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To cite this article: Amalee Meehan & Daniel O'Connell (17 Apr 2025): The principal's role in nurturing catholic school identity in the Republic of Ireland: implications for leadership development and succession planning, School Leadership & Management, DOI: [10.1080/13632434.2025.2492558](https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2025.2492558)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2025.2492558>



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Published online: 17 Apr 2025.



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The principal's role in nurturing catholic school identity in the Republic of Ireland: implications for leadership development and succession planning

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ABSTRACT

The role of a school principal is increasingly complex; in Catholic schools, principals face the additional challenge of navigating the terrain between State demands and the requirements of the Catholic community, managing multifaceted and sometimes competing expectations.

This paper investigates contemporary views and experiences of principals (headteachers) in Catholic secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland. It examines the results of the first large scale, mixed methods empirical study into Catholic school ethos in the Republic of Ireland, of which leadership is an essential dimension. Employing both survey and semi-structured interview data, it analyses the practices, views and experiences of principals of secondary Catholic schools and highlights the role and reality of leading a Catholic school in the Republic of Ireland today. Findings demonstrate a level of commitment and professionalism among principals, and much in the way of good practice and commitment to ethos. However, they also indicate succession concerns and an urgent need for leadership development supports for existing and aspiring Catholic school principals.

While the study is carried out in Ireland, it is also of interest to other Catholic education systems looking to the future of school leadership.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 July 2024

Accepted 4 April 2025

KEYWORDS

Principals; school leadership;
Catholic schools; ethos;
Ireland (Republic of)

Introduction

The principal of a Catholic school holds a unique and pivotal responsibility in shaping the educational environment and culture, thereby determining the lived experience within the school (Belmonte and Cranston 2009). A principal's stance can have a significant impact on the Catholic culture of the school they lead (Coll 2009; Bonner 2012; Keher 2023). However, principals often navigate

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the challenging paradox between State demands and the requirements of the Catholic community, managing increasingly complex and sometimes competing expectations (Sullivan 2014; Rieckhoff 2014; Branson, Marra, and Buchanan 2019).

Clegg (2012) articulates the multifaceted reality faced by these leaders in the Republic of Ireland (henceforth Ireland), which is the context of this study. She describes the world of 'good and difficult students, of Facebook and Twitter, of hassled parents, of over-burdened professional colleagues, of regulation and accountability ... of competing rights and expectations ... of the political processes necessary to achieve one's educational goals' (p.137). Despite finding the role rewarding, principals in Ireland face numerous challenges including role overload (Darmody and Smyth 2018; IPPN 2002), complex policy development (Morgan and Sugrue 2008), and integration of students with special education needs (SEN) (IPPN 2002). Additionally, interpersonal conflicts and the multifaceted legal demands of the role contribute to early career shock and isolation for principals (McHugh 2015). An added dimension for Catholic school leaders is the necessity to nurture a Catholic vision for education while simultaneously meeting State compliance requirements (Treston 2005; Boyle, Haller, and Hunt 2016). This is particularly true in a context such as the Republic of Ireland where significant societal changes in recent decades and the increasing pluralism of views are reflected in the ongoing discourse concerning faith schools (Foley, Faas, and Darmody 2025).

For historic reasons, systematised education in Ireland was initially provided by religious orders, a phenomenon which continued after the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. In the nineteenth century, secondary education was largely the preserve of the wealthy, provided by private tutors or Protestant-run schools. The relaxation of the Penal Laws allowed for the emergence of Catholic secondary schools to cater for the largely Catholic population, primarily run by religious orders like the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Sisters (O'Sullivan 2005). After gaining independence in 1922, the Irish state upheld this system until the 1960s when it became increasingly involved as a provider following the introduction of free education.

Over time, an increasing dependence on funding from the State arose and a financial pressure to align with the zeitgeist as it changed from Catholicism to secular humanism (Roughneen 2024). With the change gaining pace around the turn of the millennium, the past three decades have seen a pattern of rapid demographic change, clearly reflected in recent national census data. As a result of the economic boom in the mid-1990s, Ireland experienced inward migration unparalleled in the country's history. In 2021, 12.9% of the population were non-Irish nationals from some 200 countries (CSO 2021). Furthermore, the percentage of those who self-identify as Catholic fell by about 11% between 2016 and 2023 (from 79% to 68%), continuing a steady decline over the last five decades. At the same time, the number of those with no religion continues to rise. In 2023, persons indicating no religion comprised 14.3%

of the population, up from 9.8% in 2016, elevating no religion to the second largest religious affiliation category (CSO 2016, 2023). This social transformation has implications for Irish schools, many of which once had a Catholic ethos. Reflecting an international shift (Stuart-Buttle 2017), the once dominant tradition of denominational post-primary schools has given way to a more secularised approach to education.

