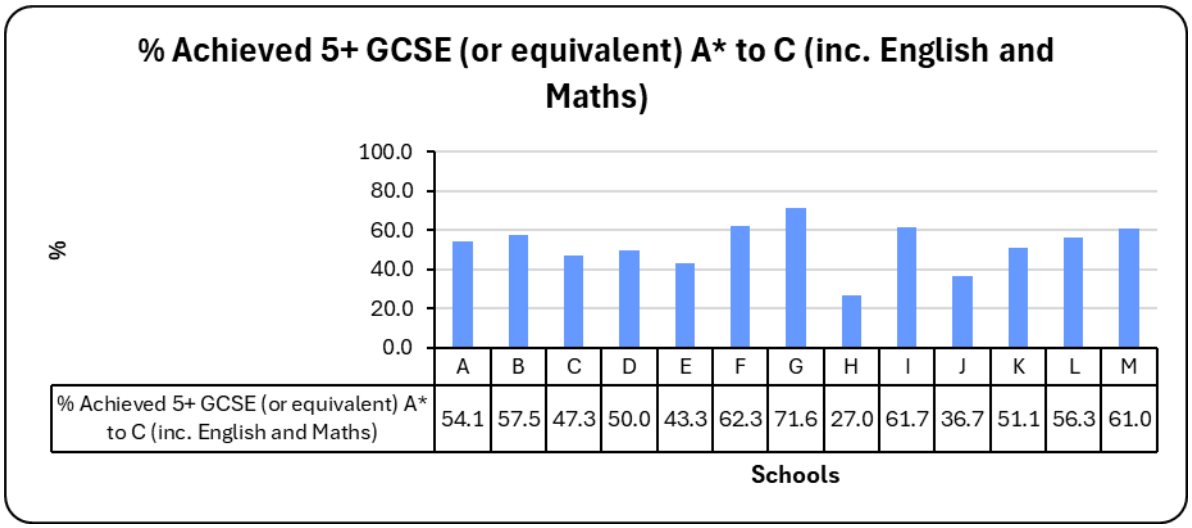


Figure 3.2b. Summary statistics for each of the 13 schools: ***Attendance_%***.



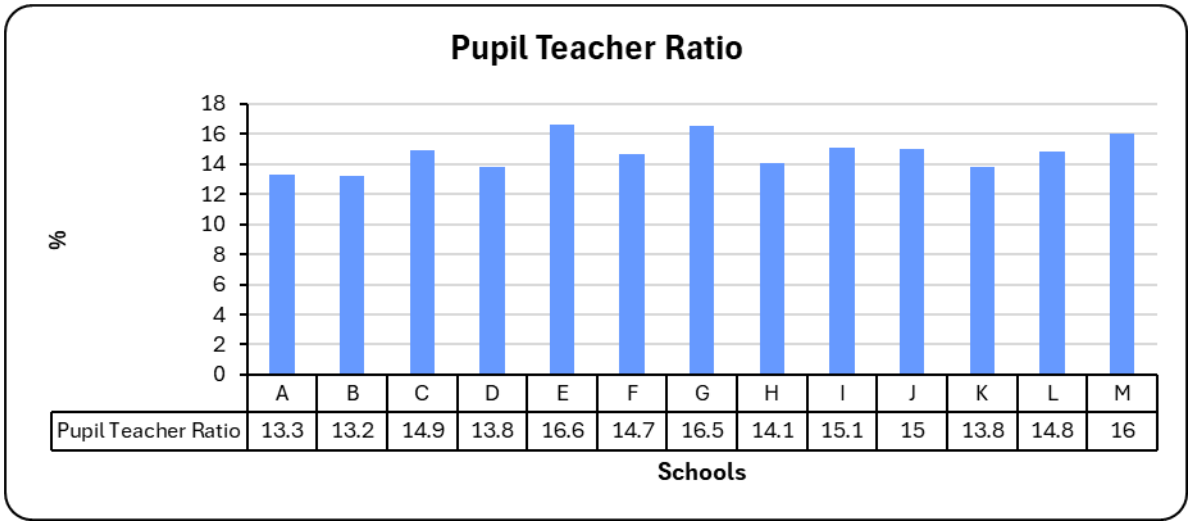
[3] Detailed statistics for each of the 13 schools are provided in Appendix 1, including management type, school enrolment, percentage of pupils with FSME, number/percentage of pupils with SEN, percentage of newcomer pupils, percentage of pupils who achieved 5+ GCSE (or equivalent) A* - C (including English and maths), percentage pupil absence, pupil/teacher ratio, number/percentage of new pupil suspensions and expulsions.

Figure 3.2c. Summary statistics for each of the 13 schools: ***% Achieved 5+ GCSE (or equivalent) A* to C (inc. English and Maths)***.



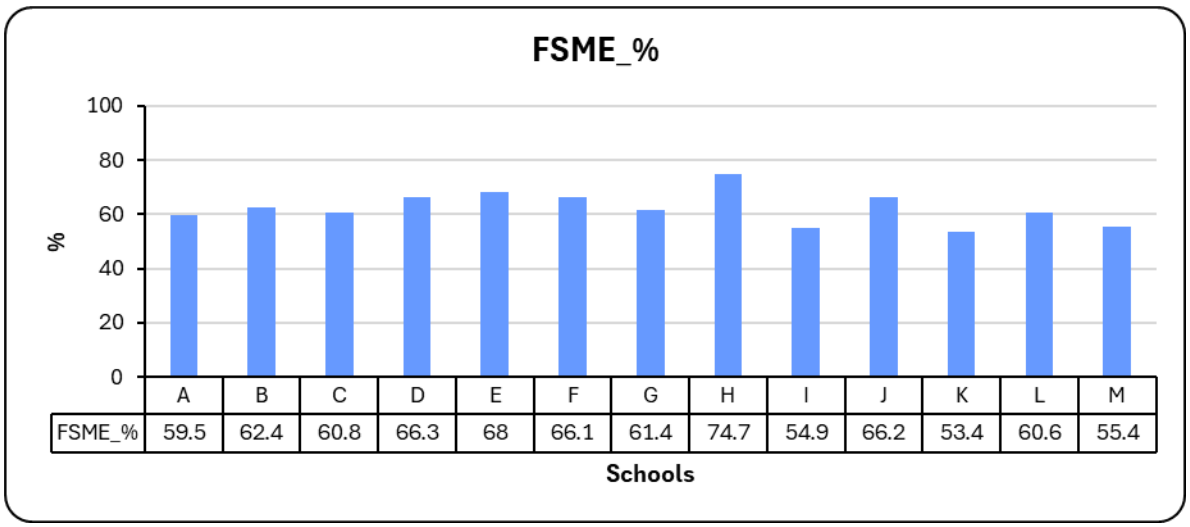
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
% Achieved 5+ GCSE (or equivalent) A* to C (inc. English and Maths)	54.1	57.5	47.3	50.0	43.3	62.3	71.6	27.0	61.7	36.7	51.1	56.3	61.0

Figure 3.2d. Summary statistics for each of the 13 schools: ***Pupil Teacher Ratio***.



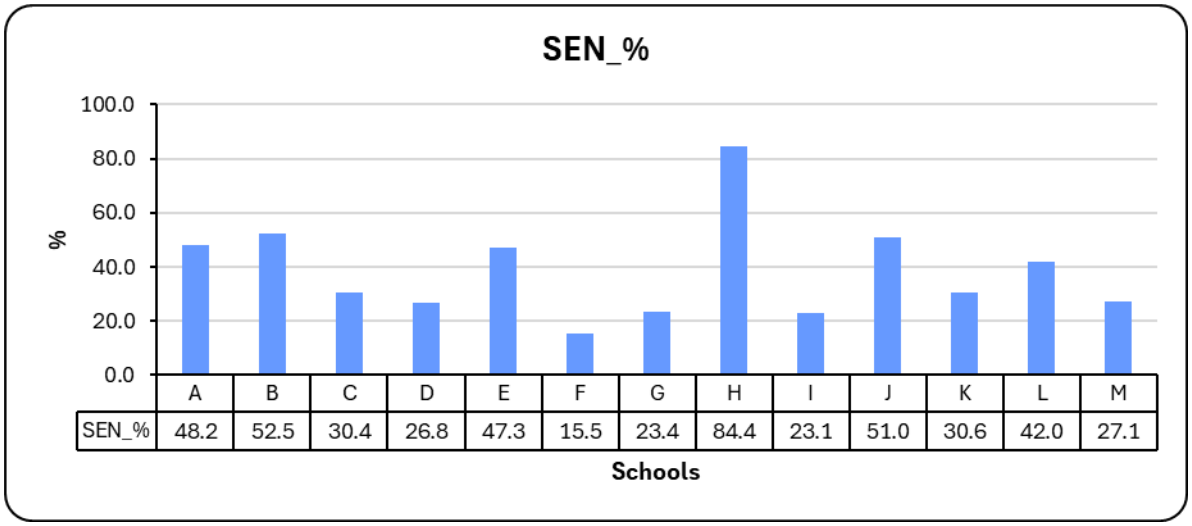
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
Pupil Teacher Ratio	13.3	13.2	14.9	13.8	16.6	14.7	16.5	14.1	15.1	15	13.8	14.8	16

Figure 3.2e. Summary statistics for each of the 13 schools: ***FSME_%***.



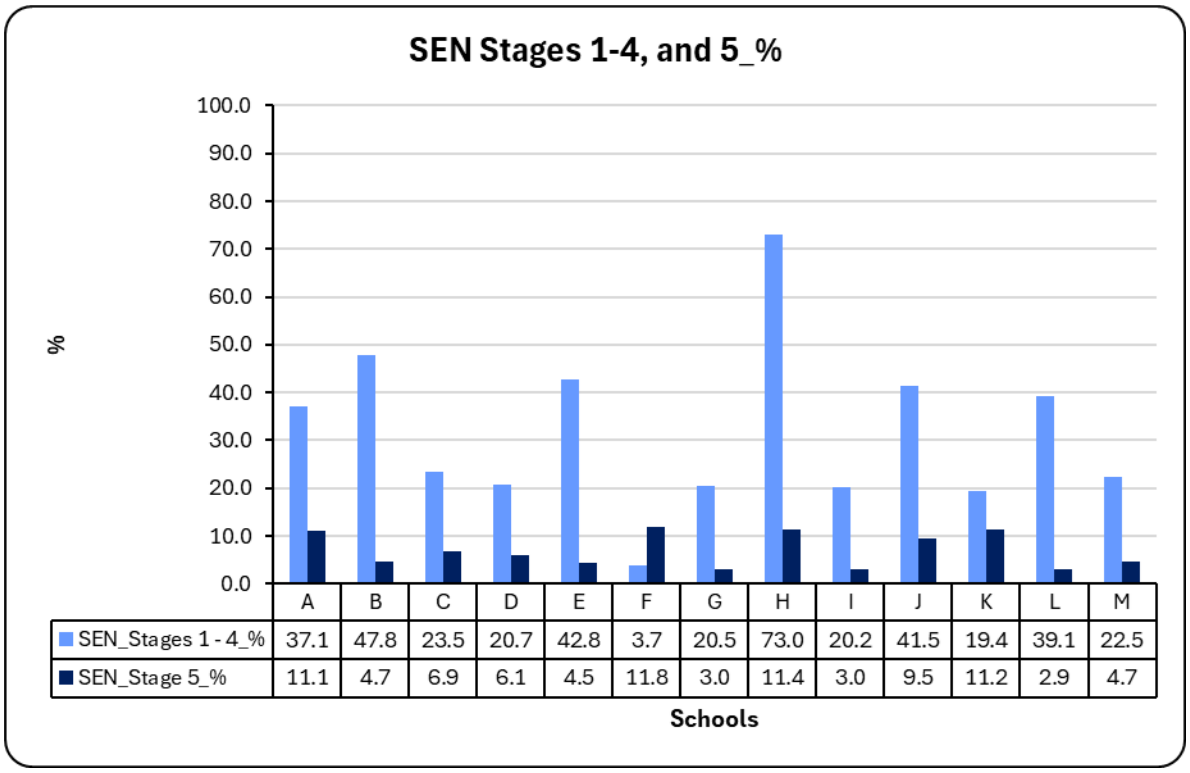
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
FSME_%	59.5	62.4	60.8	66.3	68	66.1	61.4	74.7	54.9	66.2	53.4	60.6	55.4

Figure 3.2f. Summary statistics for each of the 13 schools: ***SEN_%***.



