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Not ‘just consumers of content’: early insights into the policy enactment of the Digital Learning Framework

Audrey Cooney ^a, Derbhile de Paor ^b, Ciarán Ó Gallchóir ^c
and Patricia Mannix McNamara ^b

^aHoly Spirit Senior Primary School, Dublin, Republic of Ireland; ^bSchool of Education, University of Limerick, Limerick, Republic of Ireland; ^cDepartment of Education, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Republic of Ireland

ABSTRACT

In Ireland, as with many international jurisdictions, digital technology is firmly positioned at the core of educational discourses. However, despite a rise in ‘techno-positivity’ among professionals in schools, these positive attitudes do not seem to permeate through to practice nor in effective learning outcomes. As a result, given the introduction of the Digital Learning Framework in the Irish schooling system, this study focuses on the initial experiences of those who lead the initiative within their respective schools and the contextual nuances they must navigate in the design of the enactment. This qualitative study comprised in-depth interviews with the Digital Learning Leaders of 10 different schools. Data evidenced the initial organisational considerations a leader must reckon with during the planning phase, and early indications of pedagogical impact, leading to a conclusion regarding contextual literacy. The research also highlights the subtle policy shift of embedding digital technologies within school evaluation mechanisms, heightening a sense of accountability associated with successful enactment.

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Introduction

In recent decades, education in the Republic of Ireland has mirrored international trends of intense bouts of successive ICT policy creations (Department of Education and Science, 1997, 2001, 2008; Department of Education and Skills, 2015), advocating for digital technologies as cornerstones of curricular developments and with consequent impact for student learning outcomes (McGarr & McDonagh, 2021). The Department of Education and Skills’ (DES) (2015) *Digital Learning Strategy for Schools 2015–2020* vision advocates a need for pupils/students to become autonomous and responsible learners, indicating a deliberate shift from reported teacher-centric pedagogical integrations of digital technologies towards a facilitatory type role (McGarr & Ó Gallchóir, 2020a). In order to realise the DES’s digital strategy, €210 million was dedicated to primary and secondary schools to address localised infrastructural and pedagogical developments under the Digital Learning Framework (DLF) (Scully et al., 2021). However, also reflecting international research trends (Aslan & Zhu, 2016; Tondeur et al., 2016), it seems that this pedagogical shift has been largely superficial in nature, because, despite efforts to embed digital technologies in schools, recent reports based on the DLF suggest that practices have remained quite structured and teacher centric (Cosgrove et al., 2019; DES, 2020).

CONTACT Ciarán Ó Gallchóir  ciaran.ogallchoir@ul.ie  School of Education, University of Limerick, Limerick, Republic of Ireland

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While political and societal discourses of techno-positivity suggest both the attractiveness of digital technology and the inevitability of educational reform at the hands of technology (Hammond, 2014; Ryan et al., 2020), schools and in particular teachers and school leaders remain central to the enactment process of any form of an educational policy. Policies are not enacted in a vacuum but instead occur within complex organisational systems underpinned by relational factors which guide the process of the enactment (Braun et al., 2011). Central to the successful enactment of policies is the role of leadership (Leithwood, 2018). For example, the pedagogical and technological beliefs held by school leaders have been reported as crucial indicators for whether a digital technology initiative would be supported and embraced by a school (Polizzi, 2011; Scully et al., 2021). However, interestingly, any techno-positivity communicated by individuals does not necessarily indicate a critically informed pedagogical understanding or enactment of digital technologies (McGarr & Ó Gallchóir, 2020b). The terrain is more nuanced than this.

In efforts to embed digital technologies within broader discourses of school improvement in Ireland, it seems that the enactment process of the DLF has become embedded in the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) processes. This creates ownership and accountability for individual schools in terms of the success of their planning and enactment of their own digital learning visions. Therefore, the focus of this study was to explore digital leaders' experiences of enacting the DLF.

Idyllic policy to classroom enactment

The journey from policy to practice is a complex negotiation of varying contextual factors (Braun et al., 2011), and therefore, the gulf between the idyllic visions outlined in a policy document and the localised reality of how the policy is enacted can be quite significant. The understanding of policy as a process of enactment (Ball, 1994; McDonagh & McGarr, 2015) recognises the organic shaping functions that organisational cultures, leadership, community contexts, infrastructure and historicity play in how policies 'get done' (Barry et al., 2022; Braun et al., 2011). As a result, it is naïve to presume a universal standard of policy enactment, as the particular context and culture of the school will have a significant bearing on enactment – successful or otherwise. The agents within organisations/schools, embodying their own beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and skills, are responsible for leading the enactment that aligns with the organisation's vision (Leithwood, 2018) and work towards increasing effectiveness of learner outcomes.