Legally, upholding the characteristic spirit of a school is a duty of the Board of Management (Board of Governors/School Board) on behalf of the patron (Government of Ireland 1998, 15.2(b)). In Ireland, about 47% of second level schools have a Catholic patron (although some joint models exist); for most of these, the patronage responsibility is exercised by a lay trust body (Meehan and Laffan 2021). For instance, Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST), established in 2007, exercises the patronage responsibility formerly held by five mostly female religious orders including the Sisters of Mercy and the Presentation Sisters. The principal's responsibilities devolved from the Board of Management include protecting, supporting, and promoting this characteristic spirit on behalf of the patron (AMCSS/JMB 2024).

For this research, the terms 'ethos' and 'characteristic spirit' are used interchangeably to describe the interplay of Catholic vision, mission, values and relationships foundational to the school, as expressed in the contemporary context (O'Connell, Liffey, and Meehan 2021). The term 'identity' is also used as it is commonly employed as a synonym for ethos in documents produced by the Catholic Bishops of Ireland. These documents underscore that while the ethos of individual Catholic schools may vary, they are all expected to 'give expression to their characteristic spirit through the lens of Catholic faith' (Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP) 2014, p. 20).

This paper arises from the Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (GRACE) (Ireland) research project entitled *Identity and Ethos in Catholic Primary and Secondary Schools in Ireland, Exploring the Attitudes and Behaviours of Stakeholders*. While GRACE is an international research-based partnership (see www.globalcatholiceducation.org/grace), the GRACE (Ireland) project focuses on Catholic education at primary and secondary levels in the Republic of Ireland. Leadership, particularly the role of the principal (headteacher) is a key theme in this regard. A specific focus of this paper is to give voice to second-level principals in order to understand how they experience their role as leaders of Catholic school ethos and identity. Their experiences and voices were then used to identify implications for leadership of Catholic secondary schools into the future.

The leadership role of the principal: Catholic church requirements and supports

The leadership role of a principal in a Catholic school involves guiding the institution according to a vision rooted in that faith tradition. As Tuohy (2005)

articulates, this involves not only clarifying the vision's promise but also appreciating its application within the school community. Although no specific ethos indicators exist in Ireland for secondary Catholic education, documents issued by relevant Catholic patrons reveal some helpful benchmarks. For instance, *The Charter* (CEIST 2007), the core document of Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST), articulates the purpose, vision, mission and values 'intended to support and nourish the lives of the people who are at the heart of our schools – students, staff and parents. . . [working] together for the common good of all' (12). *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP 2019, 17–21) outlines indicators in the context of the Catholic primary school. Together, these documents provide a basis for some key ethos benchmarks as follows:

(a) *Educational Foundation*

The overarching vision of the school is Christ-centred, based on the belief that a knowledge of and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ give meaning and purpose to people's lives. This vision permeates all aspects of school life, guiding its educational practices and community interactions.

(b) *Community Integration*

Catholic schools are caring, welcoming communities that promote a culture of good relationships. They respect the unique and intrinsic value of every person, acknowledging the dignity of all its members and where there is special care for those most in need. Parents are a significant part of the school community and support the faith life of the school.

(c) *Personal Growth and Social Transformation*

Catholic education is dedicated to promoting moral growth and a commitment to justice, integrity, and environmental stewardship. This commitment reflects a broader aim of holistic personal development and social transformation, encouraging students to contribute positively to society and care for the earth.

(d) *Integral Religious Education*

Religious Education (RE) is a core component of the school's curriculum. RE helps to nurture an appreciation of the diversity of cultures and religious traditions/worldviews and to provide opportunities for spiritual and personal development (CEIST 2007; CSP 2016; CSP 2019).

Further, *Share the Good News – National Directory For Catechesis Ireland* (SGN) (Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC) 2010), in alignment with the Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland 1998), outlines a key objective for principals: they must ensure that the school's ethos statement is integrated into the daily operations of the school (IEC 2010, 207). Indicators of achievement for this objective include the following:

- The principal is employed with the understanding that they are delegated by the BoM to encourage, develop, and promote the ethos of their Catholic school.
- Provisions will be made for courses and modules focused on the management of Catholic schools, along with in-career support for current principals.
- Principals, at the BoM's behest, will take responsibility for organising opportunities for the school community to reflect on its spiritual and religious well-being (IEC 2010, 207–208).

SGN emphasises the importance of a thoughtfully considered principalship, suggesting that those training for, or currently holding, the position require comprehensive and ongoing formation to understand the complexities of Catholic leadership in contemporary society (IEC 2010, 146). This formation is pivotal to ensuring that principals are well-prepared to lead in a manner consistent with the Church's expectations. Moreover, SGN insists on the necessity of ongoing education and training for all in leadership roles within Catholic schools (IEC 2010, 204). This support structure is crucial for maintaining and nurturing the Catholic ethos in all aspects of school life. The need for such a support structure has been articulated by principals themselves. For instance, a comprehensive study involving fifty principals of Catholic schools in Ireland found a distinct lack of programmes to help them understand the philosophical, theological and spiritual underpinnings of Catholic education (Bonner 2012). It indicated the need for better preparation and formation for those who are to assume the challenge of leadership in Catholic school. More recently, Keher (2023) emphasises this as an important necessity.

