Community and Identity in Rural Stand-Alone Schools in the West of Ireland: Teachers' and Principals' Perspectives

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my

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Abstract

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In the past two decades Ireland has become increasingly diverse in a myriad of ways; religious, cultural and ethnic change have become significant features of Irish society (Darmody, Smyth & McCoy, 2012; CSO, 2016). Parekh (2005) notes the problems posed by multicultural societies are without parallel in history. Schools are right at the coalface, where changes in communities and shifting identities are experienced as part of the day-to-day practice. This thesis sets outs to explore how teachers and principals in rural stand-alone schools experience the shifting and increasing plurality of identities within their communities. Stand-Alone Schools were identified by the Report on the Forum for Patronage and Pluralism (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012) as schools where choice was considered neither an option nor desirable and which it identified as having potentially unique challenges. Given the largely denominational composition of the primary school sector it is inevitable that diverse religious and belief identities, in particular, should come to the fore in public discourse. Irwin (2009) has identified how non-recognition or misrecognition may be experienced by children with diverse religious identities. However, questions of gender, sexual and cultural identity also increasingly emerge as issues with which primary schools grapple and where questions of recognition may emerge as challenging.

In exploring questions of identity and recognition, the study views identity as a complex process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction in which individuals may move between different identities, or draw on different components of their identity (religious, ethnic, cultural, gender), depending on context and role. The thesis draws on concepts of boundary, periphery and community as significant to the processes of identification being explored (Jenkins, 2014; Barth, 2000; Cohen, 1982).

Taking a phenomenological approach that focused on the lived experience of participants and the ways in which they constructed meaning from this experience, the study explored how 10 participants (5 teachers and 5 principals) in rural Stand-Alone Schools in Galway, Roscommon and Mayo negotiated the plurality of identities that form part of their school community. In doing so the research explored the significance of these schools to the sense of a local, communal identity and the ways in which the increasing plurality of identities poses dilemmas for the schools and the primary system.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This thesis sets outs to explore how teachers and principals in rural Stand-Alone Schools in the west of Ireland experience the shifting and increasing plurality of identities within their communities. *The forum on patronage and pluralism in the primary sector: Report of the forum's advisory group* (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012), hereinafter referred to as the Forum's Report, identified what it termed the Stand-Alone School as having potentially unique challenges in the context of a hugely changing social landscape. Established in 2011, The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism set out to interrogate how the predominantly denominational Irish primary school system could adapt to provide for an adequate range of schools and school types to cater to children from all religious or

nonreligious backgrounds. The Forum's Report recommended the divestment of Catholic schools, in particular, in areas in which there was greater demand for school diversity (Coolahan et al, 2012). Thus, encouraging Catholic primary schools to change management where a desire for choice is evident has been part of government policy since. However, where school choice was considered neither an option nor desirable, Stand-Alone Schools were described as requiring particular attention. The Forum's Report identified approximately 2,000 such schools out of a total of over 3,100. As well as being largely denominational, Irish primary education is characterised by a high proportion of small rural schools, particularly in the west of Ireland.

Given the overwhelmingly denominational composition of the primary school sector in Ireland, it is inevitable that diverse religious and belief identities, in particular, should feature significantly in public discourse and within schooling. However, this is only one aspect of the apparent complexifying and fragmentation of identity. Questions around gender, sexual, cultural and community identity increasingly emerge as issues with which primary schools grapple. Increasingly schools attempt to mediate a traditional local communal sense of belonging that is strongly rooted in a Catholic perspective with more disparate conceptions of individual and group identity.

Therefore, the overarching questions guiding this study were:

- How do specific teachers and principals experience a plurality of identities in rural Stand-Alone Schools in the west of Ireland?
- What are the specific challenges faced by these teachers and principals?
- What are the lessons deriving from these experiences for educational practice and policy?

Five teachers and five principals from ten rural Stand-Alone Schools in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon were invited to participate in the study.

1.2 Aims and rationale of the research

In the past two decades Irish society has become increasingly diverse in a myriad of ways. Increasing religious diversity has been a significant aspect of this change (Darmody, Smyth andand McCoy, 2012). This was evidenced by the 2016 Census which highlighted the trend toward religious heterogeneity that has emerged over the last 25 years. Among the identified changes were, (a) a decline in the proportion of the population who identify as Catholic; (b) rapid rises among other Christian churches and the Muslim population, and (c) a rise in the number of people identifying as having no religion (Central Statistics Office, 2016). As well as significant increases in religious plurality, the population has witnessed significant cultural and ethnic change. According to the 2016 census, "White Irish" accounted for the largest ethnic group, with 3,854,226 (82.2%) usual residents, followed by "Any other White background" (9.5%), non-Chinese Asian (1.7%) and "Other incl. mixed background" (1.5%). These population changes have also been accompanied by significant changes in values and norms.

Irwin (2018) notes that in our lives, in our schools, in our workplaces and in society generally, we encounter, "a plurality of differing (and sometimes radically incompatible) perspectives while more traditional macro level truth claims (theological or otherwise) have been somewhat delegitimated" (p. 4). The grand narratives that have shaped, or sought to shape, education in the past—such as the creation of national identities, or inculcating religious belonging—and that have fostered individual and collective identity are increasingly questioned. The challenges posed to society by this plurality are captured by Parekh (2005) who powerfully notes:

> Multicultural societies throw up problems that have no parallel in history. They need to find ways of reconciling unity and diversity, being inclusive without being assimilationist, cherishing plural cultural identities without weakening the precious identity of shared citizenship (p. 35).

