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An Exploration of Leadership in Post-Primary Schools: The Emergence of Toxic Leadership

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Abstract: The focus of this research was to explore school leadership in post-primary schools using an adapted Schmidt Toxic Leadership Scale ©, which the authors recalibrated to examine both constructive and destructive leadership, the impact on individuals professional and personal lives, and on staff morale. Using a mixed methods approach, data were collected from 111 teaching professionals via online survey. Findings indicated a notable emergence of toxic leadership experiences which is reported in this paper. In addition, participants reported various and concerning negative consequences including: decreased job satisfaction, professional agency, and staff morale; reduced performance; increased attrition; increased negative behaviours including incivility; stifled career development; reduced self-confidence; depression; stress and anxiety; fear; tearfulness; humiliation; anger; mistrust; exhaustion; burnout; health issues; migraines; weight gain; substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, as well as, negative consequences on personal/home life. The results indicate that the quality of leadership was perceived to influence the health of respondents and had a bearing on their occupational wellbeing. Further research is needed to understand the nature of toxic leadership in education and its effects on organisational members.

Keywords: toxic leadership; dark side of leadership; post-primary schools; incivility; decreased wellbeing

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1. Introduction

While the extant literature on toxic leadership within educational settings is limited, its presence within schools, colleges, and universities has been noted [1–4]. The presence of unethical leadership can have adverse impacts on the school environment, including absenteeism [5] and increased levels of teacher attrition [6]. Toxic leadership has also been found to have negative influences, on not only the individual impacted, but teaching and learning in general [3,7,8]. Toxic leadership remains largely unexplored in an Irish post-primary school context, including its potential prevalence and impact. This paper reports an initial study on toxic leadership in the Irish post-primary school setting.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining the Concept

Leadership research tends to have a bias towards positive leadership methodologies and associated benefits for organisations and the employee within them [9–11]. Although there is a growing body of research into the dark side of leadership practices, such as destructive leadership [12], negative leadership within the context of educational administration and leadership has been largely marginalised [4,10]. Furthermore, there has been little research on how toxic leadership develops and maintains negative workplace dynamics and/or the impact of this behaviour on employees [1]. Toxic leadership can be defined as the "combination of self-centred attitudes, motivations, and behaviours" [13] (p. 2) that "causes, either abruptly or gradually, systemic harm to the health of an organisation" [2] (p. 18) and its people [14]. Although negative educational leadership can result in

the achievement of short-term goals, such as causing people to change current practices, "it can also immobilise people, making them hesitant to do anything at all" [15] (p. 20). Carswell, Sasso, and Ross [7], caution that "ineffective leaders have the potential to drive teachers to lock their doors and work as independent contractors; to duck and cover just to get through the day" (p. 5). The "power and synergy" [8] (p. 2) of toxic leadership bolstered by supportive followers and conductive environments can "overwhelm and replace a healthy academic culture with one of authoritarianism, fear, and retribution, regardless of the checks and balances" [8] (p. 2). The expanding body of literature on toxic leadership is contributing significantly to our understanding of the construct, yet there is no universally agreed definition of this dark side of leadership [16]. Many authors have recommended that a definition be further refined [16,17], however the complexity and multidimensionality of toxic leadership [2] may contribute to the lack of an agreed definition. Frost [18] (p. 130) defined toxic leadership as an "action and practice by leaders and systems that creates pain and suffering in others and in the organizations", but it is largely described through a "trait perspective (e.g., narcissistic, charismatic, ideology of hate), and the leaders' actions are taken as proof of those traits" [18] (p.19). However, while examining traits and characteristics of toxic leaders may be helpful in identifying toxic leaders, it may fall short of discussing how organisational culture itself may contribute to toxicity in leaders [13,19].

2.2. Manifestation of Poor Behaviours

The behaviours associated with toxic leadership include counterproductive work actions [20], social exclusion and divisiveness [19], egocentrism [21], bullying and intimidating behaviours [22]. Toxic leaders are seen as "authoritarian narcissists who unpredictably engage in political behaviours and authoritarian supervision" [23]. They are reported to exhibit traits including arrogance [2], self-importance, entitlement [24], and deceitfulness [22]. Webster et al. [22] caution that "although the literature conceptualises destructive leadership as regularly exhibiting a number of harmful behaviours" (p. 346), significant harm can be caused with just one perceived toxic behaviour. Organisational culture, defined as the "preferred sociocultural traditions that reinforce or support an organisation's mission" [13] (p. 7), is adversely affected by toxic leadership [19,20,25]. Negative behaviours trigger negative responses [20] and in turn promote a culture of inequality, divisiveness, and incivility [19,26].

2.3. Impact on Organisations

Several studies have shown a positive correlation between toxic leadership and detrition of staff morale [2,19,20,24,27], as well as reduced productivity [13]. In addition, toxic leadership is linked to intention to leave an organisation [8,9,11], with many employees leaving their jobs rather than tolerate a toxic leader [28]. Employee turnover is not only costly, but it also drains organisations of knowledge, time, and money [9,29,30] and is damaging to the sense of community [8]. Employees are reported to experience decreased job satisfaction [9,20,24,26,27,30–32] and increased job stress [31] when exposed to toxic leadership. The effect on employees goes beyond the occupational activities of the organisation, to exertion of malign influence on mental health, wellbeing, and on personal life [19,29]. These effects include psychological distress, anxiety, depression, fear, as well as physical effects such as headaches and weight loss/gain [22]. Those impacted by toxic leadership may also bring these negative effects home to family, friends, and significant others in the forms of lashing out at others and/or a lack of communication [20].