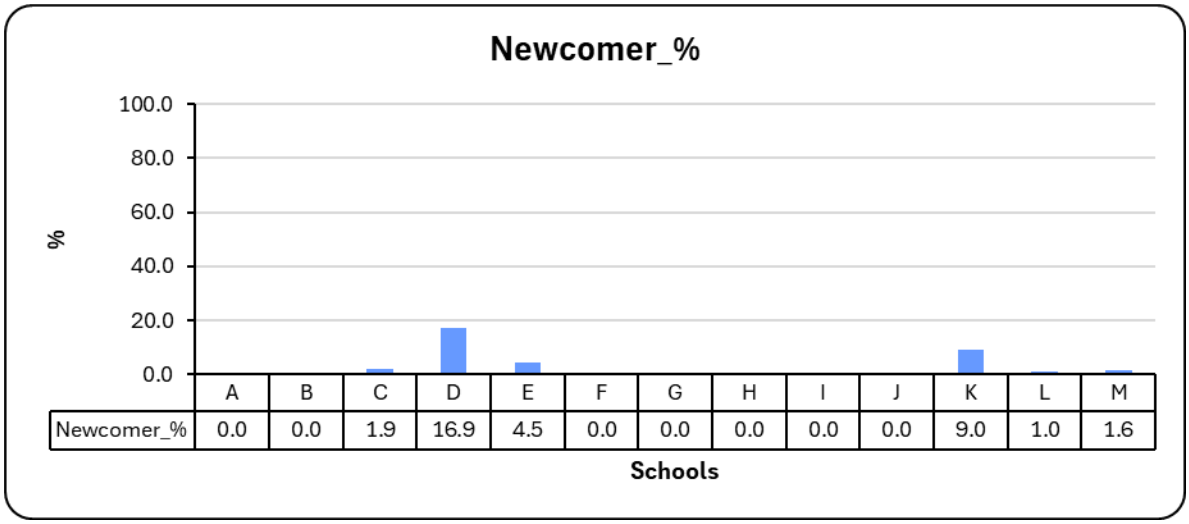
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
SEN_%	48.2	52.5	30.4	26.8	47.3	15.5	23.4	84.4	23.1	51.0	30.6	42.0	27.1

Figure 3.2g. Summary statistics for each of the 13 schools: ***SEN Stages 1-4, and 5_%***.



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
SEN_Stages 1-4_%	37.1	47.8	23.5	20.7	42.8	3.7	20.5	73.0	20.2	41.5	19.4	39.1	22.5
SEN_Stage 5_%	11.1	4.7	6.9	6.1	4.5	11.8	3.0	11.4	3.0	9.5	11.2	2.9	4.7

Figure 3.2h. Summary statistics for each of the 13 schools: ***Newcomer_%***.



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
Newcomer_%	0.0	0.0	1.9	16.9	4.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.0	1.0	1.6

3.3 Commentary

The 13 post-primary schools included in this study were selected because they each serve communities experiencing high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage (as evidenced by Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) rates above 50%) and yet perform better than expected in terms of GCSE outcomes – scoring 5 percentage points above the trend line for all schools in Northern Ireland – see Figure 2.1 above. While this shared profile of disadvantage and relative success unites them, the schools differ markedly across other important contextual and operational metrics. A brief analysis is provided below.

There are three major areas of similarity across the 13 schools:

- *High FSME Rates:* All schools exceed the 50% FSME threshold, with an average of 62.3% and a range from 53.4% to 74.7%. This places them well above the Northern Ireland average (28.1% for post-primary schools in 2018/19), marking them out as serving significantly disadvantaged pupil populations (see DE, 2019a).

- *Stronger-than-expected Academic Outcomes:* Despite high levels of disadvantage, these schools demonstrate comparatively strong academic performance. On average, 52.3% of pupils achieved 5+ GCSEs (A-C including English and maths) in 2018/19. While this figure varies widely across the schools (from 27.0% to 71.6%), all are performing above statistical expectations for schools with similar levels of FSME (see Figure 2.1 above and also DE, 2019b).

- *Strong Attendance:* Pupil attendance is relatively high across the board, with a mean attendance rate of 91.1% (range 89–92%), suggesting a culture of engagement and consistent school attendance. While the Northern Ireland average for post-primary school attendance in 2018/19 is 92.9%, the average for post-primary schools with 50%+ FSME is 90.5%, confirming that the attendance at the 13 schools in this sample is above average for other similar schools (see DE, 2021).

There are however several areas of difference between the schools, highlighting that while the schools are similar in terms of high deprivation and strong GCSE performance, they vary considerably in other contextual factors:

- *Special Educational Needs (SEN):* The proportion of pupils with SEN varies dramatically. The mean across the 13 schools is 38.6%, but this ranges from as low as 15.5% to as high as 84.4%. This highlights a significant diversity in the complexity of pupil needs faced by school leaders. However, the mean score of 38.6% is still considerably higher than the NI average of 22.8% pupils with SEN (see DE, 2019a).

- *Newcomer Pupils:* The proportion of newcomer pupils (a pupil who has enrolled in a school but who does not have the satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum) across the 13 schools also varies, with a mean of 2.7% and a range from 0% to 16.9%. This suggests that some of the sample schools operate in very ethnically homogeneous communities, while others have a much more diverse intake. The NI average for 2018/19 was 4.7% newcomer children (see DE, 2019a).

- *Pupil/Teacher Ratio:* The schools have an average pupil/teacher ratio of 14.8/1, but this ranges from 13.2 to 16.6/1. While not a vast spread, this variation may reflect different staffing models or enrolment patterns.

- *Suspension Rates:* Perhaps the most striking variation is seen in the rate of new pupil suspensions. The mean rate is 10.8%, but the range is exceptionally wide: from 0% to 38.4%. This suggests very different approaches to behaviour management, discipline, or levels of behavioural challenge across schools.

Therefore, it can be concluded that although the schools in this study share the defining characteristics of high disadvantage (FSME >50%) and stronger-than-expected academic performance, they are far from homogeneous. The wide variation in SEN levels, ethnic diversity, staffing ratios, and particularly suspension rates highlight the importance of understanding local context and avoiding a 'one size fits all' approach to policy and practice in disadvantaged school settings. Furthermore, this diversity reinforces the value of school leadership that is attuned to context, responsive to pupil need and flexible in its approach.

Chapter 4: Qualitative Results – Analysis of Interviews with School Leaders

4.1 Principal Demographic

Thirteen post-primary school principals across Northern Ireland were invited to participate in the study. All thirteen accepted the invitation and were interviewed either in person or online. The sample included eight female principals and five male principals. In terms of geographical distribution, eight participants were based in Belfast, four in Derry/Londonderry, and one in Newtownabbey

The schools represented a range of management types. Nine were Roman Catholic maintained schools, one was a controlled school, one was classified as other maintained, and two were grant maintained. Despite these institutional differences, all participating schools had a common characteristic: over 50% of their students were eligible for free school meals, highlighting the socio-economic challenges faced by these leadership contexts. 11 of the participants were school principals, and one was an acting principal.

Participants brought considerable experience to their roles, with many having long-standing histories within their respective schools.

> "*I have been in [the school] for 32 years… and I've been principal for 7 years*"
>
> "*I've been principal for, I believe it's 15 years.*"
>
> *"I started here as a substitute teacher, and then I went and did the PGCE, became a teacher, and was lucky to get a job here and haven't left. I've just worked my way up."*

Several participants emphasised the significance of internal progression within their schools.

> "*I've been a principal here since 2018. Before that, I was a member of the senior leadership team for 18 years*."
>
> "*I've been at [school] for almost 19 years in many different leadership roles*."

Others highlighted the complexities of transitioning into the principal role from within, noting both advantages and challenges.

> "*I've been Principal since 2010 with a gap between 2015 and 18… I've been Principal again for 7 years then… I'd been in the school for 11 years, so I was seen as a colleague, rather than as the boss*."
>
> "*I'm just finishing my 7th year as principal. Prior to that, I was vice principal for 17 years… You've got to know your families, you've got to know your kids, you've got to know your community and what you're dealing with."*

Even among those with relatively shorter tenures as principals, there was a notable continuity of service within the school communities:

> "*I've been principal for 3 years but I've been in the school for nearly 22 years*."

> *"This is the only school I've ever worked in… I was only employed because I was the only person who had come for the interview."*

4.2 Vision

Vision formation is a context-driven process for school principals, shaped by the environments they inherit and the leadership styles they bring. The data collection process with the principals reveals the diverse ways in which they approached, developed, and communicated their vision upon taking up their posts. Ultimately, vision was understood an evolving commitment. anchored by clear purpose yet responsive to the needs of the school community, the realities of leadership, and the journey of continuous improvement.

4.2.1 Forming a Vision

The principals interviewed described a range of experiences regarding their vision upon taking up their posts, reflecting both the contexts they inherited and their personal leadership styles. For some principals, a strong, pre-existing trajectory framed their initial approach. In such cases, vision was less about radical change and more about sustaining and enhancing established success.

> *"The biggest thing was to continue what had been a very positive trajectory with academic outcomes. I knew we needed to maintain and continue that."*

> *"Success isn't down to just one principal, it's it's all them, all those principals who've gone before. They were there for a reason at that period of time, they all built on top of each other. The foundations were being built."*

Other principals entered schools in need of significant renewal. The emphasis in these situations tended to focus on restoring and rebuilding the school's morale and reputation.

> *"[When I started] I felt the school had lost its way. We were in debt, our intake had gone down, and things weren't looking good… My vision was, quite simply, that I wanted to bring this school back to the great place that it had been and the great reputation that it had"*

> *"I believe I was brought in to wind down the school and close the school, so it was difficult coming in with this idea of a vision of going somewhere."*

Some principals noted that their vision was not fully formed at the point of appointment but evolved as they settled into their role.

> *"I don't think I had a clear vision at the beginning."*

"When I took over as principal, even though I didn't have a vision, my commitment to the staff was, 'I will serve you in order for you to serve the children.'"

"When I walked into the first staff meeting... I said, 'Colleagues, I know you're asking me... for my vision as your Principal,' and I said, 'Sadly, I don't have one... give me time'... And over time, my vision became very clear."

In other cases, the development of vision was approached as a collaborative and strategic process from the outset. Principals described how they established a vision through extensive consultation.

"When I took up the post, I did a three-year development plan, and even though we were in industrial action and we didn't have to do it, staff were actually very good. They were very accommodating. So we spoke with the pupils and the parents together did their surveys. And we drafted, we spoke with all the staff. We did a full day on review and provision and moving forward. So there was a lot of consultation with the whole staff... everybody was involved and set on the vision and realising the vision of the school."

"In the first 100 days, it's very important to have that clarity of communication with your staff... trying to get unity of purpose is really, really important and when you're working under action, short strike action, very difficult. However, in the August staff training days, I felt that it was really important to realign everyone and go back to our priorities, go back to our pillars."

For others, their early vision was tightly focused on particular strategic levers such as curriculum planning and data use.

"When I was interviewed for principal... the question was, 'What's your intentions for the first year"? And that was about the rigorous use of data for the appropriate selection curriculum."

4.2.2 Focus of the Vision

The principals articulated different but overlapping priorities that shaped the focus of their vision. For some, academic achievement and ensuring pupils could compete on equal terms with their peers were central concerns.

"One of the things that was coming into view at that stage was the need for the students to be able to compete with their peers... on a level playing field with their peers across all the sectors in education."

"My priorities have been very much looking at the performance outcomes of our young people at year 12 and year 14."

"The vision has to be about school improvement."

"Our role, our vision, was preparing pupils for success."

In other cases, vision was firmly rooted in serving the local community and providing high-quality education for all, regardless of academic selection.