Unlike other jurisdictions, Ireland does not mandate theological or religious education/formation prerequisites, nor Catholic leadership accreditation for leaders of Catholic schools. However, the need for structured foundational preparation and ongoing support for Catholic school leaders is recognised globally (Schuttlöffel 2013; Sullivan 2014; Boyle 2016). For instance, the Western Australian Catholic education system exemplifies a proactive approach to supporting leadership in faith matters. Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA) offers a comprehensive suite of career stage leadership programmes, including Emerging Leaders, Middle Leaders, Senior Leaders, Aspiring Principals, Beginning Principals, and Principal Wellbeing programmes (CEWA 2023). This system of professional development ensures that staff meet necessary accreditation requirements and is instrumental in succession planning.

Since the mid-2000s, a number of lay trusts to exercise the patronage function for Catholic voluntary second level schools (previously under the trusteeship of religious congregations) have been established. Many of these have made initial attempts to provide ethos education, for instance as part of their annual conferences, welcome days for new principals and deputy principals, and short courses for middle leaders.

The leadership role of the principal: Irish state requirements and supports

Underscored by the Education Act (1998), school leadership and management statutory responsibilities are defined in the quality framework *Looking at our school 2022: a quality framework for post-primary schools* (henceforth the Framework) (Department of Education 2022). The Framework is intended as a model for best practice; to underpin school inspections and the school self-evaluation (SSE) process; and as a guide for reflection, recruitment, professional development, improvement and accountability. As a statutory document, there is no mention of ethos, but the leadership and management dimension of the Framework articulates the responsibility of school leaders to 'create and maintain a positive school culture' and 'to communicate the guiding vision for the school and lead its realisation' (Department of Education 2022, 25).

A number of State-sponsored professional learning opportunities exist for practising and aspiring school leaders, mostly provided by OIDE the Professional Development Service for Teachers unit of the Department of Education. OIDE also supports a Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership – a part-time (18 months) blended learning professional diploma, delivered locally in nine centres throughout the country. The content is based on the four domains of the Framework (OIDE 2024). Mirroring the Framework, they make little reference to school ethos, which is the responsibility of the patron.

The Framework also underscores the process of principal recruitment. In accordance with employment legislation, Catholic school principals are recruited and appointed through open competitions. The eligibility requirements include qualifications and experience suited to the sector, with the result that candidature relies on self-selection rather than on clear strategies to identify and develop future leaders. Criteria and marking schemes are governed by the domains of leadership and management outlined in the Framework (Department of Education 2022) and should reflect the needs and priorities of the school.

Second-level appointments follow a competency-based model, with 'Leadership of a faith school' included as one of six key competencies. The successful candidate is expected to understand the requirements of leading the characteristic spirit of the school, to be committed to the demands of such leadership, and to operate according to the quality of action, function, and presence defined by the Board of Management (BoM) on behalf of the trustees (AMCSS/JMB 2024). Furthermore, while competencies are generally weighted equally, a BoM can adjust this based on the school's needs and priorities. Determining the weight allocated to each competency has the potential to impact the competition results and thus the leadership of the school's identity and ethos.

Materials and methods

This mixed-methods study employed an explanatory sequential design. The first step involved gathering a large body of quantitative data by means of an online survey.

This process was followed by a smaller qualitative strand of semi-structured interviews designed to explain and elaborate on the quantitative results (Creswell 2022; Shorten and Smith 2017). This design permits the quantitative data to inform the questions to be explored during the qualitative strand, allows the qualitative findings help explain the quantitative results, and enhances integration (Creswell 2022).

Survey questionnaires were distributed to four cohorts of secondary school stakeholders including members of BoMs, principals (including deputy principals), teachers of Religious Education, and all other teaching staff.

Table 1 below gives a breakdown of the number of respondents for all four cohorts.

The questionnaire closed by inviting respondents to self-select for follow-up interviews by inserting their email address. Respondents were assured that this information would be decoupled from their survey responses to protect anonymity. Following this, 24 interviews were conducted, six from each of the four cohorts. The small sample size is a limitation of the approach. For instance, all but one of the interviewed principals held a professional degree in Religious Education or Theology, which is atypical of the general principal cohort. This was dealt with by triangulating interview responses with (a) those of other cohorts and (b) the quantitative data. Survey data were collated and analysed thematically by means of frequency tables and cross tabulations. Qualitative data were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006) using NVivo software.

Results

One hundred principals participated in the survey, representing approximately one third of the population of Catholic secondary school principals in Ireland. Two thirds identify as female to one third male.

In terms of age range, 52% of leaders are in the 50–59 age range. 33% are aged 40–49, and 3% are 30–39. The remainder (c.12%) are in the 60–69 age group. These principals predominantly identify as Roman Catholic (96%), with 75% describing themselves as committed and practising. Just under a quarter are committed to Christian values but not as practising Catholics. However, there is a distinct sliding scale when age is considered, with both belief in God and commitment/practice decreasing in direct proportion to age. This emerged as the first significant theme from the research; further themes included commitment to ethos and identity, and support and oversight.

Table 1. Number of survey respondents by cohort.