2.4. Toxic Leadership in the School Context

Toxic leadership has previously been identified at different levels of educational organisations (schools, colleges, and universities) [2–4]. Teachers have been reported to have a high level of attrition [33,34] and recently it has been reported that "teachers have been leaving the field of education and avoiding leadership roles at an alarming rate

due to negative school climates and toxic leadership" [12] (p. 5). Fahie [1] reported on four determining experiential factors of toxic leadership in higher education institutions in Ireland as comprising personal and professional impact, organisational culture, and systems/leadership style. Other researchers link toxic leadership behaviours to negative effects, not only for the individual but on teaching and learning also [3,7,8]. It has been reported to potentially lead to erosion in the quality of education [8]. Stoten [35] advocates for the creation of a management system based on moral character and moral actions, employee empowerment, and upward ethical leadership, but has noted that the adoption of such an ethical framework in educational systems "remains to be seen" [35] (p. 5). Some studies advocate for the use of leadership coaches and mentors [7,19] as well as the training of leaders, and potential leaders, in leadership practices such as employee rights, management interventions, emotional intelligence, distributed leadership, and the harmful nature of toxic leadership [2,3,8,19,21,24,27,30,35]. A further suggestion in the literature includes restructuring of the screening and selection process of leaders [2,36], to include panel members with expertise in psychology and the adoption of multilevel [36] and more than one interview/staged interviews for potential leaders. However, limited attention appears to be given to supporting and developing school leaders' agency in enhancing the ethical climate in their organisations. As such, we advocate for a deeper ethical climate approach that would serve to underpin interventions in order to ensure deeper level success.

2.5. Ethical Climate Approach

Ethical climate refers to the shared ideas and values in organisations that are evident in the policies, practices, and procedures of the organisation rewards, supports, and the expectation of ethical behaviour as integral to organisational climate [37,38]. Ethical climate serves as a lens through which members of an organisation can assess situations that support them in identifying and solving problems [5,39]. The ethical climate of schools can be viewed in terms of caring and formal dimensions [38]. Caring dimensions refers to employees' general interest in each other's well-being, as well as their concern for the impact of organisational decision-making processes on internal and external stakeholders [5]. In such a climate, toxic leadership has no space to flourish and is not tolerated. The formal dimension refers to the general respect and adherence to the organisation's rules and professional codes [5]. Leaders play a significant role in determining the ethical climate in their organisation as they have the responsibility to make moral reasoning and ethical decision-making explicit, and work to foster perceptions of an ethical climate both inside and outside of their organisation. If the ethical climate of a school is led by the leadership team, then one should expect that ethical climate plays a significant role in shaping the staff and students' ethical behaviours [40]. Yet, although ethical leadership and its actualisation in school environments has received significant attention by scholars in the past two decades, studies on unethical or toxic leadership in school organisations are still emerging. Some studies have reported on the influence of abusive and bullying principals on teacher's psychological well-being and work performance [41,42], while others have reported on the effects of unethical leadership on teacher absenteeism [5] and teacher attrition [6]. More recently, Sam [4] explored teachers' experiences of unethical leadership in the United States and found that teachers classified unethical leadership into six themes, namely, absenteeism, indiscreet information sharing, disregard for the dignity of persons, abuses of power, displays of favouritism, and prioritising personal gain. These studies suggest a need for further investigations into the manifestations and effects of toxic leadership as well as its genesis and motivation.

3. Purpose of Study

Currently, the literature is limited regarding the moral and ethical culpability of educational leadership, and on the effects of unethical and toxic leadership on organisational members, on organisational climate in schools, and ultimately on the quality on teaching

and learning. This might possibly be due in some part to difficulties in exploring unethical aspects of leadership [4,43], which include reticence of educational leaders to engage with the field, and disquiet with and perceived unpopularity of the topic for researchers when seeking approval to conduct such studies. It was with these challenges in mind that the researchers aimed to engage in an initial scoping study exploring the leadership experiences of post-primary teachers via an adapted Schmidt's Toxic Leadership Scale. The adaptations counterbalanced the scale for constructive and destructive leadership to allay any concerns or disquiet about examining the dark side of leadership only. This notwithstanding the results of the balanced scale still yielded a notable emergence of toxic leadership experiences, and these then became the focus of this paper. As the extant literature on the dark side of leadership in schools, particularly in Ireland, is so limited, this paper is written to offer insight as to its existence and to identify this as an area that warrants further exploration. Based on the responses of 111 teaching professionals, this is the first paper of its kind in Ireland to explore the dark side of leadership in post-primary schools—its existence and associated consequences.

The study was designed as an exploratory study because currently little is known about toxic leadership in schools. Consequently, the design did not adopt a predefined hypothesis. Instead, there was a clear and focused purpose to gain insight into whether or not toxic leadership exists in Irish post-primary schools. The exploratory study research aims included: to investigate the prevalence, if any, of toxic leadership in Irish post-primary schools. This paper reports the results of this exploratory study and the authors seek to promote acknowledgement of the existence of toxic school leadership in Ireland and the need for further research and discourse in this regard.

4. Materials and Methods

A quantitative instrument was employed for the study. The data were collected using Schmidt's [44] Toxic Leadership Scale.

4.1. Instrument Design

Schmidt's [44] Toxic Leadership Scale © is a 30-item questionnaire designed to identify leadership behaviours. Each question was rated on a 5-point Likert scale with answers ranging between 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Schmidt [44] reported Cronbach's alphas for the five sub-scales as follows: self-promotion = 0.91; abusive supervision = 0.93; unpredictability = 0.92; narcissism = 0.88; authoritarian leadership = 0.89. To provide balance in the data collection procedures and to allay potential disquiet in researching only the dark side of leadership, each measure was counterbalanced with its positive counterpart. For example, where the scale asks: The most destructive leader I have ever experienced has explosive outbursts, the counterbalance was also included i.e., The most constructive leader I have experienced is patient and able to control their anger. This was done to address concerns that a study that examined toxic leadership alone might cause offence to school leaders. No school leader or school was identified in the data collection process and participants were explicitly asked not to identify any specific leader and that if they did so, this data would be excluded. This was repeatedly done throughout the survey to ensure that no individual would be at risk.

4.2. Distribution of Instrument

The survey was hosted electronically via a qualtrics.com® survey hosting, which is the agreed software allowing for survey hosting by the authors' institution. Once hosted online, the survey was distributed via a Twitter® post inviting interested parties to follow a link to the survey.