> *"I had a very clear vision. I'm local, I live up the road, and my heart was in this school for children in the community, to be able to come to this school and to become the choice of school for non-selective children in the area which the results were brilliant… I wanted it to be a good school that people would be happy to send their children to if they didn't qualify for the other schools."*

The principals also spoke about visions that prioritised the holistic development and wellbeing of pupils, seeing this as a necessary foundation for academic success.

> *"Results…has been very important and that's really been the driving force in many schools. But you know, to me it's more important that we have a caring, a kind environment where we are compassionate to the young people."*

> *"Fundamentally, we want the school to be a safe, secure, happy place for the children... our vision is that each child will be rounded, supported, and their gifts will be developed."*

> *"My vision for [the school] is maybe more a short-term vision; it's a seven-year vision, and that's about how we care for our young people and how we help them engage in learning, and how we create the life chances for them… our vision is the vision for the young person."*

> *"My vision was about bringing everybody together, working together."*

Other principals reflected a strong emphasis on individualised learning approaches, ensuring that the needs and potential of every pupil were addressed.

> *"My vision is achievement for all, and that's our mission. We have to get the right fix for the right boy. That's the personalised approach to learning and using data correctly."*

4.2.3 Communicating Vision

The principals emphasised that communication of vision was not a one-off event but an ongoing process requiring clarity, persistence, and the deliberate involvement of stakeholders. For many, the first step on their leadership journey was to articulate the vision clearly to those within the school community.

> *"You set out your vision, you have it in your own mind, and you communicate that with your stakeholders."*

"Most of the work was done at senior leadership level to establish clear lines of work I wanted to take forward."

For others, communication went beyond informing the school community, to the point where shared ownership was built among the staff, pupils, governors, and parents. These principals described the time invested in gathering feedback, refining the language of vision statements, and creating a shared sense of purpose.

> *"We give the vision statement to our parents association... the governors wanted this in, and the pupils wanted this in... we spent months sometimes... over certain words… We sent out literature to the parents that have the core values and the vision in a digestible format… the pupils have had more than one assembly on what is our vision, but again, in a pupil language."*

> *"Vision depends on transparency and good communication with all the stakeholders. Clearly I had to be interviewed for the post. I had to present my vision to governors on the day of interview. So you know, I identified to governors what I felt were the challenges in education and what I felt were the priorities for the school going forward, but also how we would overcome the challenges and work towards school improvement."*

> *"Before I even spoke to staff, I brought my union reps in, and I spoke to them and I said right, I am considering a few changes… Not because it was any union thing, but I thought they're the voice of the staff. Then I spoke to a few senior colleagues and some of the junior staff."*

Bringing staff along was frequently mentioned as a critical factor in realising the vision. The principals discussed the importance of creating "*buy-in*" through direct engagement, collaborative planning, and investing time in discussion.

> *"The biggest thing was, that ability to bring staff along with us as a senior team... and the development of staff under the core priorities of school improvement."*

> *"I had to spend some time talking to a senior leadership team and to the staff in general about vision and about pulling everyone together, to the extent that we got to a stage where people were fed up talking about vision in the end."*

> *"I would expect staff in the action planning process to... expect the buy-in to the priorities for this year."*

One of the principals also described the role of governors in upholding and safeguarding the vision. Governors were viewed not just as oversight bodies but as partners committed to sustaining the school's direction.

> *"[The governors] are the upholders of the vision. They hold that standard, and that's their role. And we've always come back to vision."*

Some leaders spoke about embedding vision through culture-building activities and maintaining visible commitment over time.

"We did a day on culture and ethos... and I have to say it was fantastic... very, very uplifting... that's how you know then that your vision is being realized because the staff are giving you that feedback."

"It's my role to articulate [the vision, and] it's the role of teachers to ensure that education in the classroom is of a sufficient quality, every single day, and to look after our pupils, every single day. But my role is to ensure, first and foremost, that the vision of the school permeates through everything we do, and that we continue to keep our focus on why we were establishing what we want to do."

"It's about people believing in the vision, no matter what anyone else says, and having the courage of their belief in their vision to make it happen."

4.2.4 Developing and Refining Vision

While the initial establishment of vision was perceived as crucial, the principals described how vision sometimes continues to develop over time, as it is influenced by school performance, emerging challenges, and the wider educational landscape. Vision was not viewed as static, but as something that required ongoing reflection, minor adjustments, and responsiveness to data.

"[My vision is] very much in line with our current school development plan… We're carrying on the existing vision, but with minor tweaks based on, for example, the performance outcome trends at module results time or in the summer series or the winter series. So you do need to make sort of tweaks to your vision throughout the year you might have your overall vision."

"The school development plan is a centralised document… And then every post holder in the school has to do an improvement plan at the start of every academic year… They identify their baseline and then talk about what tasks or actions they need to take to try and achieve those targets. And then their key measure, measurement points throughout the year, the data drops could be attendance, could be pastoral data, curriculum data."

"You're always trying to, like, just being having a vision, looking into the future. What's coming down the line?"

The principals emphasised that vision must remain focused on long-term goals, even as short-term actions evolve. Strategic thinking, analysis of barriers, and clear planning were seen as essential in sustaining momentum and avoiding stagnation.

"I tend to have a longer-term view of things that you need to have a vision. You need to know where you want to go, and you need to have a strategy to bring yourself to that position, along with an analysis of what's keeping you back."

"I was looking at vision and strategy much more than the practicalities of day to day. And other senior leaders were very, very talented at making things happen."

"We're at a point now where we either grow and strengthen or we stagnate. The choice is ours."

The process of refining vision was often shaped by personal leadership learning. Several principals reflected on mistakes made and lessons learned as their understanding of how to lead change matured.

> *"I had a long list of initiatives that I wanted, that I was in a hurry to push forward, and I was maybe too impatient, and didn't realize that it takes people time to get used, to change. So that was probably the biggest mistake, if there was a mistake."*

> *"It's about how we treat our young people and engage them in learning so that they want to learn. Because my mistake as a teacher many years ago was doing too much teaching and not allowing space for learning."*

> *"I hear people who go in with a five-year plan and boom. But me? 15 years later and I'm still scraping at the surface… Maybe if I'd been more confident I could've got places quicker. But hey, our deficit is cleared, are results are better, and our pupil numbers have more than doubled in size."*

Some leaders described how early caution, observation, and selective change helped them to refine their vision in a way that respected existing strengths while identifying necessary shifts.

> *"I don't think I would have changed too much in my first days, because I sat back and I was the new person coming into a very good, well-established school, could be better, but it was a well-established school. I wasn't going to rock that boat at all. So it was about looking and seeing things that just were crazy, I changed immediately."*

Overall, principals saw vision as something that should be held firmly in its core intent, but flexible in its expression and delivery, shaped by evidence, context, and continuous leadership learning.

4.3 Driving Success

Creating and sustaining successful schools requires a holistic approach that extends far beyond exam results. The principals described how they drove improvement by setting a broad vision of success that celebrated academic outcomes, but also prioritised wellbeing, relationships, curriculum relevance, and staff empowerment. What emerged was a dynamic and deliberate culture of continuous development, rooted in evidence, care, and high expectations for every member of the school community.

4.3.1 Measuring Success

Across the schools, pupil attainment was considered one of the most important measures of success. However, leaders consistently highlighted that other indicators were equally significant.

> *"The obvious [measure of success] is pupil outcomes… but equally important is staff well-being, morale, and turnover."*

One leader articulated a view of success that prioritised character over qualifications:

"If you left here with no qualifications and you were a caring person, you're a kind person, you're respectful... you will have success in life."

Attendance was also viewed as a critical marker of school success, with several schools implementing strategies to improve and monitor it closely.

"Well, we would track a lot in literacy, literacy and numeracy and attendance. And we offer like attendance course to parents, because they're other indicators of success, like your attendance if they're coming to school, then they're content in school, and they're happy in school."

"We are sitting very well, high up, on our on our attendance figures. And if the kids want to come to school, obviously, you know, that's a good sign."

For most of the participants, effective attainment tracking was central to their improvement culture. The principals described a strong focus on monitoring pupil progress and using tracking data to inform interventions.

"Probably the real focus is on attainment, tracking data and attainment so that has been, that has been big and people have bought into it and they see their outcomes, and the staff liked it. They liked being on board."

The importance of being "*data rich*" was a recurring theme. However, the principals placed emphasis not just on gathering data, but on using it meaningfully to drive improvement and support both academic and pastoral outcomes.

"There is a lot of emphasis on data tracking from September right through to the very end with these year groups, and at those key points of data drops that we analyse them as a senior leadership team, middle leadership teams, and put into place really quick interventions to, you know, target areas where we have concerns about."

"I base everything on evidence."

Strong relationships with pupils were seen as integral, as well as managing data effectively, so that staff were able to provide highly personalised support throughout each pupil's academic journey.

"It's about relationships and data. You know each individual from when they're 11, you know? So we're a data rich school in the sense that, when we know him at 11, the transition of 13 will be effective. The transition of 15 will be effective. We can make effective selection into sixth form, because we have great relationships."

"You have to be data driven, but you have to remember that behind all that data there's human beings, there's a child, there's a backstory of every single one of them and and again, fostering good relationships is key."

In some schools, dedicated staffing was allocated to oversee data tracking and ensure it informed practice:

"We have three teachers delegated to overseeing the tracking and the monitoring of pupil progress… so there's a team within the senior management."

"We have a data analysis manager in the school who collates all the data. It's really important to have a post like that."

Alongside academic measures, pastoral and behavioural data were tracked in detail to provide a fuller picture of pupils' school experiences.

"We have a very good pastoral system, and we have tweaked our whole attendance system… There's a huge focus on attendance or absences, as we call it and then we also look at our pastoral data… We also look at behaviour points. So 34 behaviour points, that's quite significant for our year eight child, achievement points, positive exclusions, that's suspensions. And then over here you'll see just a summary there, and then down here you'll get attendance summary, punctuality. And then I can dig deep into that. I can go into that and have an analysis of that."

However, leaders emphasised that data alone was not enough. Rather, it was how the data was used that mattered.

"We are a data rich school. But it's what you do afterwards with the data."

4.3.2 Curriculum

Leaders placed a strong emphasis on ensuring that their curriculum was dynamic, responsive, and "*fit for purpose*". There was a shared recognition that a universal approach was no longer sufficient. Increasingly, principals were tailoring the school curriculum to meet the varied needs, strengths, and aspirations of their pupils.

"I was always invested in behaviours, and how you know, that kind of high performing boy has a standardized score of 120 but the lowest outcomes at GCSE, so how are we creating a curriculum for him? How are we diversifying to meet his needs?"

Meeting the needs of "*at risk*" pupils was also a priority, with alternative curriculum pathways being offered to ensure engagement and achievement:

"We may find children who we believe are at risk of disaffection... and then offering an alternative type of curriculum where we know we're putting them in to achieve."

Career relevance was another important driver of curriculum design. Schools were making deliberate efforts to connect classroom learning with future pathways. Flexibility was key, with some schools adapting their curriculum offer each year based on the unique needs and profiles of each incoming cohort.

"We're all doing a careers refresh... to try and help children understand the relevance of the subjects for them so they can begin to look at a career pathway that meets their needs."

"We change our curriculum offer for every year group, because using their baseline data, because each year group will be different. So you know, we have a curriculum that suits the children, not as much as the staff, but yes, so it can change every year what we offer in terms of awarding organisations or the qualifications."

Ultimately, the goal was to create a curriculum that allowed all students to succeed, regardless of their starting points or aspirations.

"I think one of our greatest successes is having a curriculum model that is broad enough to suit children of all abilities, but also progressive enough to ensure that our children reach their destinations, whether it be employment, further higher education or whatever."

There was a strong focus across the schools on ensuring that every pupil could access a pathway that suited their individual goals and needs. The school principals recognised that success sometimes took longer for some pupils, particularly those facing greater socio-economic challenges. Schools aimed to adopt a patient, supportive approach that built cultural capital and encouraged resilience.