The process of leading policy enactment involves two reciprocal aspects of meaning making: interpretation and translation (Ball et al., 2011; Braun et al., 2011). Interpretation is an initial policy diagnostic, as an individual may query the relevance, suitability and consequences of the suggestive text. A school leader may be faced with the task of creating meaning for the following organisational questions: 'what does this text mean to us? What do we have to do? Do we have to do anything?' (Ball et al., 2011, p. 619). Whereas translation involves the realisation of the political and therefore, contextually relevant value-laden interpretations (Ó Gallchóir & McGarr, 2023) of the text. A school's translation of policy text can manifest itself in visual artefacts (for instance, handbooks, posters and school websites), in meetings, endorsement of events, CPD or pedagogical practices (Maguire et al., 2011). Both aspects of enactment (interpretation and translation) indicate what we are suggesting is a seldom discussed competence for school leadership: contextual literacy. Those involved in enacting policies are required to be literate in the contextual strengths and challenges of the school (Perryman et al., 2017), as they seek to negotiate these contextual factors through enactment that improves the school and, therefore, improves student learning. The sustainability of enactments requires whole-school commitment and embodiment (Viennet & Pont, 2017). Therefore, wide stakeholder consultation is advised (Perryman et al., 2017). As a result, sustainability requires an evaluative disposition of (re)interpretation-(re)translation, as the initial enactment is replaced by the provision of continuous supports, resources and ongoing coherent relationship building among stakeholders (Niederhauser et al., 2018).

Central to this process is the school leader who is responsible for enacting digital learning change (Leithwood, 2018; McDonagh & McGarr, 2015; Tondeur et al., 2010). There is a strong body of research exploring how leaders' beliefs regarding digital learning and pedagogical integration can influence the successful enactment in schools (Polizzi, 2011; Power et al., 2022; Prestridge, 2017; Scully et al., 2021). Typically, leadership of digital learning in schools in Ireland has been led by a teacher within the school who has shown an 'interest' in technological matters and has been given a particular title (such as champion, coordinator, leader), although financial and time-resourced recognition of such a significant role has reportedly been lacking (McDonagh & McGarr, 2015). It is understandable that the work of enactment would be led by a teacher as it suggests a significant shift from top-down approaches, and instead, as Hopfenbeck et al. (2015) found, has a unifying effect as teachers may feel empowered as change agents. Perhaps this may be an indication that teachers most likely possess a stronger contextual literacy which can help drive the enactment in the school and classroom. While the digital learning school leader could presumably hold techno-positive sentiments, they are responsible for the whole-school enactment of the initiative and therefore must lead a representation of all within the school, despite potentially contrasting views on digital learning. Recent policy initiatives in Ireland (DLF and SSE) appear to have recognised this need for a whole-school integrated reflective process, and as a result, recognised that the enactment is not solely based on the digital learning interpretation and translation (contextual literacy) of one sole leader/teacher.

Digital learning framework and school self-evaluation

The education sector in Ireland has been subject to intense waves of policy reforms in the past 20 years as growing recognition of the connection between quality of education and national initiatives/priorities are linked to school improvement and effectiveness. McGarr and McDonagh (2021) provided a comprehensive overview of the tidal shifts in terms of digital learning, culminating in the national *Digital Learning Strategy for Schools 2015–2020* along with the supporting framework for schools: the Digital Learning Framework (DLF). In a very much techno-deterministic fashion, the aim of the DLF (DES, 2017, p. 3) is to 'embed digital technologies into the everyday life of the school'. In doing so, the framework acknowledges that this is a whole school endeavour, and that planning 'needs to be cognisant of the needs, abilities and confidence levels of all teachers in a school' (p. 5). The strategy and its guiding framework do not seem to offer professionals the space to query technological shifts; instead, they are tools to allow professionals to 'take ownership of the use of digital technologies' (p. 2) and the improvement of the quality of education.

Discourses of school improvement in Ireland reach further than digital learning alone, as several systemic attempts have been made to embed school self-evaluation (SSE) practices. SSE is viewed as a process through which schools can collectively engage in whole-school examination and systematically reflect on the needs, strengths and areas of improvement of the school (Faddar et al., 2017; MacBeath, 1999; McNamara et al., 2011). As McNamara et al. (2011) concluded, it is essential that teachers feel empowered to drive evaluation and improvement planning, as a sense of ownership can be an intrinsic factor towards success. Therefore, similar to teachers leading on key policy initiatives (Hopfenbeck et al., 2015), it is understandable that teachers and schools should feel in control of their improvement plans as SSE 'is primarily about schools taking ownership of their own development and improvement' (DES, 2017, p. 6).

Both the DLF and the SSE draw from the exact same cyclical model of collaborative reflective enquiry which allows the school and its professionals to enact policies in a manner which reflects the nuances of their local contexts. Figure 1 (DES, 2016, p. 11; 2017, p. 8) outlines the six steps within the planning cycle. What is significant is that the cycle comprises two distinct stages. Firstly, the investigation stage involves identifying the focus of the policy, gathering relevant in-school evidence and making an analysis based on the focus and the evidence gathered. The second stage is creation, in which DLF Teams put into practice their initial investigation in the form of a shared improvement



Figure 1. Six-step reflective cycle.

plan, executing the plan and then evaluating the success of the plan. Interestingly, the two stages within the cycle reflect the enactment process of interpretation and translation. Scully et al. (2021, p. 162) noted that:

despite the enhanced awareness of and interest in technology-based teaching and learning in the Irish education system brought about by the DLF, there is no formal requirement for schools to report the main approaches they take with respect to the use of technology.