4.3. Instrument Protocol

For the purpose of the investigation and to provide the required balance, two definitions were used:

Constructive leaders are those who act in accordance with the legitimate interests of the organisation, supporting and enhancing the goals, tasks, and strategy of the organisation, as well as making optimal use of organisational resources. They enhance motivation, well-being, and job satisfaction of others by engaging in behaviours such as inviting subordinates to an extended engagement, and granting involvement and participation in decision processes [45].

Destructive leadership behaviour is defined as "the systematic and repeated behaviour by a leader, or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organisation by undermining and/or sabotaging the organisation's goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being, or job satisfaction of his/her subordinates" [45] (p. 208).

In addition to the TLS © questionnaire, participants were asked to complete a series of open-ended questions. These questions invited participants to describe the effects that their leader had on them professionally; personally; on their job satisfaction; and on staff morale. Participants were also given the option to provide additional information they deemed relevant. Similar to the work of Green [2], the purpose of these questions was to allow participants to describe in their own words their experiences and perceptions of leadership.

4.4. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was sought and granted by the University of Limerick, Ireland, (approval code 2019_10_5). Participation was voluntary, and while some general demographic information was collected, this was limited in order to ensure participants were not identifiable. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

4.5. Data Analysis

Data from the multiple-choice questions were analysed using SPSS® while a close analysis was conducted taking account of the commentary provided. Saldana [46] promotes the idea that coding itself is an act of analysis and that coding is an initial step towards rigorous and evocative analysis and interpretation. In the case of these data, they were firstly read and re-read several times to identify trends and patterns of similarity and divergence. Once patterns of similarity were identified, the data were clustered together under a theme. These overall themes were examined for overlap in order to ensure avoidance of repetition and also to cross check their fit within the overall research focus. These themes were then grouped together again by similarity and were grouped into superordinate categories. Three superordinate categories were identified as experiential factors: Professional Impact, Personal Impact, and Staff Morale. See Figure 1 for the analytical process.

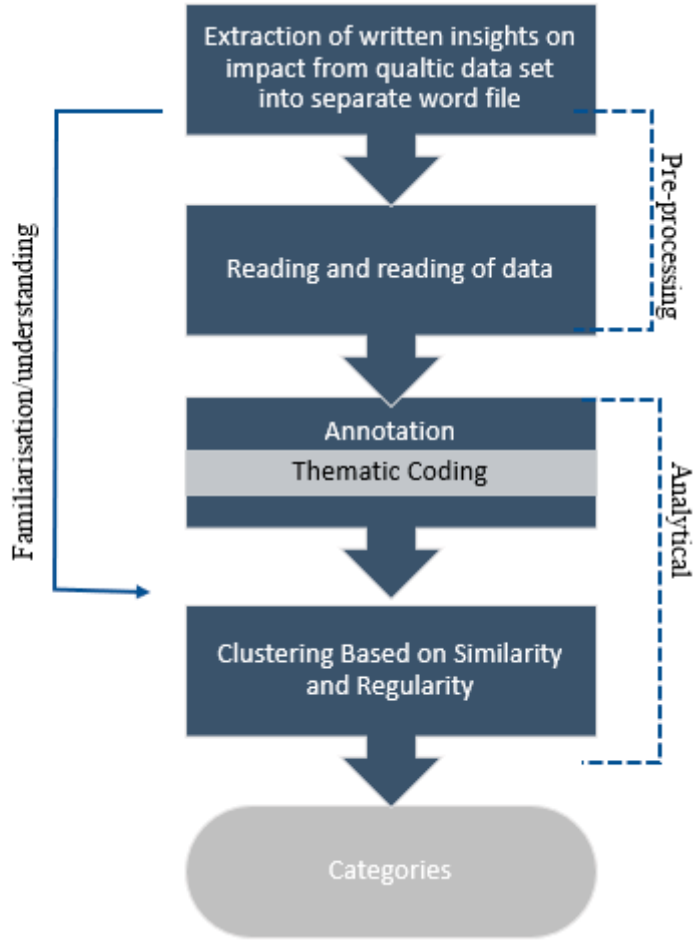

Figure 1. Analysis flowchart.

5. Sample

After removing surveys with missing data, the final sample size comprised 111 post-primary teachers across all four Irish provinces—Connaught (n = 35); Munster (n = 30); Leinster (n = 37); Ulster (n = 8); unspecified geographic location (n = 1). It is not possible to provide an exact number for the population of Irish post-primary teachers as varied national databases currently exist. However, we can provide general insight. In 2018, according to the Department of Education and Skills, there were 28,474 full time equivalent post-primary posts, however, this is not a representation of actual teacher numbers but rather is calculated by allocated hours in schools [47]. The Teaching Council of Ireland—the statutory body responsible for promoting and regulating professional teaching standards—had 43,452 post-primary teachers on their register in the same year [48], but registration cannot be taken as an indication of employment.

Because the survey was distributed via social media, we cannot provide a response rate or sample number as we cannot quantify how many teachers are on the relevant social media site. This is an acknowledged limitation and the authors do not seek to generalise from this data, but rather to provide insight into the potential existence of this phenomenon. Age range was between 24 and 65 years, with 85% of participants having in excess of 10 years teaching experience and 57% having in excess of 20 years. Of the 111 respondents, 91% held a permanent or CID position and 54% held a management position (n = 62) within their current school. See Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic data.

Variable	*n*	%
Gender		
Male	32	29
Female	77	69
Undisclosed	2	2
Age		
24–35	24	22
36–45	36	32
46–55	36	32
56–65	11	10
66 years and above	1	1
Undisclosed	3	3
Number of years teaching experience		
Less than 5 years	5	5
6–10	17	15
11–20	32	29
21–30	35	31
31–40	17	15
40 or more	1	1
Undisclosed	4	4
Position currently held in school *		
Principal (senior management)	16	13
Deputy Principal (senior management)	11	9
AP1 (middle management)	20	16
AP2 (middle management)	13	11
Programme co-ordinator (middle management)	2	2
Head of department	6	5
Teacher	48	39
HSCL	1	1
Chaplain	1	1
Other	4	4

* 11 respondents noted dual roles.