Cohort	Secondary
Member of the Board of Management	95
Principal or Deputy Principal	117
Teacher – Classroom or Subject	302
RE Teacher	129
Other Staff	74
Total	717

(A) *Belief and practice as a function of age*

An overwhelming majority of principals report belief in God (96%). The data also indicate a significant difference in religious practice between principals aged 50 and over and those below 50.

As [Figure 1](#) illustrates, 85% of principals (over 50) describe themselves as committed and practising Catholics. This figure falls to 56% under the same age. No principals over 50 years of age identify as spiritual but not religious, compared with 8% of their colleagues in the under 50 bracket.

A further illustration of this is attendance of those who identify as Catholic at organised religious services. Nearly half of principals aged over 50 attend weekly. Of those under 50 years of age, 33% report attending such services on a weekly basis.

The data relating to teachers provide triangulating evidence (O'Connell et al. 2024; Ó Caoimh et al. 2024). [Figure 2](#), for instance, shows a clear association between age and commitment/practice amongst teachers. As school leaders are generally recruited from the extant teaching body, the relationship between age and Catholic belief/practice gives rise to leadership succession concerns ([Figure 3](#)).

(B) *Commitment to ethos and identity*

School principals were invited to answer a series of questions about their engagement as leaders of Catholic identity. The survey findings reveal a strong commitment to ethos and identity at a personal level. For instance, 97% say they model a Christian way of life in their work at school and 75%

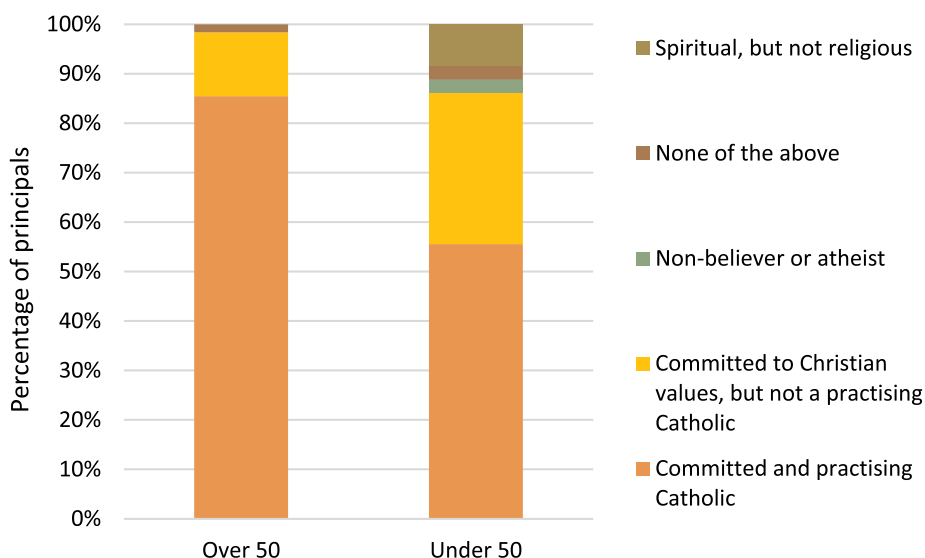


Figure 1. Relationship between age of principals and religious identification/practice.

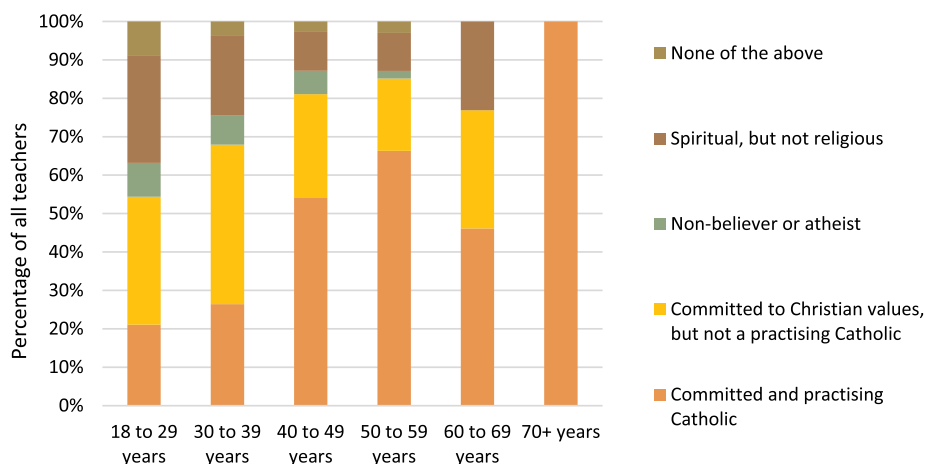


Figure 2. Relationship between age of teachers and their religious commitment/practice.

strongly agree with the statement ‘my Christian faith helps me to promote the wellbeing of all students’.

The qualitative data provide insights into these findings. One principal offered this rich view:

My initial response is to say the word ‘Catholic’ to me means universal, for everyone. We are a Catholic school but we’re not just a school for Catholics. We should be places of welcome, where identity must be rooted in and driven by Gospel values. For me, those values are respect, being just, being inclusive, providing equity, as it’s only through providing equity that we can provide equality.