"For our pupils, they get the grades they need, and they get the outcomes they need, and they end up in the destination where they want to be more or less. Sometimes it takes a little bit longer, and we have to advise them, look, you might need to do a foundation year somewhere, or you might need to repeat something, or you might need to take a year out and come back to it, but they generally get to where they want to be. "There's an old saying, it's not that you failed, it's not yet, and for a lot of our pupils, it's not yet, and that's because they come from a background where they have less resources outside school. They have less support outside school. They have less cultural capital and life experiences and all of that so our role is to help them get more cultural capital, get more confidence and engage in the learning process. And that might take a little bit longer. I mean, it might mean the grades are a little bit lower, but they'll get to where they need to be."

Pathway planning was described as an essential part of school life, with careful guidance provided to ensure each pupil was set on a realistic and fulfilling route.

"Attainment is our bread and butter. You know, there's no point in having a school if you're not attaining well, but the pathways are just something that we are very, very clear on for all of our kids to gain the right pathways for themselves."

"If you don't have focus in life, if you don't have anything to aim for, what's the point in coming to school? What's going to push you to get those qualifications? So in lower sixth our [pupils] do their personal statements, and they have to do their research and find their goal, and then we keep reminding them, you have a goal and you can believe in yourself. You can be whatever you want to be. And see, our leaver destinations are amazing... It's about saying to the pupils, this is possible. This is possible for you. Dream big."

4.3.3 Culture

Across all schools, a strong, positive culture was described as foundational to success. Principals consistently spoke of a palpable sense of warmth, welcome, and respect, where everyone was treated equally.

> *"When you come here, you get a good feeling amongst staff, and there's no sort of snobby, I don't know, preconceptions that you go into a staff room, and someone wouldn't speak to you, or that's my chair. Everybody's very welcoming, and no matter what your role is in the school."*

> *"It's a caring environment, where children are loved and cared for and given the best opportunities in life."*

> *"It's trying to create that culture of care and that culture of kindness and respect."*

"We treat everybody with respect, with the dignity. You know, that's part of our values. Our core values for the school is care, courtesy, respect, responsibility, we instil that everybody." This inclusive ethos was credited with attracting and retaining staff, enhancing the school's reputation and sense of community.

> *"The school is very successful and reputationally in the city… it's a beautiful ethos and atmosphere, it really is a nice place to work. Staff are lovely, so I think that's a big attraction."*

Staff voice was also viewed as crucial to sustaining a positive working environment. Leaders described practices that empowered staff and embedded ownership.

> *"I have my heads of department trained and invited onto the interview panels. They can choose what questions they want to ask, so the ownership is there from the beginning."*

With regard to pupils, there was a conscious move away from traditional, authoritarian models of discipline. Instead, a more relational, restorative approach to behaviour management was prioritised.

> *"We shifted the culture away from a traditional authoritarian approach to pupils… to restorative practice."*

> *"We don't exclude children... the big thing is to try and ensure that we give the staff the tools in the classroom in order to ensure that they can deal with whatever comes."*

> *"There was a shift in culture from, you know, sure, he's never at school, and he's badly behaved, to very quickly making sure everyone knew that behaviours are communication."*

A strong commitment to child-centred practice was evident across all responses, deeply embedded in daily interactions and decision-making.

"We have to have a very much child centred provision where we're crying for these young people and we owe it to these child... to the families and the community to do our very best for these young people to ensure they achieve their full potential."

"I come to school for those kids… once I lose that focus as pupil-centred… that's a child coming towards me in the morning, 'morning sir,' and I'm going to stand."

"You make tough decisions every day… But if you keep the boys at the centre of it, you can't really go too far wrong."

"It has to be child centred. It's not about anything else. And if the people here aren't child centred, this isn't a place for them."

This child-centred philosophy was underpinned by a holistic view of education, valuing not only academic success but also personal development and wellbeing.

"You're developing every child to their full potential, but it shouldn't be just results led… You've got to respect the young person as a human."

"The transmission of knowledge and skills is something that schools do and do very well, but it's also about the formation of the young person as an individual."

The principals also spoke of rejecting outdated models of teaching and learning in favour of equality and opportunity for all learners.

"There's this idea, the old traditional idea, that you open a child's head and pour all this knowledge into them... and it's not about that. People have to learn for themselves."

"All children would be equal in a room. Not equal ability, but equally taught… I don't like the word differentiation because I feel it smacks of special needs."

Knowing and supporting students individually was a recurring theme. Relationships between staff and pupils were described as personal, informed, and deeply valued.

"I know every child. I know all the pastoral data about them, and I know all the academic data about them."

"At the end of year 12, every single child has an individual interview with me. What are you thinking of doing?"

"I treat every child in this school like it's my own child, and I want the best for my children, like any parent would."

"I meet every single Year 14 pupil to talk about pathways. Every single one. They all know me."

"I am out in the corridors at the change of every class. I do all break and lunch duties… Every single child in this school knows who I am… It's all about building those

relationships, and once you've got those relationships, I don't believe there's many children you can't work with."

Importantly, decision-making always considered the impact on both staff and pupils.

"Every decision we make in here, we always try to think of impact on staff, impact on pupils."

Finally, pupil voice was a vital dimension of the wider culture, with young people meaningfully involved in decision-making processes.

"Student voice is very important."

"We have a very effective school council, wellbeing ambassadors, and anti-bullying ambassadors. All pupils, all of their voices are heard and listened to."

"If you're not listening to the pupils, there's something wrong."

"I just listen to the young people, listen to the staff, and it's just humbling listening to their own experiences."

"We send out a questionnaire, and we get pupil voice every year parental voice. Want to know how well we're doing, hard we can approve. So we have an open door policy if you tell us how we can improve. We will hear you. We're listening."

4.3.4 Staff

Staff loyalty and resilience were consistently highlighted as defining characteristics across the schools. In some cases, commitment to the school community was demonstrated even in the face of significant personal risk.

"We're a [religious denomination] school in a predominately [name of community] area… The staff had on one occasion been told they were under death threat if they came into school the next day, but all the staff were in school the next day. So, they were a very tight knit staff and they were very loyal to the school."

Maintaining staff morale, particularly in challenging contexts, was a sustained focus for school leaders. While staff were described as hardworking, passionate, and central to each school's mission, participants acknowledged the difficulties associated with low morale and the ongoing challenges of recruitment.

"Recruiting staff is virtually impossible. Why would a teacher come to a secondary school… when they can go to a nice Grammar School in the leafy suburbs?... Quite often we're bottom row."

"There are subject areas which do not attract a lot, and it's right across Northern Ireland… We have to be very good at our selection process and very open and honest and thorough."

The importance of relationships between school leadership and staff was repeatedly emphasised. Kindness, dignity, and mutual respect were viewed as vital to staff wellbeing, retention, and performance.

> *"Relationships are the key to everything… you have to be kind to your staff because if you're not nice to them… people just go off sick for six months, and you're left in a worse position."*

> *"You need to bring people along with you. You need to respect them. You need to have dignity."*

> *"Let the teachers do their jobs, let the classroom system do their jobs. It's about the team, and if you build that trust, they don't let you down."*

Staff development and empowerment were also central priorities. Leaders described a range of strategies to promote professional growth, including supporting postgraduate study, pairing new middle leaders with experienced mentors, encouraging shadowing opportunities, and fostering reflective practice.

> *"I would be promoting the professional development and courses and Masters and giving people opportunities."*

> *"If we appoint a new middle leader, I pair that person off with an experienced middle manager… and staff can come and observe senior management meetings."*

> *"I often say to staff, would you want your children to be taught by you? If the answer is no, you're in the wrong."*

> *"We invest in our staff development. We make sure we can quality assure what goes on in the classroom."*

The right 'fit' for the school was considered as important as formal qualifications. Leaders consistently stressed the importance of relational skills, emotional intelligence, and alignment with the school's ethos.

> *"You might have someone with a first-class honours degree, but through interview you'll know they wouldn't fit in the school… You need to be a very special type of person."*

> *"If you can't build relationships, you can't work here. It's as simple as that."*

One school leader emphasised that the key to a successful staff team was not necessarily recruiting new or exceptional staff, but rather creating a culture where existing team members could thrive, innovate, and grow. This participant reflected on the transformation within their school, attributing much of the progress to the collective efforts of a longstanding team.

> *"I've been in the school for 30 years. Now that I've seen it evolved, and I've seen what it does, there's been no difference. See the staff. We've got the same staff…We've got*

the same kids, from the same catchment area, you know? It was all there, and it was just … tweaking it."

Leadership styles balanced strong direction with a coaching approach, aiming to build capacity and foster a culture of trust, autonomy, and celebration.

> *"I'm a big believer in telling people when they're doing well… because I think that's so important."*

> *"I give a lot of autonomy to heads of department. I'm into capacity building… We are a coaching school."*

> *"You have to bring people with you… Knowledge is power. I don't need all the power. I need other people to share the power with me."*

> *"We're not here for egos. I'm no different than anybody else in here, and that's, that is what counts, and what staff need to see is that I do the exact same as what I'd expect them to do."*

The principals recognised that meaningful change and impact occurred primarily through teaching staff rather than senior leadership alone. However, the challenges of managing staff underperformance were also acknowledged, with participants reflecting on the difficulty of addressing issues promptly.

> *"I think there were two staff members I could've been much stricter with… I didn't push them enough… In the end I had to have very difficult conversations with them."*

Ultimately, across all schools, supporting, developing, and valuing staff was viewed as fundamental to the success of the school community.

> *"When it comes to staff, there are three magic words: support, support, support."*

> *"Staff are key. If you don't have staff with you, you will lose it all."*

4.3.5 Wellbeing

A strong culture of wellbeing was evident across all the schools represented, with participants consistently highlighting the importance of both staff and student happiness. Emotional and mental health were prioritised alongside academic achievement, with many leaders highlighting the foundational role of wellbeing in enabling learning.

> *"Happy teachers, happy pupils."*

> *"It's more than it is the GCSE and the A Level results, because it's that passport up and out of here. It's not the only thing that's breaking down. It is looking after their mental health, their emotional health."*

"The kids are happy and settled, the staff are happy coming into work, and if you don't have staff and pupils and families in good places, they're not going to learn. There's going to be no learning, and that they feel that this is their safe place, and if they do come in, and when they do come in, they're cared for and they're looked after."

Listening directly to pupils was considered central to supporting their wellbeing. Participants described how pupil voice shaped pastoral provision and ensured that academic priorities did not overshadow students' broader experiences of school life.

"We measure our pupils through surveys on how happy and secure they are in school… So we have a baseline of how they're feeling… we also measure what we're not doing well, and then we responded… that shaped some of our pastoral approaches."

"The happiness of our young people is most important. And whilst sometimes I'm talking about quantitative outcomes, student voice is very important. So, you know, sometimes it's important to leave the desk behind, speak to the young people, hear their voices, of their experience of the formal and informal curriculum."

"There's always pressure for outcomes… but pastoral care is paramount. It's the synergy between the academia and the pastoral care. You have to know the youngster."

Staff wellbeing was also positioned as a priority, with schools adopting proactive measures to support the health, morale, and work-life balance of their employees. A culture of appreciation was viewed as essential to sustaining a positive environment.

"I've actually got it thank God across the board, free healthcare, for every member of staff in this school… I can get them 24/7 GP calls, prescriptions, physio … But it's about how you look after your staff."

"Staff are happy. They've nice friendships. We would be very kind to them, you know, and appreciative what they're doing a lot best and well-being. And you know the Governors… there would be a lot of kind of looking after them and thinking right, what do we need to do?"

"Family comes first and foremost to me… I would let [the staff] out to their nativity plays, to their sports days. I just think memories like that you can't get back."

Several schools extended their wellbeing provision to the wider school community, recognising that family stability and home environment are integral to pupil success. Practical initiatives included the provision of financial assistance and the enhancement of the physical school environment.

"We're giving out gas vouchers, electric vouchers. We're giving [families] meat packs because we wouldn't give them money. We'll have to have it all sewn up so that we know it's actually food and eating and whenever. We go out, we beg, steal and borrow from all around to be able to do that."

"You're painting the places, you're getting in new flooring, lighting to make it feel warm, comfortable."

Finally, additional layers of specialist support were introduced to address complex mental health needs. For students at risk of underachievement, tailored academic alternative pathways were offered to maximise opportunities for success.