6. Results

A descriptive analysis was conducted comparing the five domains of perceived toxic leadership (Table 2) as per the Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS) © (44). As the scale had a range of 1–5, a midpoint of 3.0 was confirmed.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for toxic leadership across 5 domains.

Domain	Mean	Std. Deviation
Narcissism (N)	4.3875	0.94647
Authoritarian Leadership (AL)	4.2132	1.01703
Self-Promotion (SP)	4.1800	1.12852
Unpredictability (U)	4.1721	1.04425
Abusive Supervision (AS)	3.7695	1.24675

Perceptions of toxic leadership across various demographics.

Each domain exceeded this midpoint, with ranges between 3.7695 (Abusive Supervision) and 4.3876 (Narcissism). Thus, on average, participants perceived notable levels of toxicity amongst educational leaders.

Using SPSS®, descriptive and one-way ANOVA analyses were conducted comparing TLS © domains (self-promotion; abusive supervision; unpredictability; narcissism; and authoritarian leadership) by gender, age, and teaching experience.

Table 3 delineates the descriptive and one-way ANOVA analysis comparing the five TLS domains by gender.

Table 3. Descriptive and one-way analysis of toxic leadership domains and gender.

Descriptive Analysis				ANOVA—One-Way Analysis				
Domain	**Gender**	**M**	**SD**	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
SP	male	2.90	1.11	3.04	1.50	2.35	2.11	0.31
	female	2.94	1.00					
	prefer not to say	0.90	0.00					
AS	male	3.07	1.04	1.58	1.50	1.07	0.81	0.48
	female	2.83	1.23					
	prefer not to say	0.79	0.00					
U	male	2.04	0.69	2.09	1.36	1.19	2.17	0.33
	female	1.85	0.58					
	prefer not to say	0.43	0.00					
N	male	3.33	1.14	2.65	1.50	1.40	1.68	0.42
	female	2.97	0.84					
	prefer not to say	0.60	0.00					
AL	male	2.93	0.96	1.60	1.75	0.94	1.13	0.42
	female	2.79	0.91					
	prefer not to say	2.00	0.00					

Notes: male n = 32; female n = 53; prefer not to say n = 2.

No statistically significant difference was found. Females and males have essentially similar perceptions of toxic leadership.

Table 4 delineates the descriptive and one-way ANOVA analysis comparing the five TLS © domains by age.

Table 4. Descriptive and one-way analysis of toxic leadership domains and age.

Descriptive Analysis				ANOVA—One-Way Analysis				
Domain	**Age**	**M**	**SD**	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
SP	24–34	2.84	1.05	2.51	3.00	0.84	0.72	0.61
	35–45	2.87	1.10					
	46–56	3.05	1.10					
	57–67	2.61	0.77					
AS	24–34	2.88	1.18	3.72	3.00	1.24	1.06	0.51
	35–45	2.76	1.13					
	46–56	3.09	1.15					
	57–67	2.61	1.14					
U	24–34	1.32	0.91	2.40	3.00	0.80	0.94	0.46
	35–45	1.32	0.96					
	46–56	1.47	0.96					
	57–67	2.76	0.60					
N	24–34	3.37	1.23	1.48	3.00	0.49	0.54	0.68
	35–45	3.01	0.98					
	46–56	3.06	0.97					
	57–67	2.95	0.75					
AL	24–34	2.86	0.74	2.25	3.00	0.75	1.16	0.50
	35–45	2.74	0.90					
	46–56	2.98	1.01					
	57–67	2.69	0.54					

Notes: 24–34 n = 18; 35–45 n = 39; 46–56 n = 35; 57–67 n = 11.

No significant difference was found in the mean value of TLS © domains and age, thus, as with gender, participants across age groups had similar perceptions of toxicity.

Table 5 delineates the descriptive and one-way ANOVA analysis comparing the five TLS domains by years of teaching experience.

Table 5. Descriptive and one-way analysis of toxic leadership domains and teaching experience.

	Descriptive Analysis			ANOVA—One-Way Analysis				
Domain	**Experience**	**M**	**SD**	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
SP	<10	2.92	0.97	2.83	3.00	0.94	0.86	0.63
	11 to 22	3.04	1.15					
	23 to 32	2.86	0.93					
	33–45	2.73	0.77					
AS	<10	2.74	1.12	3.36	3.00	1.12	0.83	0.55
	11 to 22	3.04	1.13					
	23 to 32	2.91	1.20					
	33–45	2.76	1.10					
U	<10	1.45	1.02	3.57	3.00	1.19	1.17	0.40
	11 to 22	1.20	0.83					
	23 to 32	1.45	1.01					
	33–45	2.80	0.47					
N	<10	3.39	1.24	3.33	3.00	1.11	1.20	0.39
	11 to 22	3.14	0.76					
	23 to 32	2.87	1.02					
	33–45	3.01	0.68					
AL	<10	2.77	0.78	1.83	3.00	0.61	0.71	0.62
	11 to 22	2.93	0.97					
	23 to 32	2.77	0.94					
	33–45	2.73	0.55					

Notes: <10 n = 21; 11–22 n = 35; 23–32 n = 35; 33–45 n = 12.

Results depicted no significant difference in the TLS © domains and teaching experience, teachers with <10 years' experience were no different than those with 33–45 years' experience in their perceptions of toxic behaviours. The descriptive and one-way ANOVA analyses conducted comparing TLS © domains by gender, age, and teaching experience failed to reach significance.

In the TLS ©, domains of toxic leadership are identified as behaviours associated with those domains. Respondents were invited to position themselves on a scale between "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree"—with the provision to leave unanswered—in terms of how they perceived the leadership they have experienced. Table 6 shows where respondents positioned their responses.

Responses to individual items on the TLS © revealed that toxic leadership behaviours were notable and observed with frequency. Of the 30 behaviours listed, 25 were reported as "strongly agree", 4 as "somewhat agree", and 1 as "neither agree nor disagree". It is noteworthy that none of the behaviours showed high levels of "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree" amongst respondents.

Analysis of the five TLS © domains saw all domains report "strongly agree" as the dominant response, with in excess of 50% of respondents selecting strongly agree to a toxic behaviour associated with narcissism, self-promotion, and authoritarian leadership.