Another principal spoke about transmitting the message that Catholic schools are ‘places of hope and love’, stating ‘I don’t need the staff to be practising Catholics, but I do need them to know that this person of Jesus is the person whose values drive what we do here’.

The principals demonstrated a strong commitment to the value of Catholic education and the Catholic identity of their schools. Reinforcing or rejuvenating

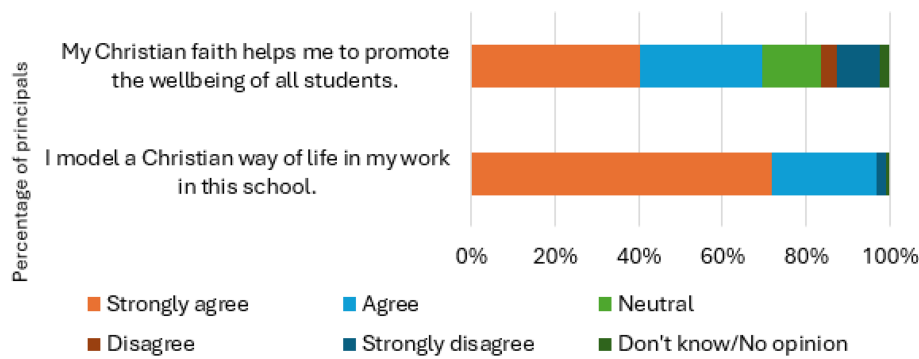


Figure 3. Relationship between principals and personal commitment to ethos indicators.

this aspect was a common priority among them; they describe practices such as introducing or leading prayer at staff and board meetings, and regularly articulating the Catholic vision of the school. Comfortable with the language of Catholic faith, these principals clearly identified the Catholic school's identity with the person of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels. This ability and commitment may be linked to their professional backgrounds; all but one of the interviewed principals held a professional degree in Religious Education or Theology and had experienced formation as part of their higher education. They attributed their background in Religious Education to a better understanding of their role in Catholic schools, helping the school to reveal how people can 'live life to the full' and serve as a 'place of hope as resurrection people.'

However, this ability and commitment was not fully reflected in the quantitative data. For instance, almost a quarter of the principals (26%) were either neutral or did not agree that 'providing opportunities for students to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is a central educational aim of this school.' With timetabling and resource management the responsibility of the principal, provision of Religious Education (RE) affords a further illustration. As [Figure 4](#) shows, just over 20% of Junior Cycle students received less than the RE time requirement of two hours per week (ICBC 2017). This proportion rises to almost half (47%) for all Senior Cycle classes.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that principals are generally more likely than staff members to agree with indicators of ethos. For example, 85% of principals agree that parents of incoming students are formally introduced to the school's Catholic ethos, compared to 55% of staff. While 55% of principals claim they attempt, at least to some extent, to develop and support the faith life of staff members according to Catholic tradition, almost 30% of staff disagree that they receive opportunities for faith development. This gap was less pronounced for other indicators, such as 'caring for others, especially the poor, is a core value of this school'; 81% of staff agreed with this statement, closely matching the 93% agreement among principals.

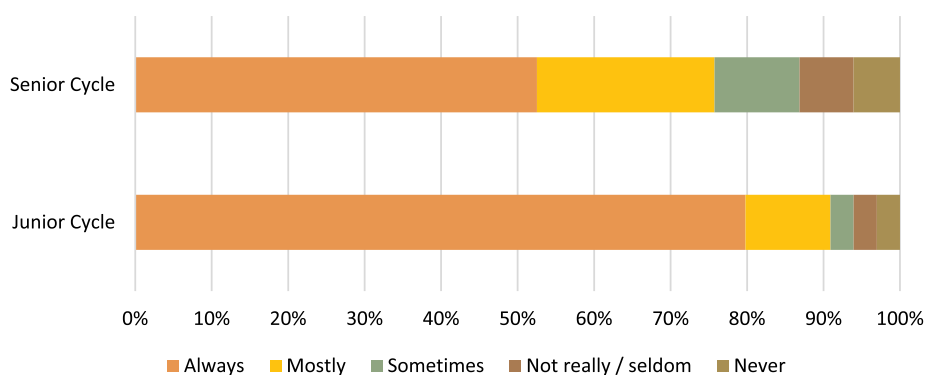


Figure 4. Frequency with which principals allocate at least two hours per week to RE, by cycle.

The theme of the principal's influence on school ethos emerged from interviews with other cohorts: BoM members and teachers were in broad agreement that leadership sets the tone for ethos, with comments such as:

Well, our senior management is very strong. It's a Catholic school and a Catholic school celebrates with students. So, if you don't wish to participate in that, that's OK. You can come along but not subscribe to the ethos or be a Catholic, but you're welcome.

However, the data suggest that the opposite can also occur, with respondents noting the effects when a principal is not committed to or confident about the school's Catholic identity. For instance, one staff member described how only remnants of a past era remain, such as a brief prayer at the beginning of staff meetings, which 'seems a little bit of tokenism, almost a box-ticking exercise.' Another respondent observed that 'crosses on the wall, maybe prayers at various times throughout the year ... I wouldn't see it much more than that.' Another participant illustrated how:

We apologise for disrupting the class to make this announcement about St Bridget's Day, or whatever it might be. We shouldn't be apologetic about it ... there has to be discussion about it and discussion that's open, rather than being afraid to say things because we might insult people. Because I think that's a huge issue in the world today.