> *"We have a youth worker and we have a mental health nurse this year. That's an added layer."*

> *"We have two youth workers on site. They are working with CAMHS… to get pupils off waiting lists, you know? Because they'll never be seen by CAMHs."*

> *"For those students that we identify as at risk of not achieving five or more [GCSEs], we put them into an intervention group, and we would maybe offer them [alternative subjects] like an OCN or something."*

> *"I'm bringing in a social worker this year. We've got youth workers, counsellors, therapists… I'd love to get a dentist… We have children sitting crying with toothaches because their dental care… If it were your child, is it good enough? And if it isn't, we have to do something about it. We have to do whatever."*

4.4 Community Connectedness

According to the principals involved in this research, the importance of community involvement in schools cannot be overstated, as it plays a crucial role in fostering a supportive and inclusive environment for both students and staff. Strong governance and positive relationships with various stakeholders, such as parents, local businesses, and external agencies, are essential for the school's success and reputation. Principals across different school types consistently emphasised that the ethos of a school, its commitment to student-centred values, and the active participation of the community are key factors in building strong connections. As one principal noted, "*the involvement of community is essential,*" highlighting the critical role these partnerships play in enhancing educational outcomes and supporting the broader community.

4.4.1 Local Staff

A recurring theme across the interviews was the value of school staff being part of the local community. Many of the principals emphasised that staff living locally brought an inherent credibility, which helped in building trust and understanding of the students' needs. This local connection was also seen as vital for building relationships with both pupils and parents.

> *"I was pretty familiar with the kids coming from this area... My own children live in this community… So that was definitely a bonus for me, being able to have credibility among the staff that I was very invested in the area."*

The principals underscored that a significant number of their school staff either lived locally or were former pupils themselves, which facilitated an instinctive empathy for the students' challenges. There was importance placed on the teachers not seeing themselves as separate from the community, but as active participants in it.

"[The teachers] don't look down on the pupils. They see the pupils as part of their local community, and the pupils themselves see the teachers within the community, and they know the parents."

"Almost all of the classroom assistants… are past pupils."

"There's an awful lot of ex pupils back at the school, because that's where we get our teachers from, really, but there's there's very good so they have a very good understanding of young people and an identity of the young people. Most of our teachers also live in the same streets. There's not people commuting in and out and that tends to happen in working class-based schools that teachers don't often live in working class areas anymore. They leave. But our pupils, our teachers, live in the area."

"Several of the teachers here, not just teacher support staff, even the admin staff. I mean, my PA, they're all past pupils."

"Quite a number of our teaching staff and most of our classroom assistants are past pupils."

"You're from the community, and you want the best for your community."

"Our staff are excellent. They get our kids. They don't look down. Otherwise they wouldn't be here. You know, if they, if they think they're above the pupils, they don't stay with us."

At the same time, leaders were aware of the need for adaptation when they were not originally from the area.

"When I started, someone said to me, remember you're not from here. You don't judge or make decisions based on what you think you know. You talk to people, you interact with people. If you're a leader of a school, it's very important that you actually know your target audience, you know how to speak or how you treat them. That's key."

The principals also recognised the significant social disadvantage many of their students faced. Several spoke about the importance of acknowledging these challenges and ensuring that the school environment was a supportive one.

"Sitting in social disadvantage with around 60% of children on free school meals... we have a fully developed inclusive framework."

"I went through the unemployment rates, the drug use and abuse, suicide rates… if you find a child from that area who's having a bad day, I want you to excuse that person... understand that that child is quite likely coming from an environment of this."

Some principals expressed a strong commitment to breaking cycles of disadvantage within their communities, illustrating the transformative role education can play.

"There's cyclical, systemic poverty with families in this area… you're breaking all those cycles."

Creating a welcoming and accessible school environment was also a priority. Principals shared how they worked to ensure that parents felt comfortable engaging with the school, particularly in communities where some families might initially feel excluded or unwelcome.

> *"Some parents have said to me, 'Look, when we walk into the school, we feel comfortable. We feel as if we're with our own community.'"*

> *"Sometimes parents don't want to come in, but we would then try our very best to even do home visits if the parents didn't engage."*

> *"It takes a village, and we're part of that village. We can't do it on our own, and we need the parents as partners in it as well."*

> *"It's so important that we are the family… and that includes parents. Parents know they can come into the school… We don't keep our staff here at night to do parent meetings, we do them during the school day… It promotes parental engagement."*

4.4.2 Governance and Stakeholders

The management type of a school, whether Catholic, controlled, or integrated, was not consistently seen as a determining factor in levels of community connectedness. Several participants reflected that their school ethos and focus on the child were more impactful than its management type. For example, some principals expressed that their school's commitment to student-centred values transcended the administrative structure.

> *"I don't think it's got anything at all to do with it being a controlled school. I can't see how that plays a role at all."*

> *"I don't I don't understand why the controlled sector is lagging behind... the impact of us here as a faith-based school is about the core values of the child being at the centre, high expectations. You can achieve anything."*

However, other principals suggested that historical factors, such as the legacy of the Troubles and the prioritisation of education within the Catholic community, had influenced approaches. Several principals emphasised the historical role of education in Catholic communities as a route out of disadvantage.

> *"I'm gonna put my hands up and say I'm a person of faith and a committed Catholic… Was the fight for education a huge part to play in it? I think so."*

The principals who worked in faith-based schools also discussed the balance they maintain between being open to broader community engagement while safeguarding their religious ethos. For example, some of the principals highlighted the importance of promoting inclusivity while still holding onto their values.

> *"I would encourage all staff to pray in their own way with Muslim children, they all come to, they're not forced, you know, but all are encouraged as a Catholic school to come to our celebrations."*

"We have to be very diligent as to who comes in, and what they offer… We are a Catholic school, and we have certain values that we try to keep."

While support from managing bodies like CCMS was seen as improving, many participants still felt that it did not fully address the needs of schools, particularly in terms of advocacy.

"I would say CCMS are much better as a supportive body now... but to me, CCMS don't play a big enough role in being a voice for us sometimes."

Strong governance and positive stakeholder relationships were consistently regarded as essential to building community connectedness. Moreover, how the community perceived the school was seen as a significant indicator of success.

"My Governors support me to the hilt. They're brill. Absolutely brilliant."

"Our governors are very good. They come in and meet our staff at the beginning of the year… and acknowledge their work and publicly thank them."

"The views of your stakeholders… what people in the community say about our pupils, what the shopkeepers, bus drivers, and visitors say—those are really important measures."

4.4.3 Wider Community Partnerships

Beyond engaging with parents, the principals emphasised the importance of developing partnerships with a wide range of community stakeholders, including youth workers, charities, employers, local schools, and emergency services. These partnerships were seen as key to providing students with a well-rounded support system and ensuring they had access to resources and opportunities beyond the classroom.

"Youth work is another one that I often think the Department of Education is missing out, and they're needing a much better link with youth work."

"We work very closely with the local youth club... and we'll have some joined-up initiatives with them."

"We do a lot of work with the police service and the fire service… Helping people to understand the importance of those services for their community."

"Relationships are so important with schools that are close to you."

"We've got very strong links with the primary schools, which is extremely important… We are also the lead school in the cluster of all the primary schools and that is extremely important… It's the school getting ready for the different children that are coming their way."

Schools also partnered with external agencies to provide extra support for vulnerable students, recognising that these connections helped to fill in the gaps left by the traditional education model.

"Having those good community connections isn't just about the great support. Sometimes it gives us the background to what's actually going on. That's the first thing, because they know more about what's going on after three o'clock. We don't know, but they can tell us, and we think, right, okay, that's why she's behaving like that. That's, that's the story. And you know, that's, that's very good, because it puts it into context for us and the plan that we have for them. But also they would provide support, so they would come into the school to provide some support, like behavioural support."

"We work very, very closely with external agencies to ensure that we have a very robust preventative curriculum."

In some cases, schools partnered to provide behavioural support, address pastoral needs, or simply ensure pupils had access to activities they otherwise might miss.

"It's good for supporting the school, to connect with the support outside school, for the same children or families or area."

"If the regional college or the techs open their open days and apprenticeships, we don't say go on down. We will take the students down."

"You need to have joined up thinking. You need cohesion with all the community groups and people, all the outside agencies, you know, the education authorities project as well. And parents and stuff like that."

Partnerships with employers and charities were also seen as beneficial for developing students' character and aspirations.

"All of our fifth years, our Year 12 students… get a mock interview from a proper employer every year."

"We do an awful lot for charity... Many of these children come from very challenging backgrounds themselves, but still are very generous and giving."

One school leader highlighted the vital role that extra-curricular provision plays in supporting pupil development beyond the academic curriculum. These activities were seen not only as a means of fostering new skills and interests, but also as an important way to build relationships, boost confidence, and deepen the sense of belonging within the school community.

"Everybody's involved in extracurriculars. We have something for everyone. Our school timetable is structured to finish at 2 o'clock on a Tuesday, and that's our extracurricular activity day. Everybody's involved."

Furthermore, schools maintained strong links with past pupils, recognising the value of these connections as inspiration for current students.

"Wherever we are aware of any past pupils involved in anything, we would bring them in… We've got like 400 responses… Pupils working all over the world."

“Many of the past pupils are now parents… They wouldn’t have sent their own children here had they not had a good experience.”

Finally, leaders emphasised that a school’s reputation within the wider community is invaluable and can only be built through consistent positive relationships with all stakeholders.

"We’ve worked very hard to build our reputation within the community up, and that's the relationships with all stakeholders, and the local community too."

“We used to do a lot of marketing, selling the school... It's word of mouth. It's how you're treated by a school that goes through the broader community."

“Our reputation in the community is very strong at the minute... because of the way we treat people.”

4.5 Personal and Professional Qualities and Values

4.5.1 Challenges

The principals indicated that although leading a school is an immense privilege, it comes with deep personal and professional challenges, many of which are often hidden behind the daily running of school life. Several principals reflected on the loneliness and self-doubt that can accompany leadership roles.

“Leadership is lonely.”

“I had significant imposter syndrome… I still look around and think, is it really meant to be me?"

“I’m very proud of my team. And as someone with imposter syndrome, you do defer to your team a lot for affirmation.”

Beyond personal insecurities, the principals described how they were also required to navigate the shift from teaching to leading, managing not just students but an entire organisational structure. As leaders progress in their careers, they sometimes find themselves distanced from the aspects of teaching and learning that originally motivated them to join the profession.

“It's a very different thing being Principal. It's not a teaching role. People move into things and like, are they really? Where does the business sort of model fit in on it? Do you know what I mean?”

“I think one of the negatives is that you're not as front-facing with children when you go into senior leadership, so you have to ensure that why you went into education in the first place is not lost. And I think that's one thing that has allowed me to remain rooted in what I'm about, in that I never take my eye off the teaching and learning dimension of no matter whether we're dealing with the most complex pastoral issue or we're dealing with a drugs issue within the school or whatever you never take your eye off what we're about and where we have to return to on an ongoing basis.”

Leadership in education can be overwhelming, and the importance of maintaining boundaries to protect personal well-being is a common thread.

> *"I don't have email notifications on my phone at any time of the day or night, and I go into my emails to look at them when I want to do that. And I strongly recommend people have notifications switched off… you need to have an uninterrupted time, and you need to be doing things for your own well-being."*

> *"I never ever saw myself to be a principal. And I enjoy the job, but I also, if you like to use an American expression, keep it real because it is a job. I will do my job to the best of my ability between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM every day. But it stops there because to me you've got to have a good work-life balance and I know there are other principals who spend all sorts of hours looking at emails."*

Emotional resilience is crucial for managing competing pressures and obligations. Many principals spoke about the toll of supporting students and staff through grief, loss, and hardship.

> *"I'm lucky that I have faith. It's not an easy job. Because you know, when you lose a child, you know, in different ways, it's, you know, very, very difficult. You know, to pick up the pieces again and move on, and you do carry it, or whatever, you know. So it's, it's not an easy job."*

The principals also highlighted the challenges of dealing with parents and the wider community, especially since the use of social media can amplify negativity.