Table 6. Percentage representation of TLS © behaviours sorted by "strongly agree" in descending order.

TLS Domain	Behaviours	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Unanswered
N	Thinks that he/she is more capable than others	69	18	6	2	3	2
SP	Denies responsibility for mistakes made in his/her department/team	65	23	4	3	5	1
U	Varies in his/her degree of approachability	65	23	6	3	3	1
AL	Will ignore ideas that are contrary to his/her own	65	24	5	4	1	2
AL	Determines all decisions in the department/team/school whether they are important or not	65	22	6	4	1	3
N	Has a sense of personal entitlement	64	19	9	3	2	4
SP	Accepts credit for successes that do not belong to him/her	62	20	5	7	5	1
N	Assumes that he/she is destined to enter the highest ranks of my organisation	59	23	13	2	2	2
N	Thrives on compliments and personal accolades	58	22	13	5	2	2
AL	Controls how subordinates complete their tasks	57	23	9	6	3	2
SP	Acts only in the best interest of his/her next promotion	54	29	9	5	3	1
U	Allows his/her current mood to define the climate of the workplace	54	32	9	2	3	1
N	Believes that he/she is an extraordinary person	54	24	14	3	3	2
U	Affects the emotions of subordinates when impassioned	51	36	9	1	2	1
AL	Is inflexible when it comes to organisational policies, even in special circumstances	50	32	9	5	2	2
U	Allows his/her mood to affect his/her vocal tone and volume	49	33	14	1	3	1
AS	Holds subordinates responsible for things outside their job descriptions	48	27	10	7	7	1
AS	Is not considerate about subordinates' commitments outside of work	47	27	13	8	5	1
SP	Will only offer assistance to people who can help him/her get ahead	45	29	12	7	6	1
U	Has explosive outbursts	44	26	12	7	10	1
AS	Speaks poorly about subordinates to other people in the workplace	41	29	18	5	6	1
U	Causes subordinates to try to "read" his/her mood	41	37	14	4	4	1

Table 6. *Cont.*

TLS Domain	Behaviours	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Unanswered
AL	Does not permit subordinates to approach goals in new ways	41	34	15	7	1	2
SP	Drastically changes his/her demeanour when his/her supervisor is present	38	35	14	6	6	1
AS	Ridicules subordinates	36	34	13	10	6	1
U	Expresses anger at subordinates for unknown reasons	32	33	17	9	5	4
AS	Publicly belittles subordinates	28	33	18	13	6	2
AS	Reminds subordinates of their past mistakes and failures	28	35	15	14	6	2
AL	Invades the privacy of subordinates	28	30	23	11	5	3
AS	Tells subordinates they are incompetent	23	22	27	13	15	1

Table 7 illustrates TLS © Domain ranking sorted by "strongly agree" in descending order.

Table 7. TLS © domains ranked in order of highest average percentage of participants answering, "strongly agree" to a toxic behaviour.

Domains	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Unanswered
Narcissism	61	21	11	3	2	2
Self-Promotion	53	27	9	5	5	1
Authoritarian Leadership	51	28	11	6	2	2
Unpredictability	48	31	12	4	4	1
Abusive Supervision	36	30	16	10	7	1

Narcissism domain registered the highest average occurrence of respondents selecting "strongly agree" (61%) with its associated behaviours (Table 7). Analysis of the individual behaviours (Table 6) saw participants "strongly agree" with "thinks he/she is more capable than other" (69%); "has a sense of entitlement" (64%); "assumes that he/she is destined to enter the highest ranks of my organisation" (59%); "thrives on compliments and personal accolades" (58%); and "believes that he/she is an extraordinary person" (54%). Respondents indicating "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree" to individual behaviours had a range of between 2 and 5 percent.

Self-promotion domain registered an average of 53% (Table 7) of respondents selecting "strongly agree" to behaviours associated with the domain. Analysis of the individual behaviours (Table 6) saw participants "strongly agree" with "denies responsibility for mistakes made in his/her department/team" (65%); "accepts credit for success that does not belong to him/her" (62%); "acts only in the best interest of his/her next promotion" (54%); "will only offer assistance to people who can help him/her get ahead" (45%); and "drastically changes his/her demeanour when his/her supervisor is present" (38%). Respondents indicating "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree" to individual behaviours had a range of between 3 and 7 percent.

Authoritarian leadership domain registered an average of 51% (Table 7) of respondents selecting "strongly agree" to behaviours associated with the domain. Analysis of the individual behaviours (Table 6) saw participants "strongly agree" with "will ignore ideas that are contrary to his/her own" (65%); "determines all decisions in the department/team/school/whether they are important or not" (65%); "controls how subordinates complete their tasks" (57%); "is inflexible when it comes to organisational policies, even in special circumstances" (50%); and "does not permit subordinates to approach goals in new ways" (41%). "Somewhat agrees" was the dominant response for the behaviour "invades the privacy of subordinates" (30%). Respondents indicating "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree" to individual behaviours had a range of between 1 and 11 percent.

Unpredictability domain registered an average of 48% (Table 7) of respondents selecting "strongly agree" to behaviours associated with the domain. Analysis of the individual behaviours (Table 6) saw participants "strongly agree" with "varies in his/her degree of approachability" (65%); "allows his/her current mood define the climate of the workplace" (54%); "affects the emotions of subordinates when impassioned" (51%); "allows his/her mood to affect his/her vocal tone and volume" (49%); "has explosive outbursts" (44%); and "causes subordinates to try and read his/her emotions" (41%). "Somewhat agrees" was the dominant response for the behaviour "expresses anger at subordinates for unknown reasons" (33%). Respondents indicating "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree" to individual behaviours had a range of between 1 and 10 percent.