The influence of school leaders was particularly evident in the case of three principals who, upon their appointment, deliberately set out to renew the school's ethos. These principals had to be both creative and strategic in encouraging staff to embrace the school's Catholic identity. They discussed sensitively resurrecting traditions that had been abandoned including

- Addressing the absence of a qualified RE teacher through staff allocations
- Introducing an RE textbook
- Distributing ashes on Ash Wednesday and incorporating prayer/reflection moments at staff and Board of Management (BoM) meetings
- Increasing the number of RE periods to meet the requirement of two hours per week

This effort to strengthen the Catholic identity faced several challenges, such as resistance from BoM members, a 'hands-off' attitude from staff, and concerns about enrolment. Nonetheless, the data suggest that under the leadership of these new appointees, each of these schools is re-emerging as distinctly Catholic with minimal adverse consequences.

In summary, the data reveal that the stance of principals can influence ethos. Whereas the current set of principals is personally committed to Catholic school ethos, how that plays out in the schools they lead is not as clear. Principals generally show a higher level of agreement with ethos-related variables compared to teachers. Given the close alignment among teaching cohorts (RE teachers

and other teaching staff), this discrepancy suggests that principals may either be somewhat out of touch with the on-the-ground realities or that their responses are more aspirational than reflective of the actual situation. Lastly, the qualitative findings indicate that the strategic use of the competency-based process in appointing second-level principals can influence the identity and ethos of a Catholic school.

(C) *Ethos support and oversight*

The need for support for principals to exercise their role as leaders of ethos and identity emerged strongly as the final theme.

Among principals, 78% reported that they had received some form of training from their patron or trust 'for their role as a faith leader'. Almost half (48%) stated that it was provided on an ongoing basis (or at least once a year) with 32% reporting that it was offered on a once-off basis (or less frequently than once a year). [Figure 5](#) below shows how principals report the extent to which the Catholic ethos was covered in the training they received.

However, the adequacy of this training was called into question by the qualitative instrument. Principals spoke about a range of challenges that make it difficult to lead Catholic school ethos, such as increasing diversity, State demands, staff understandings/attitudes to ethos, and lack of support for principals. Schools have a diminishing number of practising Catholics, with much greater multicultural and multifaith populations, as well as people of no religious faith (Ó Caoimh et al. [2024](#)). In many schools, practicing Catholic families have become 'the new minority'. Comments such as 'it can be hard to be a Catholic in a Catholic school' resonate with findings from a recent study by the National Anti-Bullying Centre, which reported that RE teachers have specific concerns about practicing Catholic students being targeted for bullying

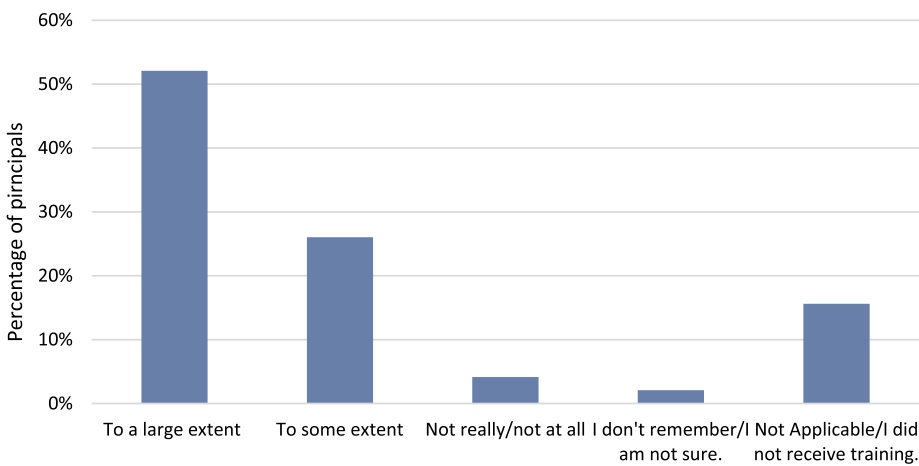


Figure 5. Extent to Catholic ethos was covered in the training provided to principals.

in an increasingly secular environment (Meehan and Laffan 2021). This shift is also reflected among teachers with remarks like ‘we probably have a significant majority of what we call non-practicing teachers’ echoing the decline in faith practice among teachers (O’Connell et al. 2024; O’Connell, Harmon, and Meehan 2023).

Despite this shift, the data indicate that principals and schools are embracing this new diversity and striving to accommodate it. They consciously welcome individuals of various faiths and worldviews, in line with their Catholic school ethos. For example, over three-quarters (77%) of respondents agreed that students of non-Christian faiths have the freedom to express their beliefs while in school.