> *"It's very easy for community and parents, in particular, to vent on social media, and they don't really mean it, but it's hurtful at times to some teachers… You have to have a thick skin, but sometimes you think, 'That's completely untrue, that's completely unfair'… But you also have to be able to say, this is an angry parent who's really just worried."*

The burden of leadership, particularly the overwhelming pressure from external factors, is a challenge faced by many.

> *"I am hugely disheartened by the pressure on leaders… I have colleagues who I just think are amazing leaders, and they have, you know, just been crushed by being caught up in things that have nothing to do with them. So there is a there you know, it is tricky to be a leader, and I think the system needs to tap into that expertise."*

> *"There's colleagues of mine who have been in the post far longer than me, working with people, and it's nearly killing people, and that's why nobody's going into it… It's a lovely job, and that, but it wasn't really where I aspired to be."*

Fatigue and burnout are recurring issues for many leaders, with some feeling drained by years of challenging work.

> *"I think that a lot of people are done out, and they're worn out, and they're staying on because they're getting it too young, and they're done. They are tired and exhausted,*

and have they fought the fights both unions and whatever, and therefore they cannot bring about the change."

"You never have a minute headspace at the weekend, you're constantly thinking of school. Your free time is taken up with thoughts of school. You never switch off. That's the thing I find the most draining. You're always trying to do your best for everybody."

Despite these challenges, principals consistently spoke of the profound rewards of leadership, finding motivation and hope even amidst exhaustion.

"It does occasionally impact on me… I'm busted, I'm wrecked, I'm exhausted. But the positives so much outweigh the negatives."

4.5.2 Purpose

For many school leaders, their sense of purpose is not rooted in ambition or status, but in the drive to serve, improve, and lead by example.

"It didn't matter what I was called, and it also didn't matter what money I earned... What enticed me to apply for things was that ability to work on that team, or that ability to work alongside a leader that you saw had qualities that you wanted to be in yourself.

"I didn't consider myself ambitious… I stepped forward because I didn't want to work for someone else."

"I've always been someone who sought out opportunities to make a difference."

This deeper motivation often arose from a passionate commitment to students and their success, rather than a personal desire for leadership itself.

"I never wanted to be a Principal, and I still don't really want to be a Principal... but I think... what developed my passion was, that real commitment to drive improvement for the children."

"The youngsters motivate me. It motivates me that no two days are the same… I want the best for the youngsters."

"The role of the principal is to make sure that every child is fulfilling their full potential."

For some leaders, this purpose is personal: it is about treating every child with the care and dignity they would want for themselves or their own family.

"Every time you walk into a room, that child in front of you is you, or your child, how do you want that child to achieve? To be made feel? to be spoken to? to be treated? Because if you can't do that for your 14-year-old self or your 14- or 15-year-old child, you are in the wrong job."

The commitment to excellence and care extends to every action and decision, no matter how small.

> *"Every day, every decision, no matter how small it is, I give it everything."*

Finally, leaders recognise that while their role is vital, it is the classroom teacher who has the most direct influence on student outcomes. Supporting and empowering teachers is a key part of fulfilling their purpose.

> *"Ultimately, it's the teacher in the classroom who has the greatest impact… It's my responsibility then to get that out of them and make sure that they have the tools, the resources, and the training to enable them to do their best."*

4.5.3 Characteristics

The principals were invited to reflect on the characteristics they held which helped to underpin effective leadership in schools. Their responses reflected a combination of resilience, creativity, and a determination to achieve the best outcomes for pupils.

> *"I am creative and a problem solver. So I will not be beaten. If I decide I want something to happen, for the pupils, whatever that happens to be… Nothing will stop me. I don't care who says no to me. I will be relentless."*

> *"You need good planning and never give up attitude on any child."*

> *"You need to be able to make decisions and some of those decisions are very, very difficult, but you've got to stand up and if you get it wrong, you learn."*

> *"You've got to be committed, you've got to work hard and it is very rewarding."*

Strong school leaders also emphasise openness, honesty, and a collaborative spirit.

> *"I'm really collaborative with my SLT team. I don't like a hierarchical structure, so I extend that when I go out to community partners."*

> *"I am open. I meet the parents anywhere and they know exactly what I'm about. I'm open and honest when I speak to them. I'm very respectful towards the parents."*

> *"I try to be very open and transparent, and communication style is very important for me."*

> *"I'm very much relationships, relationships, relationships. Relationships with staff, with parents, with the community, with the children in the school. To me, that's the key. That was just part of my process."*

Listening and relational leadership were consistently valued characteristics.

> *"I'm very much a listener."*

"Somebody close to me said my greatest strength is my gentleness… I used to think that wasn't a leadership quality. Now I know it's a huge strength… I'm a listener. My door is open all the time… If they're free and I'm free, come on down."

"You don't need to have all the answers. But you do need to listen, learn, and surround yourself with people who challenge you."

Humility and integrity were also seen as essential to building authentic school communities.

"Humility… and integrity. It's about knowing your community, knowing your children, and knowing how to communicate."

"I worked under a leader that always said, 'this is my school,' you know? And I thought, get over yourself, you're a blow in. You'll come and you'll go and like the rest of us. This school belongs to the community."

The principals described how respect, dignity, and empathy underpinned how they relate to both the staff and the pupils in their schools.

"I have no difficulty apologising… I got it wrong. I apologise. Can we move on? I don't hold grudges…not forgiving is the biggest waste of energy and it will tear you apart."

"Treating staff just with dignity and respect and listening to them and actually trying to create that idea of a team routine, we work together."

"I'm very relational… and Empathetic… Being a teacher is about being empathetic, being visionary."

"You never shout. There's no shouting, it's all very calm and respectful."

"I don't micromanage anybody. I like to empower, and put my trust right in that teacher that they're doing the best for their department, and they're doing the best because see, when you let teachers breathe, that you'll get so much more out of them, rather than being breathing down your neck, or, you know, micromanaging, yeah, so I trust the trust, yeah, trusting and, you know, rewarding them, appreciating your staff as well."

The approach to behaviour management further reflected the value placed on empathy and understanding.

"I do come back to this breaking down the barriers, the whole thing about positive behaviour, management, convincing staff that actually… the finger wag and scold off some child who already feels terrible and their life's already a mess, you know, to break down a lot of the barriers around that that actually they were seeing a lot of the softly, softly touch, but actually, hey, the softly, softly."

Leading by example is considered non-negotiable for school leaders who want to build trust and credibility.

"I lead by example. I'm on break duty every lunch time and every break duty. If I'm not prepared to get out and brush the canteen floor when a child has spilled something, why would I be asking any other member of staff to do it?"

"We're not here for egos. I'm no different than anybody else in here, and that's, that is what counts, and what staff need to see is that I do the exact same as what I'd expect them to do."

Despite personal insecurities and experiences of challenging management styles, resilience and adaptability have remained essential.

"I'm not the most confident person."

"I've been under other styles of management. It was my way or the highway boom and whatever. And of course, me being me, I was doing it and with bells on. But there were other people dug their heels in and didn't do or whatever, and you were battling against that."

Finally, one principal reflected on the importance of knowing their own leadership style and resisting pressure to conform to the leadership styles or expectations of others.

"I'm not a man of conflict. Even my governors, at the beginning, they're going, Oh, you're too soft. You need to do it this... But you know what, there are, there's more than one way to do things, one way doesn't work for all."

4.5.4 Values

The principals were invited to share the personally held values that they felt influenced their leadership style. All of the principals shared a variation of being motivated towards humility authenticity, and putting the pupils first.

"If somebody asked me to define my leadership, it would be under the servant leadership on the umbrella… Because how dare anybody not allow those children to grow and to be nourished?"

"My moral code won't allow me to let the children in this school down."

"If you treat people in a certain way, they'll behave in a certain way… I mean, if you actually treat kids with respect, and that's how you speak to them, and how you look after them."

"I like to be out [in the corridors] because the closer I am to the pupils, the better my decision making."

Personal authenticity and integrity were also described as non-negotiable leadership values for many of the principals.

"But I think for me it is, it's being yourself, being real. It's about being true to yourself."

"People see me as a simplistic leader. I'm extremely simplistic, not not in not my thinking, but extremely simplistic in my my own self… I'm not here for glory. I have someone in charge of PR for the school, but a wise Principal once said to me, 'let the community do the talking. Forget about headlines and forget about flashing lights and so on, because one day you're up and the next day you come very quickly down."

Some of the principals felt that faith, compassion, and a sense of moral responsibility were strong foundations for many leaders' daily practice.

"I work hard every day to demonstrate those [values]… compassion, caring, forgiveness. I know I can set the tone of things… Even the way I dress, the way I phrase emails, the way I speak to staff."

"All children can learn, and you can never give up on anyone. And much of that really comes from, I've got a very strong faith."

"I have an extremely strong faith… So I ask for the grace every day to deal with what I have to deal with."

Some of the principals serving in Catholic schools shared how the ethos of the school helped to guide both their leadership style and the overall school culture.

"We're a Catholic school, so we are rooted in the values of social justice, equality, and equity. And all of those key things should be in every facet of what we do."

"We have Catholic ethos and you know, that's borne out by our behaviour, by how we conduct ourselves in school, how we lead by example… It's about helping instil those values into your young people."

"We have respect for everyone, and again, that's down to our Catholic ethos, I mean, and the processes that we put in place to make sure that everyone is valued. And our reward system that we have in place isn't just for the high achievers, it's for those who've tried or who've made an improvement."

"Coming from a very strong Catholic ethos, our values are respect, community faith... All those core values are lived out every single day in this school, and we have high expectations."

4.6 Future Leaders

In reflecting on their personal futures, the principals expressed a range of thoughts about their roles, the evolving nature of leadership, and the importance of succession planning. Although each principal's perspective differed, a common theme emerged: leadership in education is a dynamic journey, that requires adaptability, a recognition of personal limits, and the commitment to ensuring that the next generation of leaders is prepared for the challenges ahead. Below are their insights and reflections on the future direction of leadership in education, as they consider the balance between stepping aside at the right time, mentoring future leaders, and embracing new opportunities for growth.

4.6.1 Advice for aspiring leaders

The principals interviewed were invited to share their insights and advice for those aspiring to leadership positions in education. Drawing from their vast experiences, they highlight key lessons and strategies that have shaped their leadership journey. Many of the principals emphasised that the ability to build and maintain positive relationships was essential for leadership. The principals described how any aspiring leaders must foster connections not only with staff and students but also within the broader school community.

> *"It's all about relationships, and that's a balance between relationships with staff and relationships with pupils, and then relationships between staff and pupils, you know?"*

> *"You don't get anywhere fighting with people you know, you get more with sugar than vinegar. You just have to, you do? You have to and some people, you know, can be challenging and whatever, but you know, you just try, and building the relationships, I think, is the key thing."*

> *"If especially you're not from a working-class background, really, get to know your staff, your community, as best you can, be real to that."*

> *"Your support staff are a phenomenal resource."*

Authenticity was also detailed as being crucial for leaders, and staying true to oneself helps to establish trust and integrity. Some of the principals explained that school leadership is not about power but about service, and this mindset should guide decision-making and actions.

> *"I can only be a leader if I'm true to myself... Just trust yourself, who you are. Be yourself, be authentic."*

> *"Leadership isn't about power; it's about service. If you're not willing to serve, you're not ready to lead."*

> *"Leadership is about listening—if you're not listening, you're getting it wrong."*

The principals suggested that any aspiring school leaders must remain focused on their core mission of ensuring that all decisions and actions ultimately benefit the students. This requires both bravery and a constant drive for improvement.

> *"I think it's being brave… Be strong in your convictions like, what do you know looking at the data and looking at the pupils and looking at what needs to change… Look at your outcomes. Look at about an it's all about achievement, and what's good for the kids. Like it has to be the children have to be the centre, you know? And it's about achieving and moving on."*

> *"The best advice I ever got? Find the thing that keeps you awake at night – that's what you're meant to be working on."*

> *"Being a principal is a ruthless pursuit of excellence, so you need to know who you are. You need to be high performing yourself, to expect high performance off other people.*

And that's the stuff that. And it's not about the teacher in the room. It's about the children and the young person and what they deserve."

"The key takeaways would be effective recruitment… You need to know that… you're getting the right fit for your school."