However, through the shared reflective cycle underpinning both, connecting the DLF with the SSE has subtly provided a framework of accountability in which schools must now evidence for external assessors (The Inspectorate) and hold themselves accountable to the content and realisation of such improvement plans focused on digital technologies from both an organisational and learning outcomes perspective.

It was in this specific context that the aim of this study was to explore digital leaders' experiences of enacting the DLF. We were guided by the following research questions: what are the organisational factors noted by the leaders? and how do leaders perceive impacts on learning?

Methods

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study in order to gain a deeper understanding of how DLF Leaders approached the DLF in their own local contexts. Ethical approval was granted by the University Ethics Research Committee of the relevant host institution.

Participants

Of the 10 DLF Leaders working in primary schools who were interviewed for this study, seven were male and three were female. The DLF Leaders interviewed for this inquiry had spent between 5 and 39 years teaching. The DLF Leader role is considered a leadership position within the school; however, this does not necessarily ensure a formal position or remuneration for the role. In fact, the DLF

Table 1. Overview of digital technology leaders interviewed.

Participants (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Number of years teaching	Number of years in current post	Length of time enacting the DLF
Norman	Male	36	15	One year
Ivan	Male	11	2	12–18 months
Noel	Male	12	Volunteer	12–18 months
Will	Male	12	6	12–18 months
Alice	Female	9	Volunteer	One year
Emily	Female	39	25	Less than one year
Claire	Female	13	Volunteer	One year
Peter	Male	11	1.5	Less than one year
Seamus	Male	5	Volunteer	One year
Nathan	Male	11	Acting post-holder	12–18 months

guidelines suggest that digital technological transformations of schools should be approached from a collective perspective, which removes the onus from an individual but also possibly creates a gap in terms of central leadership. Therefore, there was a range of leadership experience among the participants, from teacher leaders towards senior leaders. For clarity, we are using the term DLF Leader to describe those responsible within each respective school for leading the DLF teams during the enactment. A number of participants held formal positions of responsibility within their schools, and the DLF Leader role was an addition to their role. Four of the participants were regarded as teacher leaders, meaning that they did not occupy a formal position of responsibility, and therefore, the DLF Leader role was occupied in a voluntary capacity. Our decision to focus on the primary sector alone is two-fold. Firstly, our network as both professionals and researchers steered us towards primary schools and made recruitment of participants logistically smoother. Secondly, the primary sector is of particular interest in terms of policy enactment as there is no designated ‘release time’ for teacher leaders from their face-to-face teaching responsibilities to facilitate learning and/or leading within the school. As a result, much of the planning, training and collaboration envisaged within the DLF happens on an ad hoc basis, as the DLF Leader leads the whole school learning/planning on an almost militia basis, while attempting to balance their full workload. We felt this contextual nuance provided an additional layer of interest and rationale to focus exclusively on DLF Leader voices within the primary sector alone. [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the participants. To protect the anonymity of the participants, they are referred to throughout the study using randomly assigned pseudonyms.

Data collection

We initially began recruitment via purposive sampling techniques (Cohen et al., 2018; Greene, 2006; Silverman, 1993), wherein participants were invited via email to participate in the study based on knowledge of their engagement with the DLF. We purposively identified schools within our networks based on our own professional and social capital as both professionals and researchers. Following the use of purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2018), we then utilised social media to engage with potential participants outside of our own professional networks. Ten schools positively responded to the invitation.

Given that participants came from various geographical regions nationally, the interviews were conducted using Zoom. We decided on semi-structured interviews in order to prioritise and prompt the participants’ voice in constructing knowledge around the enactment experience of the DLF (Cohen et al., 2018). The interviews lasted on average 40 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the lead author and prepared for data analysis.

Data analysis

Given the exploratory nature of our study, our analysis of the participants’ responses was framed by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six stages of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible means of analysing data yet offers a clear path to support the interpretive nature of the data in order to

Table 2. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis.

Stages	Action(s)
1. Familiarising yourself with the data	To become familiar with the structure and content of the interviews, we as a group repeatedly read all of the transcripts of the participants' interviews. The 'Lead Author' (LA) listened back to the original recordings to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions.
2. Generating initial Codes	Based on the reading of the transcripts, we collectively agreed initial codes to guide purposeful reading. LA then led the coding of the transcripts. This was an iterative process as new codes were identified throughout the reading of the interviews, therefore, requiring revision of previous interviews considering newly identified codes.
3. Searching for Themes	LA then began to sketch connections between codes to upwardly generate themes. For example, the theme of 'Organisational Enactment of the Digital Learning Framework' consisted of codes such as 'collaborative inquiry', 'time saturation', 'how a team is formed'.
4. Reviewing Themes	The themes and subthemes were then collectively reviewed to confirm the accuracy and suitability of the emerging narrative. For example, 'Organisational Enactment of the Digital Learning Framework' was explained as 'the noted challenges and successes experienced by the DLF Leaders in their attempts to enact the DLF'.
5. Defining Themes	LA then re-read the transcripts in light of the agreed identified themes and subthemes to confirm accuracy of representation. Once completed, we further refined the sub-themes, assigned clear titles and finalised definitions.
6. Producing Analysis	Writing the report, making the explanation of the themes and sub-themes coherent.

explore the experiences of the participants. Table 2 outlines the six stages of the analysis and the key actions taken by us in the analysis.