A second challenge takes the form of staff attitudes towards ethos. Principals highlight how some staff members have no real allegiance/do not support the school’s Catholic identity. Although these individuals are in the minority, they can resist the efforts of the principal. Some teacher responses underscore this sentiment; for example, ‘It may not be total opposition but there wouldn’t be a massive drive from a cohort of the staff to promote ethos.’ Quantitative data provide further insight into this concern. Staff members are generally more inclined to ‘respect’ rather than actively ‘witness to’ the Catholic ethos. Furthermore, as Figure 6 demonstrates, the older staff members are, the more likely they are to ‘respect’ the Catholic ethos, echoing the succession concern highlighted earlier.

Increasing and complex State demands forms a further challenge to ethos leadership. Participants report that State demands have grown exponentially over the last number of years. Principals are under unrelenting pressure with new programmes, systems, and initiatives continually being introduced, while nothing is removed to make ways for these initiatives. In school ‘ethos is a very squeezed-out space due to non-stop demands on a principal. There’s so much happening in schools ... the change is phenomenal ... we’re very initiative laden.’

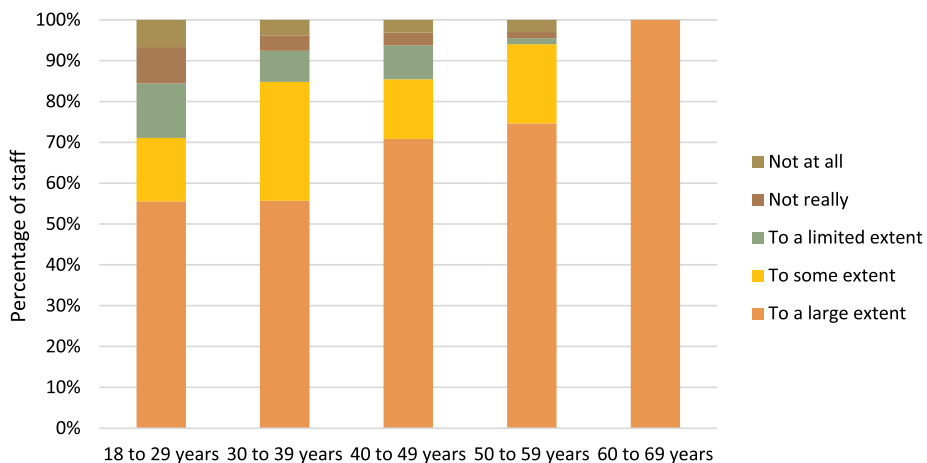


Figure 6. Extent to which staff members respect their schools’ Catholic ethos, by age.

The role of school trust bodies in preparing principals for ethos leadership and helping them navigate ethos-related challenges was a significant theme. Some principals pointed to their trust as a valued and regular source of support. Other responses were more critical. For example, one principal sought support from the trustees regarding ethos issues but found the support lacking. The trustees need 'to get their act together, putting it very bluntly, as they have a responsibility which I don't see them currently fulfilling and I am appalled to be quite honest.' Oversight of Religious Education (RE) was a recurring theme, with principals suggesting that trustees should adopt a more critical approach, particularly concerning the quality of RE being taught in their schools. They expressed a desire for clearer guidance from the patron or the Church on assessing the effectiveness of RE classroom practices, though they emphasised that this assessment need not replicate the rigorous standards of state inspections (for further details on RE, see Meehan et al. [2024](#)).

Principals hope that trust bodies/patrons would:

- help principals to lead the practice of faith, including liturgy
- develop staff in their understanding and knowledge and their ability to lead ethos
- ensure that whoever is working for them 'is genuinely interested'
- help school leaders of the future to be clear about the mission and value of Catholic schools, and able to articulate and lead this mission; to be confident in the Christian story in order to 'engage with society in a way that offers hope to the next generations'
- articulate publicly 'the positive values and influence that Catholic schools' can have.

Overall, the data from principals indicate an appreciation for the training/help received, yet at the same time a need for regular, systemic, high quality support.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that the current cohort of principals is largely well-informed about and dedicated to the identity and ethos of Catholic schools. The multifaceted nature of their role aligns with the previously discussed perspectives of authors such as Clegg ([2012](#)) and Darmody and Smyth ([2018](#)). However, the evolving demographics among school leaders, including the observed correlation between age and belief in God/faith practice, raise succession-related concerns. Qualitative data reveal that principals universally advocate for substantial professional development and support related to ethos.

Discussion

The study found some strengths and weaknesses regarding the responsibility of principals to encourage, develop and promote expressions of ethos (AMCSS/JMB [2024](#)), such as ensuring an overarching Christocentric vision of education,

an integrated community welcoming of all and with special care for those in need, commitment to social justice and adequate provision of Religious Education (CEIST 2007; CSP 2019, 17–21). In their personal witness, principals clearly take this seriously, with 97% reporting that they model a Christian way of life in their work. Overall, current principals of Catholic schools in Ireland are committed to Catholic education. They lean into that faith tradition and find it very helpful in many aspects of their role from wellbeing to decision-making.