The principals emphasised that leadership required hard work, a clear focus on the long-term goal, and the humility to accept that leadership may not always be popular.

"The biggest takeaway is to remain focused to what you're actually about, and I think and to remain grounded. It's a privilege to sit in a senior team, but privilege only comes with an awful lot of hard work. And I think the biggest takeaway is people may not like you, but people respect and I think that's the biggest thing as a leader, and that we're here to serve the people that make the greatest difference to the children."

"I do think the biggest thing to survive in education is to remember that if you've done your best, you can't do anything more than that, and that will do you."

"I don't want people to be out to seven at night, prepping lessons and stuff like that. It's about building that relationship, getting the planning right. And you know, so the three things would be the pursuit of excellence, effective recruitment, and effective use of data."

However, despite the many challenges, the principals concluded that leadership is ultimately a privilege requiring dedication, humility, and a deep sense of purpose.

"Leading a school is the greatest privilege, like I have to say it is the greatest privilege like I still I said, I said this before I stand up in front of staff, and I still have I still pinch myself."

"I'm blessed to have been privileged to be to be principal, and I have been blessed by a fantastic staff and a community of people that have supported me."

4.6.2 Teacher Training

When asked about the future of school leadership, many of the principals emphasised the importance of effective recruitment and teacher training. They expressed concerns about how these areas impact the quality of leadership and teaching in schools and offered suggestions for how the profession could be shaped for future generations. Drawing from their experiences, they identified key areas for improvement and growth in teacher preparation that would influence the future of education. A major theme that emerged in the principals' responses was the need for a more well-rounded Initial Teacher Education programme, especially in areas beyond academic excellence. They stressed that emotional intelligence and pastoral care were critical skills that new teachers must possess to succeed in schools.

"There's so much more that needs to be done in teacher training… There needs to be more done with pastoral care… We've got teachers coming in and they haven't a scooby doo… You've got to be pastoral. I see people come in and I know they won't last five minutes… Great grades academically, but no emotionally? No empathy."

> *"I often say to kids, who will make the best youth workers? Who will make the best social workers… And to me, education is the same. You know, that's what makes, to me, a good teacher where teaching isn't, you know, a career, it's very much a vocation."*

A key suggestion for improving the future of teacher training was ensuring strong mentoring and support systems for new teachers. Several principals shared their own practices in providing mentorship to newly qualified teachers, ensuring that they have the guidance they need during their induction and early professional development phases.

> *"I have some criticisms of the way teacher training or teacher education is done here I think there's, there are better ways of doing it, and I certainly didn't get very much out of it. A lot of it is sink or swim. So we have to create lifeguards here. So there's a couple of ways to do that. First of all, we have a senior leader in charge of staff development and particularly looking after teachers in their induction and early professional development phase, and they will take them through that and do a lot of mentoring work with them and ensure that other people around them, like Heads of Department, heads of year, are also mentoring them to ensure that they succeed, because we don't want them to drop out."*

> *"Your support staff are a phenomenal resource."*

The principals also highlighted the importance of real-life experiences and creative thinking in shaping the future of education. They emphasised that school leaders and teachers should not only think inside the classroom but should look for ways to expand students' learning experiences beyond the school walls.

> *"I'm a believer in getting education out of a classroom sometimes or out of a school to have a real-life experience. The idea of children getting into school from nursery, primary school, secondary school, or grammar for their A levels, going to university and many of them went straight back into your classroom again. It's very peculiar."*

> *"The future of education… will depend on leaders who can think outside the box, who can find solutions instead of waiting for them."*

4.6.3 Future Direction

When asked about their own personal future, the principals reflected on their roles, the challenges of long-term leadership, and the evolving nature of their careers. These reflections revealed a common theme: while they are deeply committed to their work, there is also recognition that leadership has a natural lifespan and that the future of school leadership depends on a mix of change, succession planning, and the willingness to embrace new ideas and perspectives.

Several principals shared thoughts on the finite nature of leadership, acknowledging that it's important to step aside at the right time to allow for new energy and ideas. Many agreed that there is a time limit to being a principal, and they are already considering the next generation of leaders.

"I would suggest maybe five to seven years is plenty of time for someone to be principal… Bring in someone who has even greater energy and who has some new ideas. New levels of enthusiasm."

"You will burn out eventually. You need people with new ideas… There's a time limit to being a principal."

"When I step down, there will be a lot of applicants for my job."

"I'm happy with where I am. I can't seem myself in the education authority or in the department. I like pupils, I like the interactions you get with pupils."

Succession planning was a key topic of discussion, with the principals emphasising the importance of preparing the next generation of leaders. There was a shared desire to create mechanisms within the system that could help bridge the gap when experienced leaders step down, ensuring continuity and ongoing support for schools.

"There absolutely needs to be a mechanism by which the system benefits from the experience of Principals, and whether that is that as you reach a particular stage, there's a, you know, a phased kind of process where you're in school part of the time, and you're, you're working to support other principals in similar situations."

"A lot of Principals, they stay too long, because for them to actually give it all up. Boom. It's just too difficult and for people to take it on… I'd often thought if there could have been, like, some sort of a staged or staggered, you know, where, if somebody's actually getting into retirement, you know, they go down to three days, but one of those days, they're prepared to go into a school and actually support a new principal as a mentor or something."

Some principals mentioned that while they aren't ready to step away from their leadership roles just yet, they are aware of the pressures that come with the job. They expressed an interest in sharing their experiences and mentoring younger principals to help ease their transition into leadership roles.

"I'm not ready to give up in what I love. I don't think I'll ever stop loving here. I'm not intending to go any other school, but I probably would like something that would share experiences with younger Principals… because there's nothing prepares you for sitting in that chair. And I also think that the workload… and the pressure that is on that chair, that's the difference between the VP post and a Principal."

"I'm already driven, without even knowing in in succession planning of my role, you know, driven in the sense that I'm looking at you know who's coming next and who would be the right fit, and what would that look like?"

There were also principals who expressed a sense of fulfilment with their current roles but acknowledged that a change might be necessary in the future. Some were not sure what their next step might be but recognised that leadership roles in education come with a natural progression toward new opportunities.

“I don’t know if I want to stay in education.”

“You look at industry, nobody stays in industry in those top jobs for 10 years, they move they move because you come in and you bring about the change. And you know, you bring your ideas, and you model it on, and you move it forward.”

“I’m retiring this year… But there’s so much more I want to do within the field of education.”

Chapter 5: Conclusions

This study set out to explore the characteristics of effective leadership in post-primary schools located in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland, and to explore the following key research objectives:

- To discern the key features of 13 high performing post-primary schools with over 50% of pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSME).
- To critically explore the motivation, values, support structures, and personal and professional characteristics of the school leaders in these schools.
- To draw lessons and offer insights for new and aspiring leaders working in similarly challenging contexts.

While the statistical analysis of the contextual / demographic features of the 13 schools (see analysis in Chapter 3) highlighted some areas of convergence, most notably in terms of the high levels of free school meal entitlement and better-than-expected GCSE attainment, the schools are in many other respects quite varied. They include, for instance, a range of school management types, although it is noteworthy that 9 of the 13 are Catholic maintained schools and only 1 is a Controlled school. There are also wide variations in terms of SEN levels, ethnic diversity, staffing ratios, and particularly suspension rates. Such analysis is a warning against over-simplification or generalisation in relation to describing what might constitute 'disadvantaged schools'. Furthermore, the diversity of school demographic confirms the importance of school leadership that is sensitive to its local context and responsive to pupil need.

Drawing on insights from the thematic analysis of the 13 interviews (see Chapter 4) and informed by the national and international research literature discussed in Chapter 1, the following conclusions are organised around five key dimensions of effective, principled leadership in disadvantaged schools: Clarity of Vision**,** Championing Children**,** Connection**,** Character, and Continuation. Each of these will now be outlined in turn.

5.1 Clarity of Vision

Forming, communicating, and refining a clear and compelling vision for the school.

The first key theme to emerge from the qualitative findings was the importance of forming, communicating and regularly refining a clear vision for the future development of the school. While there were differences across the sample in terms of the nature of the vision and whether that vision was fully formed at the outset, all principals acknowledged the importance of a strong, coherent and clear vision which had to be regularly communicated and reinforced to staff, pupils, parents and other stakeholders to ensure understanding and collective ownership. While there was evidence from many principals of consultation and discussion around the precise content and wording of the vision, there was consensus that one of the key roles of the effective school leader was to champion the particular vision of the school and to ensure that it infuses ("permeates") the whole school. As one principal explained:

> *"It's my role to articulate [the vision, and] it's the role of teachers to ensure that education in the classroom is of a sufficient quality, every single day, and to look after our pupils, every single day. But my role is to ensure, first and foremost, that the vision of the school permeates through everything we do, and that we continue to keep our focus on why we were establishing what we want to do."*

These findings align with the international research literature on successful leadership in disadvantaged contexts, particularly the work of the *International Successful School Principals' Project* (ISSPP), which identified consistent features of effective principals across systems (Duran & Cemaloğlu, 2024; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023). Key practices identified include the importance of setting the vision or direction of the school (Moral et al., 2020) and ensuring that this is conveyed with passion and commitment to the pupils (Santaella, 2020; Demie, 2021). This passion is clearly linked to the development of a clear vision for the school's future and the ability to communicate that vision to staff and stakeholders. For instance, in their study of leadership in disadvantaged schools in the province of Granada (Spain), Moral et al. (2020) stress the importance of a "unifying vision" and a "clear direction", citing one principal who comments that "It is necessary to have a path, the boat should not go adrift" (p.119).

The research highlights how such vision supports staff morale and provides coherence and direction to improvement efforts (Gillett et al., 2016; Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023). Regular staff meetings, informal conversations, and symbolic leadership practices all contribute to maintaining shared goals and a sense of purpose (González-Falcón et al., 2020; Santaella, 2020). Vision is therefore not simply a statement but an embedded practice, reinforced through daily interactions and leadership modelling, and helping to provide a clear compass for the future direction of the school.

5.2 Championing Children

Advocating for every child's success, both in terms of academic attainment and holistic wellbeing.

Directly linked to the importance of vision is the prioritisation of the success of the pupils by the principal. A common thread through all 13 interviews was a strong commitment to championing the children, both in terms of their academic attainment and also their holistic development and/or emotional health and wellbeing.

School leaders were clear that improving the quality of teaching and learning in order to raise attainment was their priority (*"Attainment is our bread and butter. You know, there's no point in having a school if you're not attaining well"*), and outlined how they had driven forward the use of data tracking to support individual pupil target setting and progress across the school. There were frequent references to detailed analysis of attendance and performance data at all levels of leadership in the schools, with evidence of key staff gathering and monitoring the data to inform future planning, intervention and support (e.g., *"We are a data rich school").* While every school follows the Northern Ireland Curriculum, there was consistent evidence across the 13 principals of their commitment to making the curriculum flexible, adaptable and relevant to the individual needs of the pupil population, especially those who have less support at home

(*"less resources…less support…less cultural capital and life experiences")* and who might be at risk of underachieving. As a result, principals spoke of the importance of raising aspiration ("*It's about saying to the pupils, this is possible. This is possible for you. Dream big."*), but also providing a curricular offer in school that is appropriate to learner needs as well as being attractive and relevant to their interests and career aspirations ("*having a curriculum model that is broad enough to suit children of all abilities, but also progressive enough to ensure that our children reach their destinations"*).

However, school leaders repeatedly spoke of how this resolute focus on curricular relevance and high pupil attainment has to be balanced with a concern for and commitment to the children's holistic development and pastoral wellbeing. As one principal stated, "*It's about relationships and data. You know each individual from when they're 11",* while another remarked that *"You have to be data driven, but you have to remember that behind all that data there's human beings, there's a child, there's a backstory of every single one of them".* While the focus on attainment and pupil wellbeing can sometimes appear contradictory, the principals in this study very clearly placed an emphasis on their convergence, stressing that their practice was essentially child-centred (*"It's a caring environment, where children are loved and cared for and given the best opportunities in life."*).