Findings

The findings offer an insight into the enactment process of the DLF from the perspective of the DLF Leaders of 10 different primary schools. Two themes were identified from the participants' responses. Firstly, the 'Organisational Enactment of the *Digital Learning Framework*' explores the challenges and successes of leading the enactment in each of the 10 respective schools. The second theme of 'Consumers v Creators of Content' referred to the initial pedagogical impacts noticed by the DLF Leaders within their own respective learning organisations. In this section, we will discuss each theme as it pertains to relevant trends in the literature.

Organisational enactment of the *Digital Learning Framework*

Two subthemes were identified under this theme: a) the initial considerations required by organisations in the interpretation phase, and b) the cultural shifts in terms of professional learning and collaboration as a result of the DLF enactment.

Initial considerations

Time saturation. Given that the DLF Leaders are not officially allocated 'release time' from their face-to-face teaching, time was an expected challenge for the participants (Sebba et al., 2007), with Seamus noting time 'as the biggest hindrance'. All the participants appeared to consider time in terms of either the pressing need to deliver and enact on the DLF, or as a balancing act requiring consideration of the individual needs of colleagues. Claire explained that if time had been resourced to an individual of the DLF Team, it would enable them to support in-class practices instead of struggling for space during whole-school staff meetings.

Time is always an issue and if you had more time or you had a teacher that could go into classrooms and just see how people are getting on and check in on people ... You know, it's all about they say show them during staff meetings, but your staff meetings are caught up with so many other things you know but yeah, I suppose time is probably the big one. (Claire)

This need to personalise supports in order for the initiative to be sustainable was echoed by William, among others. He explained that the digital competences of the staff were varied, but there seemed to be no time to work one-to-one with individuals.

To get more time and I know it's only one area in school and you've loads of different subjects and areas you need training with but to have time for training the staff at their own levels, because they're all at different levels, and they all want to help with different things so it's just about getting time and the training, the expertise to do that. That's the main thing. (William)

Building a team. Based on the participants' responses, several considerations emerged for how to construct a leading team and the subtleties required for its sustainability. Firstly, some of the participants suggested a legacy convenience assembly, where existing teams fell into the new team, and that the DLF merely provided 'the individuals in place a title'.

Before there was a Digital Learning Team, even before there was talk of a Digital Learning Team, we would have worked together all the time to coordinate ICT and to coordinate ICT in the school and then when the team was formed, it was myself, himself and the principal. It kind of fell naturally that way. (Nathan)

Secondly, participation on the DLF teams for some appeared to be based on a perceived judgement of their digital literacy. Interestingly, it was largely the DLF leaders themselves who seemed to find themselves stumbling into either being a part of the team or leading the initiative. For example, Alice was known in the school for supporting her colleagues' efforts to integrate technology into their classes and as a result, seemed a suitable candidate to approach.

When I joined the school I nearly fell into the D.L. team because I was just helping other teachers with aspects of technology they found difficult and it just became known that I had an interest in I.C.T. So I was approached by the principal and asked if I would get involved in helping out and then we asked a couple of other members of staff who were enjoying use I.T. and that's just how it came about. (Alice)

An interesting concept of equal representation on the DLF team emerged from Claire's and Peter's interviews. Both used similar discursive positionings to describe an essential member of the DLF team. They felt for the enactment of an initiative focused on embedding technology into the practices of the school, that it was important to both recruit and have a member of the staff who may have been 'a little reluctant' (Claire) to endorse the principles of the initiative.

I suppose we picked people that had a little bit of interest in Digital Technologies but at the same time you kind of want to have people who are a little bit reluctant to use them you know as well so that you're representing I suppose the whole staff. (Claire)

Like I would always have been of the opinion that on any team you need somebody who is a little bit reluctant, as well as someone who is really driving it. And then the reluctant person can bring all the rest of the reluctant people on the staff so that they can really get buy in at the start. (Peter)

Purchasing (blind investment). While managing both time and the composition of teams was a recurring challenge for the schools, the near helplessness caused from lack of clear guidance in the purchasing phase of the DLF plan was a significant challenge. All of the interviewees suggested that they were provided with the funds sought for by the DES, but that their role in supporting ended with the transfer of those funds. Seamus suggested that 'I think they're very hands-off in terms of "we're giving you ten or eleven thousand but don't bother us anymore after that!"". As a result, he felt that 'we were just given the money and basically told to spend it how we wanted'.

There was a fear amongst the participants that their purchasing decisions would result in a bad investment for their schools. Both Claire and Peter captured this sense of caution and desperation. Claire bluntly wished for clear guidance, whereas Peter cautioned that with constant developments in educational technology, schools can sometimes be hesitant to fully commit to a wholesale purchase.