Fostering an inclusive Catholic community, concern with the wellbeing of all students, and caring for others, especially the poor, all emerge as well-achieved expressions of ethos. Confident leadership of such social justice indicators is evident, with many schools embracing the new diversity in Irish society. The indicative documents (CEIST 2007; CSP 2019) underline the expectation of respect, welcome and dialogue with those of other beliefs and worldviews in all Catholic schools. Principals demonstrate this by consciously welcoming people of faiths and worldviews other than Christian and ensuring that students of a faith other than Christian have the freedom to express their faiths while in their schools. This resonates with a recent international study which found that Irish teachers demonstrate a ‘heightened focus on cultural and religious diversity as a central issue within their teaching’ (Cho, Heinz, and Choi 2023, 1021).

This level of confidence stood in contrast to the Christocentric vision central to Catholic education; over a quarter of principals were either neutral or did not agree that ‘providing opportunities for students to develop a personal faith in Jesus Christ is a central educational aim of this school’. Furthermore, some indicators where principals scored highly, such as formally introducing parents of incoming students to the school’s Catholic ethos, were somewhat disputed by the data from other cohorts. This divergent data may indicate that principals are aware of and aspire to these functions but need considerable support to achieve them. The complex role of the principal is even more demanding against the increasingly plural and secular backdrop outlined in the introduction, when challenges to ethos such as limited understanding/degrees of negativity among some staff are considered.

While upholding ethos is a legal requirement, there is little systematic support for this aspect of the principal’s role. The advanced system of State training where legal imperatives and government requirements are concerned does not extend to matters of ethos. Catholic trust bodies have introduced some mitigating initiatives, such as the Middle Leaders courses to develop an understanding of ethos leadership in aspiring leaders. Although such inputs are mostly appreciated, a much more developed, systematic approach is needed. In 15 years’ time, school leadership will come almost entirely from those who are currently under 50 years of age today. Religious adherence among teachers drops from 63% for the over 50s to 41% among the younger cohort, raising the possibility that in the future, many Catholic schools will be

led by people with little or no commitment to the ethos. If both State and Catholic Church charge the principals with upholding school characteristic spirit, then both have a responsibility to support them.

Although the study is Ireland specific, it contributes to the international narrative on Catholic education. While thriving in developing countries, the issue of weak identity dogs the Catholic sector in other jurisdictions (Dorman and D'Arbon 2003). For instance, following six decades of slow decline, in 2020–2021 the number of students in USA Catholic schools dropped precipitously (6.4%) from the prior year, and 209 schools closed or merged nationwide. Despite the subsequent increases, enrolment has not recovered and remains well below pre-Covid levels (Wodon 2021). The impoverishment of Catholic identity is identified as a factor in this downward trend, with weak leadership on the part of the principal, the school board (BoM) or the diocese (patron) as another (Medlin 2011). Paradoxically, it seems that despite the statistical narrative of secularisation, families choosing a Catholic school do so for the 'value-added' component that makes it different from a state school.

Conclusion

The results of this study contribute to the literature in the field of Catholic school leadership with implications for the specific context (Republic of Ireland) and for the wider field. Without good ethos leadership, the credibility of Catholic education in the public sphere is undermined. If Catholic schools can't articulate and give witness to the credible and persuasive vision of Catholic education, (what it means to live a good life) then the value-added component is lost. While they may offer an excellent education in other respects, the transcendent dimension which underpins the essential characteristic spirit becomes diminished. The push of secularisation and the removal of religion from the public sphere is a global concern for faith-based education, articulated in the Global Compact for Education (Francis 2019). Addressed to a worldwide audience, the Global Compact for Education identifies clarity of identity and mission and the ability to lead it as a way forward, offering a compelling middle ground between a slide towards superficial Catholic education on one hand and an insular conservatism on the other. By highlighting some common principles resonant with those of the indicative documents outlined in the introduction, Francis proposes a global unity in the education endeavour. All leaders should be conversant in these principles and the practical implications for their own contexts and circumstances.

Ireland is not alone in experiencing the decline of religious affiliation and practice. There is much to be gained from international sharing of best practice among Catholic education providers. For instance, while Ireland does not mandate theological or religious education/formation prerequisites, nor Catholic leadership accreditation for leaders of Catholic schools, the need for

structured foundational preparation and ongoing support for Catholic school leaders is recognised globally (Schuttlöffel 2013; Sullivan 2014; Boyle 2016). It is clear from this study that policy documents are not sufficient to prepare for the future without an effective implementation strategy. The Western Australian Catholic education system, for example, exemplifies a proactive approach to supporting leadership in faith matters. This system of professional development ensures that staff meet necessary accreditation requirements and is instrumental in succession planning.

While the study is carried out in Ireland, it is also of interest to other Catholic education systems looking to the future of school leadership. The principal's role in nurturing the Catholic character of a school is crucial for maintaining its quality and ethos. Effective leadership development and succession planning are imperative to ensure that Catholic schools continue to thrive. Catholic systems worldwide are facing the challenge of decline; international sharing of best practice may be of much mutual benefit. By adopting systematic approaches to identifying and developing future leaders, and by providing robust support structures, Catholic schools can better prepare for leadership transitions and ensure that their Catholic identity is preserved for future generations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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