Abusive supervision domain registered an average of 36% (Table 7) of respondents selecting "strongly agree" to behaviours associated with the domain. Analysis of the individual behaviours (Table 6) saw participants "strongly agree" with "holds subordinates responsible for things outside their job description" (48%); "is not considerate about subordinate's commitments outside of work" (47%) and "speaks poorly about subordinates to other people in the workplace" (41%) and "ridicules subordinates" (36%). "Somewhat agrees" was the dominant response for the behaviour "publicly belittles subordinates" (33%) and "reminds subordinates of their past mistakes and failures" (35%). "Neither agree nor disagree" was the dominant response for the behaviour for "tells subordinates they are incompetent" (27%). Respondents indicating "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree" to individual behaviours had a range of between 5 and 15 percent.

Analysis of TLS © domains and associated behaviours indicates the emergence of toxic leadership behaviour within Irish post-primary schools.

Further Insights

In the open-ended sections, participants were invited to make open comments on (a) constructive leadership experiences and (b) destructive leadership experiences in these sections. Analysis indicated a number of professional consequences of toxic leadership (see Table 8) and for the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on these. Commentary included decreased job satisfaction—"I used to love coming to school, they made me dread it. I had to keep reminding myself to do the best for the kids"—reduced professional agency as a result of excessive control and micromanagement; increased attrition rates and intentions to leave; job insecurity, increased organisational cynicism, stifled career development and prospects; increased negative behaviours including tension, frustration, and incivility; and the creation of "toxic" workplace culture. Although the majority of participants did not indicate reduced personal performance, "unproductive" work environment was referred to by participants. In addition, there was evidence of reduced goodwill—"it badly effected goodwill. Staff are no longer willing to go the extra mile. Extra-curricular negatively impacted. Becomes a vicious cycle". These insights are thematically illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8. Professional impact on participant of toxic leadership.

Theme	Example Outcomes	Example Respondent Statements
Job satisfaction	Negative job satisfaction (n = 72)	"brought me to zero" "I feel unappreciated and undervalued. I feel that the work in the classroom is the least valued work done in the school." "I didn't have any job satisfaction. My job satisfaction was reduced to thinking I had a pay cheque and could support my family. My job felt like an endurance test, to be honest."
Professional Agency	Reduced professional autonomy (n = 12) including: constantly questioned, undermined, ridiculing, overruling Micromanagement behaviours (n = 15) including: excessive	"Undermines my working day, pretends to listen however never hears what is said. Makes me feel I am incompetent, erodes all aspects of my work I value. Controls and interferes in all aspects of my job" "Has undermined teachers' autonomy . . . " " . . . always questioning and undermining" "He had to be in control at all times and did not empower"
	control, asserting dominance, fault finding	" . . . thrived on power and the control that they held over everyone in the building. They both knew that everyone was dependent on them for references and they both deprived teachers of in-service training and opportunities and made threats to prevent them taking part in associations, applying for jobs or attending interviews."

Table 8. *Cont.*

Theme	Example Outcomes	Example Respondent Statements
Attrition	Left School (n = 9) including: early retirement, changed school, career break, left teaching. Intention to leave (n = 4)	"I did not enjoy coming to school. Due to stress I was not doing a job and despised myself because of it. I eventually took a two-year career break." "so many staff left for other jobs or took early retirement" "I am thinking of leaving my post and job"
Performance	Goodwill reduced/abused (n = 11) Reduced enthusiasm (n = 14)	"It's just a job. I very much am committed to my students but certainly will not volunteer for any committee or extracurricular work ever again" "I've always loved my job gave 150%. This person caused me to review and decide to only do what I'm paid to do having devoted many years to extracurricular and enjoying it all" "He slowly killed the joy, excitement and creativity in my teaching and leadership . . . I left and am now Principal" "I would always have enjoyed and taken pride in my work. Dissatisfaction with work will result in poor job performance, less willingness to engage. Personally, I no longer have the enthusiasm for the job as I feel very undervalued."
Behavioural	Negative behaviours (n = 6): tension, feeling uncomfortable around leader, incivility amongst staff.	"Toxic staff room - backbiting - trust issues - internal competition- secrecy- no collaboration- unfriendliness" " . . . caused and was instrumental in actions that were extremely insidious in breaking the trust and community of the staff."
Career Prospects	Negatively affected career prospects (n = 11) including: promotion, job security, professional development opportunities.	"Limiting opportunities for my own development" "Undermining professionally and personally. Preventing promotion" "I feel my ambition has been stifled" "Attempted to stunt development of professional development within staff"

Note: total number of respondents n = 82.

Participants indicated, what they considered to be, impacts on their mental and physical health (see Table 9). These included: depression and anxiety; low self-esteem and self-doubt; mistrust, negative emotions including frustration, anger and fear; feelings of helplessness and shame; tearfulness, feelings of isolation, insomnia, vomiting, digestive problems, migraines, weight gains; and burn out. A variety of distressing psychological consequences were recorded, one participant considered suicide with another indicating substance abuse. A number of participants sought counselling as a coping mechanism. Negative impact on home life was also noted. These insights are thematically illustrated in Table 9.

A significant relationship between toxic leadership behaviours and decreased staff morale was evident in responses—100% of participants indicated low, decreased, or a lack of staff morale. Factors attributed to low morale included: incivility, "toxic work environment", lack of opportunity for career advancement or development, favouritism—"staff morale was low for the staff not in the leaders circle", "apathy", lack of value, lack of teacher voice, and consistent "questioning and undermining" by leader. Associated consequences recorded included: attrition, "unproductive" work environment, "demotivated and frustrated" staff, increased incivility, and "toxic staffroom"— "inconsistent, destructive, and unkind culture is commonplace in our staff"; preventing "school development". These insights are thematically illustrated in Table 10.

Table 9. Personal impact on participants of toxic leadership.