Sometimes too you would wish that someone would just tell you where to go to buy devices and what apps to get! (Claire)

The difficulty with technology is that there are always new and other ideas coming on. I think you know if you're going to invest in technology, you're going to have to do it properly. And so many schools have invested in probably not very wisely in trying to be prudent and frugal with the money ... (Peter)

Emily felt that in order for her school to transition to a digital learning organisation, much of the funds were initially siphoned to infrastructural upgrades under the label of 'maintenance' within the school because if 'the internet won't work, the computer won't work'. However, she was adamant that the lack of guidance around purchasing potentially disadvantages schools and, as a result, suggested that an understandable accompaniment to the DLF was an objective representative to assist with the DLF teams' needs assessments and purchasing.

Better help in deciding. We are receiving funding. So you are given funding and that's okay but what do you use the funding to do with? What do you do with it that's most effective for what you are getting?

And you end up in the dark sometimes. So, I think a lot of help around best use of the funding that you have. If there was someone there that would come on board who is not trying to sell their own product but who is impartial and is saying, 'We look at your school, we see what you have. This is what we think you should use'. I think this would be hugely beneficial. (Emily)

Culture of inquiry

The second subtheme referred to cultural impacts noted by the participants in terms of the professional collaboration and learning of colleagues within the schools. This subtheme is organised in terms of collaborative inquiry and reflective requires.

Collaborative inquiry. Participants noted a significant collaborative cultural shift associated with the DLF. This seemed to articulate itself in several ways. Firstly, as a result of lacking formal guidance on purchasing and attainment, participants noted that connecting with other schools was of meaningful benefit. Both Peter and Alice strongly reflected this trend in their responses. Peter believed that a 'Digital Cluster' of different schools would benefit and synthesise the DLF work in schools. Alice recommended that for any school starting the DLF process, that they should connect with another school to explore their experiences.

It would definitely be to ask other schools. I went to a seminar but I also would have had a lot of help from the colleagues I would have trained with. I got in touch with them and asked them how they are going about things in their schools and they can tell me, 'This worked well, try this. This didn't work well for reasons X, Y and Z'. So you know, straight away you can cross off some things that you don't need to focus on for the immediate future. (Alice)

Secondly, the participants noticed the emergence of informal collaborations within their schools centred around personal stories of experimenting and embedding technology. Norman and Claire both noted teacher willingness to keep 'your door open' to invite colleagues to see various technologies in practice. Claire, particularly, highlighted the limitations of demonstrations in staff meetings which were removed from the pedagogical context, and that modelling this practice in the classroom was the most effective form of collaboration.

You can be telling them and telling them but if they see the classroom management of it – if we bring down the Lego to a staff meeting, they can't really visualise how they would manage all of this in a classroom. So if there's anything new we're doing you know I'd send out – put it on Aladdin or whatever, that I'm going to be doing this at such a time if anyone wants to come up and see it. And after seeing it then, I felt they were more confident to take the resource and use it themselves. Yeah so it seemed to work well. (Claire)

Finally, these collegial 'in-house' connections also impacted on how the participants viewed the evolving role of CPD for the schools' continuing DLF work. Ivan recommended that future leaders not overlook the levels of willingness and 'expertise there can be in staff' because 'teachers are much

happier to learn from other teachers than have someone come in'. This sense of 'in-house training' being preferred was significant in the participants' responses. Norman highlighted how his school embedded practices of inviting those returning from CPD events to conduct workshops with colleagues based on how it applies to their DLF plan 'rather than doing a plan that has no relevance to what's going on in their own building'. Will's response resonated with this trend, suggesting that the benefit of attending various CPD events was that they could translate that learning to their own context-specific needs.

Myself and others, the others in the team too, were more than willing to have little workshops – quick little workshops after school to help teachers with specific areas. Whether they wanted help setting up Google Classroom, or using Google Docs or Google Slides – whatever it was. So we tried to – that's where we're at at the moment with that. But we do need more time to get proper training in from outside and use whatever expertise we have ourselves – areas that we are good at and have time to relay that to other members of staff. (Will)

Reflective inquirers. Reflective practice was also a significant subtheme pertaining to the cultures of inquiry portrayed by the participants. Nathan described the DLF plan as 'constantly evolving and changing' and therefore, it seems that there is a reflective capacity required which 'naturally lends itself to looking at teachers' practice'. Both Norman and Seamus captured this sentiment in their responses. Norman explained that the DLF plan allows teachers to appraise their own engagement with the plan and to collectively share their identified struggles. This then enabled the DLF teams to collaboratively problem-solve with the individuals.

[We] meet as a group so within those meetings they reflect on practices that are taking place or referring to what plans are. So if there are problems or they need an extra bit of help or that they need time about a certain area or they're not getting to the end line because something is restricting that, well then that feeds back then and you can maybe make changes to the plan or just help them kind of develop other ways of doing what's not coming together for them. (Norman)

Seamus focused on how the DLF provides a whole-school opportunity to holistically reflect on the capacity to advance the vision contained in the plan.