These findings thus confirm the conclusions of earlier international research studies in disadvantaged school contexts where the importance of tailoring the curricular offer to suit learners' needs and interests is highlighted, alongside the effective use of tracking and monitoring attainment data (Moral-Santaella & Raso-Sánchez, 2023; Demie, 2021; Gurr et al., 2018; Passy & Ovenden-Hope, 2020). The importance of pastoral care is however also stressed in the literature, with many studies confirming the importance of creating a supportive, nurturing and safe school environment as a necessary pre-condition to effective teaching and learning (Demie, 2021; Medina et al., 2014).

5.3 Connection

Building strong relationships with pupils, staff, families, and the wider community; demonstrating deep contextual literacy and understanding.

The third key theme to emerge from this study is the importance of Connection, with a heavy emphasis placed on the development of positive relationships at all levels within the school and also between the school and its surrounding community.

The most important of these relationships is the educator/child relationship where principals often spoke of their interest in, commitment to and knowledge of individual pupils, explaining that they treated each child as if they were their own children. Despite the many challenges and competing demands of school leadership, several principals described holding individual interviews with every single year 12 or year 14 pupil, and how being visible in the corridors at break and lunchtime was crucial to building and maintaining relationships with the pupils. One principal summarised their approach in the following way: *"I treat every child in this school like it's my own child, and I want the best for my children, like any parent would."*

Relationships with staff were also seen to be fundamental to the success of the school. Given the challenges of recruitment and retention, principals spoke of the importance of providing support, encouragement and opportunities for professional development (*"You need to bring people along with you. You need to respect them. You need to have dignity."*), while others spoke of how not everyone was suited to working in their schools, given the level of challenges faced. Selecting that *"very special type of person"* was seen to be crucial in terms of appointing and developing staff with the right skill set of emotional intelligence and relational capacity (*"If you can't build relationships, you can't work here. It's as simple as that."*)

The principals consistently emphasised the vital role of strong ties with the local community, highlighting how deeply understanding and empathising with the challenges their pupils face was of central importance. Many principals spoke of the benefits of employing staff who lived locally and/or were former pupils of the school. While these were most commonly support staff and classroom assistants, the principals also referred to a high number of teachers who lived locally and/or were former pupils. The benefits of this community connectedness are self-evident in terms of understanding and identifying with the pupils, but this level of connection also reflects a high level of personal commitment to the wider community (*"You're from the community, and you want the best for your community."; "Our staff are excellent. They get our kids. They don't look down."*). One principal, who was not from her school locality, spoke of how she invested considerable time following her appointment as principal in talking to local people, getting to know the community, visiting the local feeder primary schools and working hard to build strong community relationships. As another principal concluded, *"It takes a village, and we're part of that village. We can't do it on our own, and we need the parents as partners in it as well."* Perhaps the clearest message came from a further principal who recounted the following anecdote, *"I worked under a leader that always said, 'this is my school,' you know? And I thought, get over yourself, you're a blow in. You'll come and you'll go and like the rest of us. This school belongs to the community."*

This clear emphasis on the power of relationships in school leadership in disadvantaged contexts is also reflected in the international research literature, confirming the assertion by Pashiardis and Johansson (2021, p.697) that, "model leaders are people-centred, good at developing relationships, modelling appropriate behaviour and establishing relational trust". Establishing strong links with families and communities is also promoted in the research literature, with Michalak's espousal of the notion of "the school as being part of rather than apart from the community" (2009, p.394) and the use of the term "contextual literacy" by Gillett et al. (2016, p.600) to describe leadership that is in concert with the particular contextualised needs of the surrounding or catchment community.

5.4 Character

Embodying sincere and authentic personal and professional values such as care, compassion, integrity, humility and resilience - often shaped by faith or moral purpose.

The interviews with the 13 principals provided rich insights into the character, personal and professional qualities and values of each of the school leaders. When the principals were asked about the characteristics they felt were necessary to lead effectively, the varied responses

included creativity, openness, honesty, integrity, humility, authenticity, empathy, trust, understanding, forgiveness, resilience, an ability to problem solve and a willingness to collaborate. Rather than appearing to *"have all the answers",* one principal remarked that they just needed *"to listen, learn, and surround yourself with people who challenge you."*

Underpinning these individual qualities was a set of deeply held personal and professional values. While every principal spoke of their commitment to the needs of the individual children in their school and while one principal referred specifically to their "servant leadership" style, several also spoke of their strong personal faith *("I have an extremely strong faith… So I ask for the grace every day to deal with what I have to deal with."*). In many cases, this related to the Catholic ethos and its *"roots"* in the values of *"social justice, equality and equity"* as well as a *"community faith".*

The significance of the religious ethos and related management type of the school is both illuminating and highly complex given Northern Ireland's troubled history. When asked specifically about the influence of management type, some principals struggled to explain the disparity in attainment between the controlled and Catholic maintained sectors ("*I don't, I don't understand why the controlled sector is lagging behind"*), while others suggested that their faith and the surrounding faith-community were important factors in the prioritisation of education (*"I'm gonna put my hands up and say I'm a person of faith and a committed Catholic… Was the fight for education a huge part to play in it? I think so."*). There was however no consensus across the 13 principals that school management type or specific religious ethos was necessarily the determining factor in their school's success.

The qualities proposed and demonstrated by the principals in this study certainly resonate closely with the qualities that emerge from the international research literature, which refers to humility, adaptability, integrity, energy, resilience, dedication, sacrifice, approachability, flexibility and service. For instance, Arthur and Bradley (2023, p.762) refer to the importance of teachers in disadvantaged schools having "a really strong moral compass", while Moral et al. (2020, p.110) suggest that successful principals in such contexts often show "tenacious commitment, arrogant humility, visionary passion and focus on achievement within democratic values".

While the literature also discusses a range of leadership styles (e.g., transformational, servant, distributed and 'strong top-down leadership' – Muijs et al., 2010), the principals in this study continually emphasised the importance of *"bringing everybody together, working together",* and the ability to *"bring staff along with us as a senior team",* suggesting a collective, empowering leadership style, imbued with a strong sense of vision, rooted in a commitment to pupils achieving their academic and holistic potential, and shared across the entire school community.

5.5 Continuation

Passing on the mantle through recommendations in terms of enhancing ITE, CPD, middle management training, mentoring and nurturing the next generation of leaders, particularly in contexts of disadvantage.

When asked to offer their advice to those aspiring to lead in similar educational contexts, the 13 principals offered a wide range of advice, but common themes were the importance of forming strong relationships; leading collaboratively; maintaining the highest expectations of themselves, their staff and pupils; and being prepared to work hard in pursuit of a clear vision.

There was broad consensus that further development of Initial Teacher Education was essential to give future teachers a greater understanding of the complexities and challenges of working in disadvantaged communities but also of the importance of emotional intelligence and pastoral care, as well as subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. ("*We've got teachers coming in and they haven't a scooby doo… You've got to be pastoral"*). Once appointed too, the school leaders were clear that there was a need for greater support and mentoring ("*we have to create lifeguards here"*) and there were examples cited of staff dedicated to mentoring newly qualified teachers to ensure that they had the support required to enable them to navigate the initial challenges of starting to teach in socially disadvantaged communities, ensuring a higher retention rate and greater willingness to progress to future positions of school leadership.

Many principals also reflected on the future of their leadership roles, acknowledging both the personal demands of school leadership and the need for renewal within the system. A shared theme was the recognition that leadership has a natural lifespan and that stepping aside at the right time allows new ideas and energy to emerge. As one principal noted, *"You will burn out eventually. You need people with new ideas… There's a time limit to being a principal."* Another remarked, *"Five to seven years is plenty of time for someone to be principal… Bring in someone who has even greater energy."* Succession planning emerged as a key concern. Principals spoke of the need to mentor future leaders and to build formal structures to support leadership transitions. Several proposed phased retirement or mentoring models to retain experienced leaders' wisdom while enabling change: *"There absolutely needs to be a mechanism by which the system benefits from the experience of Principals."* While some were uncertain about their own next steps, others expressed contentment with their current roles, driven by a passion for pupils and learning. Yet all recognised the need for future-facing leadership and for investing in those who will take the mantle forward.

While the international research literature rarely focuses on succession planning for leadership in disadvantaged school contexts, the direction of travel in educational policy in Northern Ireland very definitely supports the 13 principals' calls for greater sharing of effective leadership practice in disadvantaged communities (e.g. *A Fair Start* – Purdy et al., 2021; *TransformEd NI* – DE, 2025a), a new accredited leadership qualification for Northern Ireland to replace the PQH qualification (e.g. *A Fair Start* – Purdy et al., 2021; *TransformEd NI* – DE, 2025a), short-term secondments and work-shadowing opportunities (*Investing in a Better Future* - Independent Review of Education, 2023), and in-service support and continuing professional development for newly appointed and experienced principals (e.g. *A Fair Start* – Purdy et al., 2021; *TransformEd NI* – DE, 2025a).

5.6 Conclusion

The evidence from the current study lends further weight to recent calls for greater investment in leadership training, mentoring, and succession planning within our most disadvantaged

educational contexts. At the same time, it serves as a timely reminder not to assume that all disadvantaged schools are identical. The 13 schools in this study, while all serving communities with high levels of social and economic need, differ significantly in their contexts, challenges and approaches. The findings therefore offer a uniquely contemporary insight into the diverse realities faced by highly effective school leaders, each one fostering pupil aspiration, providing high-quality, relevant and meaningful learning experiences, using robust attainment data to monitor and plan for achievement, and championing each individual young person to fulfil their potential and thrive, regardless of background.

Appendix 1

13 Schools	Type	Total Enrolment	FSME_%	Total SEN	Newcomer _%	% Achieved 5+ GCSE (or equivalent) A* to C (inc. English and Maths)	Absence _%	Pupil Teacher Ratio	Number of New Suspensions	Number of Expulsions	Attendance _%	New Suspensions _ %	Expulsions _%	Total SEN_%	SENStage 1 - 4_%	SENStage 5_%
A	Controlled	1003	59.5	483	0.0	54.1	8.3	13.3	231	0	91.7	23.0	0.0	48.2	37.1	11.1
B	Other Maintained	678	62.4	356	0.0	57.5	8	13.2	7	0	92.0	1.0	0.0	52.5	47.8	4.7
C	Grant Maintained Integrated	1001	60.8	304	1.9	47.3	8.4	14.9	85	0	91.6	8.5	0.0	30.4	23.5	6.9
D	Grant Maintained Integrated	508	66.3	136	16.9	50.0	10.4	13.8	98	1	89.6	19.3	0.2	26.8	20.7	6.1
E	Roman Catholic Maintained	556	68	263	4.5	43.3	8.5	16.6	37	0	91.5	6.7	0.0	47.3	42.8	4.5
F	Roman Catholic Maintained	729	66.1	113	0.0	62.3	8	14.7	175	2	92.0	24.0	0.3	15.5	3.7	11.8
G	Roman Catholic Maintained	806	61.4	189	0.0	71.6	9.3	16.5	54	1	90.7	6.7	0.1	23.4	20.5	3.0
H	Roman Catholic Maintained	430	74.7	363	0.0	27.0	10.1	14.1	5	0	89.9	1.2	0.0	84.4	73.0	11.4
I	Roman Catholic Maintained	1047	54.9	242	0.0	61.7	8	15.1	61	0	92.0	5.8	0.0	23.1	20.2	3.0
J	Roman Catholic Maintained	677	66.2	345	0.0	36.7	11	15	260	0	89.0	38.4	0.0	51.0	41.5	9.5
K	Roman Catholic Maintained	676	53.4	207	9.0	51.1	8.5	13.8	0	0	91.5	0.0	0.0	30.6	19.4	11.2
L	Roman Catholic Maintained	1477	60.6	621	1.0	56.3	8	14.8	51	0	92.0	3.5	0.0	42.0	39.1	2.9
M	Roman Catholic Maintained	877	55.4	238	1.6	61.0	8.7	16	19	0	91.3	2.2	0.0	27.1	22.5	4.7
Mean_x		**805.0**	**62.3**	**296.9**	**2.7**	**52.3**	**8.9**	**14.8**	**83.3**	**0.3**	**91.1**	**10.8**	**0.0**	**38.6**	**31.7**	**7.0**

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