Key Themes	Example Outcomes	Example Respondent Statements
Psychological	Loss of confidence/self-doubt (n = 39) Stress/Anxious (n = 19) Depression (n = 6) including: reduced mental wellbeing; suicidal thoughts, antidepressants, counselling.	"Has made me doubt my ability as a teacher and my ability to manage my classroom" "Undermined confidence personally and professionally" "My stress levels increase and this is something that affects my personal life." "The destructive leader's behaviour, mood and increasing aggressive interaction with staff has led to a very stressful workplace. I suffer from chronic migraines and one of my triggers is stress, so I have been physically unwell and missed school as a result of their behaviour. I have been shouted at in staff meetings and small group meetings, on one occasion reduced to tears, then shouted at again for being teary-eyed (I got up and left). I, along with several of my colleagues, go out the back door of the staffroom and the fire exit at the bottom of a corridor to access classrooms, to avoid passing the principal & deputy principal's offices . . . " "I considered suicide. I ended up on antidepressants. I became overweight. Dreaded going to school each day, especially after school holidays. Often ended up in tears on a Sunday night" "Broke me mentally . . . I needed counselling."
Emotional	Emotional responses (n = 25) included: fear, tearfulness/crying; frustration; embarrassment; humiliation; anger; bullied; used/trampled on; helpless; isolation; confusion; mistrust, and disbelief.	"Made me afraid, feel helpless, I wanted to avoid dealing with them" "Despairing, isolated, angry." "On a few occasions . . . reduced me to tears of disbelief" "Frustration and a loss of trust." "The biggest issue has always been not being able to identify what it is exactly they are looking for. Thrives on small talk and seems to enjoy seeing people not progress in their careers. Very sneaky in their approach and lack honesty.
Physical	Health problems (n = 15) included: exhaustion; sleeplessness; feeling physically sick; migraines; weight gain; lack of energy, substance abuse.	"It influenced negatively my professional and personal confidence, my school and home life. It was AWFUL. I cried often and began to drink. Sunday nights were dreaded and as for August . . . I hated it. I could not retire as I was the breadwinner in the home and there were no jobs. I do not want ever to go through that again" "made me hate my job and feel sick coming into work every day"
Personal life	Effect to home/personal life (n = 2)	"I attempt to keep work and life separate but inadequacy has led to fights due to my complaining at home about work."

Note: total number of respondents n = 82.

Table 10. Impact of toxic leadership on staff morale.

Key Themes	Example Outcomes	Example Respondent Statements
Negative morale	Negative effects on staff (n = 86) including: reduction, incivility, toxic environments	"Beyond imaginable. I have worked in two schools before I came to this one . . . I never experienced such negativity and such low morale in any staff room . . . toxic" "It badly effects goodwill. Staff not willing to go the extra mile. Extracurricular negatively impacted. Becomes a vicious cycle". "Destructive and unkind culture is commonplace in our staff. There is very little laughter, and those who model this destructiveness are promoted. The vast majority of staff have been silenced. Our union doesn't even meet anymore, the culture is so poor the students have been affected. The ethos of the staff room is the ethos of the classroom." "Staff morale disappeared a long time ago. All I can say is that because we are afraid to speak up and say our piece even at staff meetings, we have lost our mojo. Sub teacher will comment that we are negative and downbeat"

Note: total number of respondents n = 86.

7. Discussion

Data from this study illustrate that toxic leadership was perceived to be in existence among the sample of Irish post-primary teachers who responded to the survey. The authors acknowledge that these data are to be read with the caution that there may be respondent bias present, i.e., those who had experienced toxic leadership were more likely to respond to the invitation to participate. Respondent bias notwithstanding, the data do illuminate some worrying leadership experiences. Further, insights provided through the open-ended questions provides additional understanding of the adverse impact for teachers who perceived that they were working in cultures of toxic leadership. Negative consequences included decreased job satisfaction and staff morale; decreased professional agency; reduced performance; increased attrition; increased negative behaviours; negative impact on career development, as well as, highly concerning adverse effects on an individual's psychological, emotional, and physical wellbeing. These data are consistent with previous research on the dark side of leadership [1,2,19,20,24–26,32]. It would appear from this initial scoping study that this is certainly the case here. The authors wish to note that schools are complex organisations. There are limited opportunities for promotion outside of the Assistant Principal and Post Holder leadership roles. This creates limited opportunities for a career trajectory within one's school organisation. The limitations in opportunity and for career aspiration and lack of success in what are public applications for promotion creates, to some degree, a context of disappointment for some, which may influence their perceptions of the culture of leadership in their schools. Principals are often in almost impossible situations of choosing from within their staff at interview, all the while knowing that the outcome may leave others institutionally hurt and may adversely colour their relationships. The authors also note that the International Institute of Educational Planning [IIEP] has identified the trend of decline in the status of the teaching profession and has linked this to dwindling opportunities for teaching incentives, and the limited relationship between teachers' performance and development [49]. This lack of opportunity was exacerbated in Ireland by a moratorium on promotions to middle management in 2009, a factor that Donnelly [50] describes as a 'double whammy' to the career aspirations of teachers. While thankfully, this restriction is now changing, the detrimental impact for school culture and for leadership cannot be understated here. Thus, the authors wish to note the organisational culture pressures that schools and their leaders are under. We wish to disavow any notion that this paper is making a case that 'all school leaders are toxic.' Indeed, we acknowledge there are models of excellent school leadership practiced every day. However, we also note that there are pockets of practice where toxic leadership does flourish. The purpose of this paper is to seek to promote acknowledgement of the existence of toxic school leadership in Ireland and the need for further research and discourse in this regard. Moreover, data from this study raise a number of matters for consideration. Advocates in the literature have made the case that in order to address toxic leadership, there is a need for the concept and its effects to be acknowledged [1,24,30,35]. There is clearly cost to the wellbeing of employees who experience toxic leadership behaviours. Teacher unions and academics alike have warned of the effects of stress and burnout on teacher wellbeing, mental health, and performance as a result of increased workload and austerity measures in Ireland [51,52]. The adverse impact of toxic leadership also warrants the same attention given its impact on wellbeing. Further, the formation of safe and independent outlets for reporting toxic behaviours, as suggested by Pelletier [19], should be considered by governing bodies. The results from a study that explored the experiences of Irish teachers when seeking redress for bullying and incivility [53] provided salutary insight into failures to effectively address complaints of workplace incivility and bullying.