It was really to try to pool as much shared information as we could but also to look at the gaps that we had. Not necessarily saying what do we have. What is it that we don't know? What are we missing? Where maybe are we falling short? And it was from there then that we moved on to, What do we have? How are we going to use these things? We tried to start really as small as we could, even down to the basics of when we had iPads. Where are they going to go in the school? How are we going to keep them? We did things like – we did a survey and an audit. So a survey of how people felt about digital learning and an audit of what things that we had. (Seamus)

Interestingly, the participants indicated that their reflective decision making in the construction of the DLF plan was guided by the DES's (2016) six-stage reflective cycle in the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) documentation. Both the DLF and SSE guiding documentation contains the same reflective cycle. As a result, it seems that the schools modelled similar reflective practices for both initiatives. Alice explained that 'we just followed the six-step process that's outlined in the Digital Learning Framework'. Alice particularly noted the benefits of having a connection between various initiatives in schools, such as the DLF and SSEs. Her response suggests that previous overlapping experiences can make the process appear less daunting for professionals.

I suppose the Digital Learning Framework is similar to the [School Self-Evaluation] document – that whole six step process. So I suppose in that sense, it's beneficial because at least when we're engaging in S.S.E. and we switch to the Digital Learning Framework, that we're using a process we're familiar with – that we identify the focus, gather evidence, though at least in that sense, it's not an extra thing to get yourself upskilled on – you already have a bit of a knowledge of it. (Alice)

Given the SSE guided reflective cycle, Peter felt that it was also effective for DLF leaders to reflect on successes of the enactment of the plan to continue through the cycle to the next phase of planning while remaining connected to evidence impacting on learning.

I mean the S.S.E. process and the cycle is good, it's a good cycle for the implementation for change but um it would be good to check back and reflect and reflect critically like on has there been an improvement in learning and what is the improvement and how is it evidenced.

There was considerable uniformity of the respective DLF Leader's experiences of initial considerations for planning the enactment of the DLF. Time was understandably going to be a factor within schools, especially considering the ongoing intensification of policies targeting improvement and effectiveness discourses in education (McNamara et al., 2011). This can result in saturation in terms of appetites for new and, in some cases, resource-competing policies (McLaughlin, 1987; Sebba et al., 2007). However, attempts to combine the DLF work with the overarching SSE work were noticeable. The reflective cycle (DES, 2016, p. 11) seems to have provided a common process and lexicon to begin and empower the enactment work in a collaborative and distributed manner.

As Leithwood (2018) suggested, the question of 'who' is vital when considering leadership of policy enactment. The education sector in Ireland has recently embraced distributed practices in terms of school leadership (DES, 2016, 2019, 2020), in the sense that activities are shared within organisations to empower all staff members to contribute to the ongoing improvement and effectiveness of the school (Barry et al., 2022; Harris, 2008). While several researchers (DES, 2020; McDonagh & McGarr, 2015; Scully et al., 2021) have found that the leadership of digital technology initiatives typically falls to the tech-savvy or techno-positive members of staff, and we too found aspects of this, our study also evidenced an appreciation of a distributed team model for leading the DLF. The team leader was understandably one who demonstrated a particular competence for digital technology, but there was an understanding that the success of the initiative was dependent on having a whole-school representation within the team to ensure empowerment (Hopfenbeck et al., 2015). This distributive move towards recognising 'a web of leaders, followers and their situations' (Spillane, 2006, p. 3), which again is reflective of the Department of Education and Skills' (2017) prioritisation of approaching the enactment as a community, could perhaps explain the cultural shifts of collaboration and reflective practice noted as possible professional successes of this whole-school approach to the enactment of an initiative. However, we must return to Leithwood's (2018) key distinction of 'who'. It would appear that those who experienced early successes in the enactment of the DLF plan possessed an element of social capital that we are referring to as contextual literacy. It is unclear from the findings what the digital technology knowledge or competence levels of the participating DLF Leaders were, but what is evident in their responses is the rich knowledge and understanding of the professional contexts within which they work and sought to lead.

A particularly worrying trend noted by the participants was a lack of support provided to the schools after the successful awarding of funding. Participants conveyed considerable frustration and a sense of isolation as they were suddenly expected to complete tender and purchasing processes with no training in this matter. As part of the interpretation phase (Ball et al., 2011) is a diagnostic of the needs of the school/organisation. We fully agree with sentiments of democracy and empowerment (Ball et al., 2011; Hopfenbeck et al., 2015) in terms of involving and prioritising teachers as key agents in the enactment process owing to their contextual literacy. A failure to provide support in terms of purchasing orders, tender processes and infrastructural suitability of technologies eliminates the impact of teachers' contextual literacy and possibly risks deterring future applicants from accepting the risk of leading. Interestingly, Ireland has been noted for its historically siloed approach in terms of collaborations between schools (Moynihan & O'Donovan, 2021). However, we found that the participants and their schools sought out collaborative opportunities with other schools out of necessity because the support from the Department of Education was lacking. This would seem as an unintended collaborative positive to emerge from the DLF work of these schools.

Consumers vs creators of content

The second theme identified in the DLF Leaders' interviews pertained to the noted initial pedagogical impact on the learning experiences within the schools. It must be highlighted that all schools were in the preliminary process of the DLF enactment. However, there still seemed to be early evidence of several significant influences on pupil learning. As Alice suggests, the DLF has 'had nothing but a positive influence. The children are much more engaged and motivated'.

Participants noted a shift in the expected learning outcomes for the pupils. Nathan suggests that the resultant expectations of their learners based on the DLF centre around 'coding, computational thinking and twenty-first century skills'. This emphasis on twenty-first-century skills was reflected by a number of participants in terms of problem solving, collaborative actions and technological savviness. Therefore, as Will suggests, there is a focus on the process of learning rather than the content.

We're getting more away from the whole books and copies – there still are books and copies obviously – but it's more exciting for the kids to go on, research themselves different topics and then make their own projects, type it out and share that then with the rest of the class. (Will)

Based on the participants' responses, this shift in expectations towards the process has had an impact on both student confidence and, as a result, engagement in the learning process. Peter suggests that the use of technology can allow for more inclusive means of engagement with lesson expectations.

I would think about it holistically as well because technology can be a great motivator and it can inspire creativity and it can give children who don't have a voice a voice as well you know for because it can be very inclusive. But once you make it inclusive you need to have the expertise to allow all those things as well. (Peter)

With an increase in motivation and engagement, several of the participants noted that the pupils were asking for additional activities which transcended the boundaries of a routine school day. For example, Will seemed delighted that his pupils were asking to be assigned project-based activities during the holidays.

Back in the classroom, we would make more use of Google Classroom and all the kids would be involved in the classroom. You would set assignments and tasks for them to complete based on the work you are doing in the different subject areas. And the kids absolutely loved it – they were asking for more assignments, more projects – even over the holidays! You get little alerts, now we have disabled emails for the kids, but they can still, if you allow it, they can still comment in the Google Classroom forum and they might request more projects over the holidays. So it was just keep feeding them all of this – but they loved it. All of this! (Will)

Perhaps the shift in learner outcomes and heightened motivation of learners can be explained with a rise in democratic learning approaches through digital technologies noted by the participants. As teachers utilised more project work based on learner feedback and content creation, Alice noted a change in epistemic dominance, as pupils were no longer 'just consumers of content, they are creators of content'. The use of digital technologies in education is certainly far from a new policy prioritisation; however, many have found that infrastructural upgrades do not necessarily guarantee a follow-through impact on teaching, learning and assessment (Aslan & Zhu, 2016; Liu et al., 2017; Tondeur et al., 2016). Neither have techno-positive beliefs, as Regan et al. (2019) found that while teachers displayed positivity in terms of their digital technology incorporation into the classroom, they largely utilised digital technologies as tools for assessment and documenting learning, therefore not underpinning learner outcomes with the use of digital technologies. The supporting guidelines for schools enacting the DLF in Ireland (DES, 2017, p. 12) promote a democratically inclusive approach to working towards learning outcomes as a lived process of learning: the role of the teacher then is to support and facilitate students to 'create and innovate so that they are engaged in managing their own learning goals and activities'. Each of the schools noted early indications of a learning process underpinned by digital technologies that offered the learners the opportunity to create rather than consume content. While early in the enactment process, this is

certainly an encouraging finding from our study as content creation reportedly allows learners to display creativity while also fostering a deeper engagement with the topic being explored (Zielezinski, 2017).

In terms of expectations for the role of the teacher, this also suggests that teachers are no longer required to be omnipotent in terms of both content and digital technologies but instead are pedagogically competent in facilitating learners with opportunities for problem solving, project-based learning and collaboration skills (DES, 2017) which transcend the rigid boundaries of a classroom setting. While this was a small-scale study, and it would be ill-advised to presume generalisable impacts of the DLF enactment across the primary sector, it is important to consider the timeliness of the DLF introduction to the education system in Ireland. The interviews with the DLF leaders took place in the summer of 2019, before the emergence of Covid-19. It would be of interest to re-engage with schools post-Covid-19 to explore the preparatory work of the DLF and how leaders and teachers negotiated their own pedagogical content knowledge in these new spaces.

Conclusion

Our study aimed to explore the Digital Learning Framework (DLF) Leaders' experiences of enacting the DLF. Naturally, there were limitations associated with our study. While this exploratory qualitative study featured a strong sample of 10 DLF Leaders in 10 different primary schools, the DLF is enacted throughout both primary ($N = c.3300$) and post-primary schools ($N = c.730$) in Ireland. As a result, it is not intended to generalise from this study. Additionally, we focused our recruitment strategy on the primary sector alone, and, as a result, this too may impact on the identified experiences and perspectives. It must also be highlighted that the individuals interviewed regarded themselves as the DLF Leaders in their respective schools, and therefore, their own perspectives may too have been influenced by their attachment to convey a successful enactment. Nonetheless, our study offers important initial insights into the enactment of the DLF in the primary schooling sector in Ireland in terms of the considerations and preparations required to begin the interpretive stage of enactment, ensuring that the DLF teams consisted of a democratic representation of staff members, the difficulties of conducting a needs assessment and the associated targeted purchases, and the emergence of collaborative and reflective cultures amongst professionals in the schools. Also noted were the early indications of pedagogical impacts within the classroom on learning outcomes, approaches to realise outcomes and the creation rather than consumption of content. We suggest the following conclusions from our study with associated recommendations.