Tavanti [21] suggests that there are five personal coping mechanisms that can be utilised to cope with toxic leadership: developing indifference and emotional detachment; looking for small wins and victories that can keep you going; limit exposure with the leader; exposing the toxic individual through appropriate channels; and standing up to and holding the leader accountable. Morris [32] has recently echoed some of these strategies,

including avoidance of the leader, seeking help, and/or confronting the leader, with the addition of simply doing nothing. Bhandarker and Rai [54] simplified these strategies even further and reported that coping with toxic leadership can be largely expressed through three strategies; assertive coping, avoidance, or adaptive coping. Worryingly, maladaptive strategies have also been noted as common strategies [22]. These include feelings of helplessness, shame, and self-blame. However, focus on the individual, while important in terms of support, eclipses organisational responsibility in allowing toxic leadership to flourish/continue unabated. A systemic and organisational perspective is essential in order to effectively address toxic leadership through creating organisational values that are "concrete and behaviourally specific" [20] (p. 18) and integrated into a performance management system. Stoten [35] calls for a movement towards a system drawing on virtue ethics and argues that this cultural transformation can be achieved through implementing "hard" and "soft" strategies such as: the creation of "value statements" which are built on ethical frameworks and embedded into all aspects of the organisation. Literature suggests that creating safe outlets for followers to report toxic behaviours such as an ethics ombudsman could support the investigation of toxic leadership [19]. Given the poor outcomes for redress seeking among teachers who experience bullying and incivility [53] in the teaching profession (the population of focus in this study), the suggestion of an independent assessor/mediator has some merit. Furthermore, conditions should also be identified under which followers feel safe to challenge a toxic leader.

Some reflection on, and reframing of, senior leadership selection processes might also be worthy of consideration. Current eligibility criteria for the position of post-primary principal and deputy principal requires applicants to be a registered post-primary teacher with a minimum of 5 years teaching experience [55,56], there is no prerequisite for evidence of leadership, professional development or for educational leadership qualifications. Although the establishment of the Centre for School leadership (CSL) by the Department of Education and Skills has begun to foster a culture of mentoring and coaching in school leadership, as well as, providing leaders and aspiring leaders with specialised training in educational leadership through the provision of CPD and level 9 postgraduate qualifications in school leadership, these still remain desirable rather than mandatory. Amending eligibility criteria to include the requirement of a recognised qualification in educational leadership, as well as compulsory engagement with a formalised mentoring and coaching programme for a period of time after an appointment to a senior management position is worthy of consideration. Restructuring the interview process to move away from a single interview to a multilevel competency and disposition-based interview with sequential rounds for senior leadership positions may allow for greater insight for selection panels. Given that school leadership roles are permanent and have significant impact on the culture of schooling and employee wellbeing, more measured appointments might aid the opportunity to avoid the appointment of those less suited to or less commensurate with the interpersonal dimensions of leadership. Furthermore, interview/selection panels should include members trained or qualified in organisational culture, interpersonal engagement, and leading complex systems so as to specifically assess potential leadership, as well as the potential for destructive leadership [2]. Assumptions that because one is a principal, one would make an effective interview assessor, is also worthy of critical consideration. Greater attention should also be given, by those involved in the selection of school leaders, to educational leadership, and to teams and systems leadership research and practice. There is little specific training dedicated to harmful leadership practice and associated effects provided by professional bodies or the associated universities providing postgraduate qualification in school leadership in Ireland. It is equally important that leaders have an understanding of behaviours that knowingly or unknowingly inflict harm, as it is to have an understanding of effective leadership [57]. The inclusion of frequent and consistent professional development of this type would raise awareness and educate leaders and aspiring leaders to the negative consequences associated with toxic behaviours. In particular, there seems to be a need for education programs to emphasise the caring and formal dimensions

of an ethical climate [38]. School leadership professional development curricula could include case studies to facilitate school leaders understanding of these dimensions in their own organisations. Reflecting on the nature and manifestations of toxic leadership in school organisations, as well as the effects thereof on members' psychological, emotional, and physical well-being, could ultimately support and empower school leaders to develop practical strategies that will enhance the ethical climate in their organisations. If school leaders do not reflect on identifying toxic leadership and its effects on members in an organisation, we run the risk of responding to its effects, rather than leading with moral culpability in the first place and avoiding its emergence, which is clearly the preferable option.

The literature suggests that toxic leadership can be addressed from an organisational perspective through ensuring organisational values that are "concrete and behaviourally specific" [20] and integrated into a performance management system. Stoten [35] calls for a movement towards a system drawing on virtue ethics and argues that this cultural transformation can be achieved through implementing "hard" and "soft" strategies such as: the creation of "value statements" which are built on ethical frameworks and embedded into all aspects of the organisation. Literature suggests that creating safe outlets for followers to report toxic behaviours such as an ethics ombudsman could support the investigation of toxic leadership [19]. Furthermore, conditions should also be identified under which followers feel safe to challenge a toxic leader. Studies also advocate for the use of leadership coaches and mentors [7,19], as well as the training of leaders, and potential leaders, in leadership practices such as employee rights, management interventions, emotional intelligence, distributed leadership, and the harmful nature of toxic leadership [2,3,8,19,21,24,27,30,35]. A further suggestion apparent in the literature is a restructuring of the screening and selection process of leaders [2,36], to include a person with clinical psychology training sitting on interview panels to participate in multilevel interviews for potential leaders [36].

This is the first paper to focus on toxic leadership in the context of Irish post-primary schools. This research was exploratory in nature and is not without limitations. The sample size for the study is small; attaining a confidence level of approximately 80%, therefore we recommend more formal studies with national samples will enhance what is currently known and aid researchers in uncovering what needs to be known. The purpose of this study was not to generalise the findings but to explore if toxic leadership is present in Irish post-primary schools. Based on the findings of this study, we recommend that future studies would be beneficial.

This survey was distributed via a social media platform and as such those who had negative experiences were more likely to respond, yielding potential respondent bias and as such the results need to read with that in mind. That notwithstanding, the data point to an issue that warrants further investigation. This study examines toxic leadership based on the perceptions of participants, it did not examine the relationship between susceptible followers, conductive environments, and leader toxicity. Further research investigating this toxic triangle [58] will improve understanding of this complex concept. Nonetheless, this research illustrates negative and distressing consequences of toxic leadership behaviours for participants.

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