Firstly, CPD is fundamental to the successful enactment of the DLF, but this must extend beyond in-school or school cluster-days focused on pedagogy alone. While a whole-school approach led from within is advised in the DLF, its enactment still appears dependent on the multi-faceted role of the DLF Leader who is responsible for guiding pedagogical transformations through digital technologies but first, must be competent in leading teams, completing needs analyses, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and literate in procurement and infra-structural considerations, in addition to their day-to-day timetabled responsibilities. This seems counterintuitive given international attempts to move away from archaic monocratic forms of sole leadership in schools, as both national and international educational policy documents herald distributed leadership as an innovative and collaborative approach to leading schools. Therefore, CPD and professional learning for teacher leaders should be focused on facilitating and equipping each school to conduct their own needs analysis regardless of the particularities of specific policies requiring engagement. Requiring each school to generate their own DLF plan for the school is a welcome recognition of the importance of contextual nuances. Butler et al. (2018, p. 475) explained that in order to 'bring about educational transformation' all aspects of the 'ecosystem' of the school must be considered. We suggest that it is the contextual literacy of school leaders and their knowledge of the challenges and strengths of the ecosystems within which they operate that allows for a sustained enactment of policies.

Brooks (2011, p. 12) cautioned against hasty attempts to disregard previous technologies and becoming trapped in a cycle of upgrades without critically questioning the need, labelling this trend as ‘evergreening’. Perhaps failures to provide DLF Leaders with necessary CPD to empower their work is a form of systemic evergreening, as individual schools have been left unsupported in their digital technology upgrades, with time being the only indicator of whether or not it was a good investment.

The six-step reflective cycle developed by the DES appeared to provide initial structure and lexicon to consider policy enactment. The alignment of the cycle with Ball et al.’s (2011) conceptualisation of enactment as a process of interpretation and translation is a welcome advancement for policy at the school level. In terms of digital technology, Scully et al. (2021) noted that there had been little requirement for schools to evidence digital technology transformations within the schools. However, underpinning policy enactments with the school self-evaluations through the six-step reflective cycle, there seems to have emerged veiled attempts to introduce an element of accountability into the Irish schooling system in terms of digital technologies. Given that the *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015–20* has expired, we are left to consider how schools who make poor investments will be treated or how those who fail to successfully implement their own DLF plans will fare in future bids for funding, especially considering that the DLF experience is now open to the external evaluation of the inspectorate.

Finally, we must also acknowledge that Covid-19 has relandscaped this terrain. The role of digital technologies in the Irish schooling system has – no different from globally – come under intense scrutiny with the recurring moves to remote learning. One might wonder if the timing of the DLF was unintentionally fortuitous. In our study, the DLF Leaders noticed the beginnings of pedagogical transformations in the classroom in terms of how both teachers and learners interacted with digital technologies. Further research is required to explore the preparatory potentials of the DLF for the unknowns associated with teaching during Covid-19, in terms of teachers’ initial perceived sense of competence and how pedagogical practices were forced in to their own (re)interpretation-(re)translation. It would be of great value to examine if the initial trends of digital learning implementation benefited the transition to remote learning during Covid-19 and early reported insights of content creation were enacted. We remain hopeful that this is a growth space that will continue to flourish scaffolded by the *Digital Learning Framework*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Audrey Cooney is the Deputy Principal of Holy Spirit Senior Primary School in Dublin 12. She studied diagnostic assessments in maths education for her Masters in Education and has written two maths problem-solving books. For her Masters of Education in School Leadership, Audrey explored policy enactment and digital technology in education. She designs and delivers digital technology professional development to teachers around Ireland.

Derbhile de Paor is an experienced teacher and school leader. She is currently a member of the School Placement team in the School of Education at the University of Limerick where she also teaches on the educational leadership programmes. Her research interests include school leadership and school-based teacher education. Her work has a particular focus on the experiences of practising teachers’ facilitation of teacher education in both initial teacher education and induction.

Ciarán Ó Gallchóir is a Lecturer in the Department of Education at Maynooth University. He teaches on the university’s initial teacher education programmes and postgraduate programmes in educational leadership. His research interests are identity development, school placement and educational leadership.

Patricia Mannix McNamara is Head of the School of Education in the University of Limerick. Research interests currently include leadership, organisational wellbeing, workplace bullying and doctoral supervision.

ORCID

Audrey Cooney  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7968-0293>
 Derbhile de Paor  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7469-2204>
 Ciarán Ó Gallchóir  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1423-947X>
 Patricia Mannix McNamara  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3011-0177>

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