The problems identified by Parekh are entirely central to this thesis. However, as Nelson (2017) notes, it may be more helpful to characterise the kinds of challenges arising from social change, and identified in the research, as posing dilemmas rather than problems for the educational system. A dilemma, according to Walker and Dimmock (2000), refers to "conflicting situations that demand irreconcilable choices because of the existence of competing, deeply rooted values" (p. 9). In this sense dilemmas are more complex than the straightforward, routine problems regularly encountered in schools that can be readily solved. They are characterised by a degree of irreconcilability (Cuban, 1992). In this thesis the terms dilemmas and challenges will occasionally be used interchangeably. In working with participants, the term challenge is one that has greater resonance for the practical world of the school. However, when considering implications for policy or broader change, these challenges are recharacterized as dilemmas.

Thus, primary education is at the coalface, where changes in communities and shifting identities are experienced as part of the day-to-day practice of education. Emerging from these rapid and profound changes are questions, such as how do primary schools cater to, adapt or reflect this increasing plurality? Or indeed, how do we balance, as Parekh proposes, the cherishing of this plurality of identities while also maintaining a shared, collective identity? In much of the related public discourse in the Irish educational context, the configuration of the primary school system has been the focus of much attention. One key characteristic of the system is that it is overwhelmingly denominational in nature. Of the 3,124 mainstream primary schools in Ireland, approximately 93% are under denominational patronage, with the vast majority (approximately 90%) of these being Catholic (Department

of Education and Skills (DES), 2019). Therefore, there has traditionally been a significant degree of perceived homogeneity and coherence, at least since the end of the 19th century, between the general population and the composition of the education system. In 1961, for example, 94.9% of the population described themselves as Catholic (CSO, 2016), in a system that was almost entirely denominational. Another significant and distinctive characteristic of the Irish school system is the disproportionately high number of rural schools, and small rural schools, in particular. There are 716 schools with under 60 pupils, classed by the Department of Education and Skills as small schools, which account for 23.1% of all primary schools. However, these provide for only 4.4% of primary school pupils (DES, 2019, p. 3). Small schools are most common in the west of Ireland accounting for 41.4% of schools in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon and 11.9% of pupils. Both characteristics are pertinent for the questions being explored in this thesis. As questions of identity have increasingly come to the fore and are contested in the public domain, as is the case in all European countries, they pose specific dilemmas in the Irish context that have been much discussed (The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), 2007; Faas, Hajisoteriou and Angelides, 2014).

Recent years have seen attempts to face the demands of complex challenges posed by these changes at a structural level (DES, 2014; DES, 2017a; DES, 2017b; DES, 2018) and at a curricular level (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2006; NCCA, 2015; NCCA, 2019b; NCCA, 2019c). This research focuses on the experience on-the-ground within rural Stand-Alone Schools. In particular, it focuses on the experience of teachers and principals in the west of Ireland of the increasing plurality of identities within their communities. As the west of Ireland is the geographical region with the highest concentration

of small rural schools, and in many ways is geographically peripheral, it is likely that schools play a particular role within their communities and, indeed, have a greater significance.

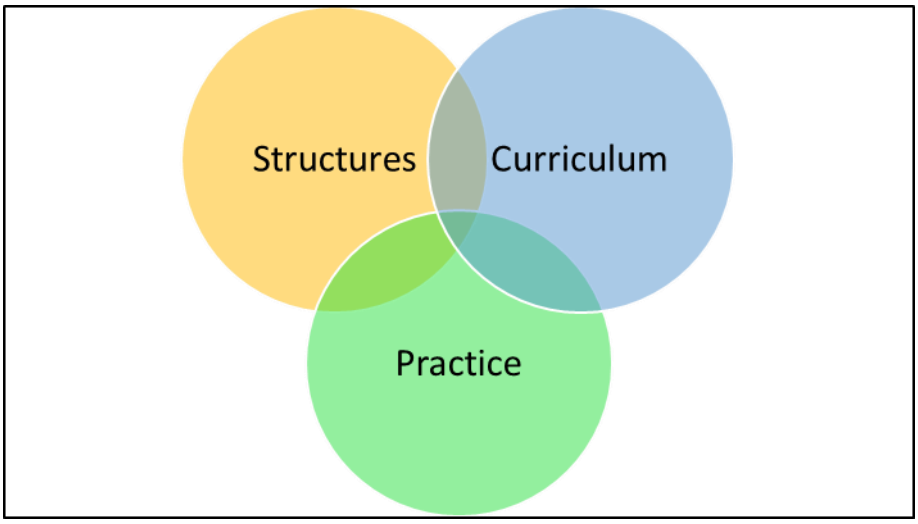
Therefore, the impetus for this research is to delve more deeply into the particularities of these complex questions at the micro level (school and classroom level), in order to explore how identity is constructed and reconstructed and the lessons that may yield for more nuanced macro level (national level) responses. Entwined in these processes of identity construction, are issues of recognition. Taylor (1997) argues that identity is formed in dialogue with significant others in our lives. In addition, in order to develop a positive selfidentity, one's own identity must be properly recognised. In this theory, non-recognition or misrecognition is experienced by the individual as a form of harm and oppression. As societies become more diverse and plural, questions of recognition become ever more complex. Irwin (2009) has identified how in a denominational school system, nonrecognition or misrecognition may be experienced by children with diverse religious identities. But as communities become ever more plural, questions of recognition complexify. The research focuses on the perspectives of teachers and principals in rural schools as they

are the agents at the nexus of structures and practice, and therefore have a unique vantage point regarding these various pressures. They are also the actors whose role it is to tie together the various, sometimes seemingly contradictory, strands that inform the identity landscape in order to provide a coherent education within their school communities.

In education, the identities of children are nurtured in the space where the structures of the system, the curriculum and the lived practice of the school meet (see Figure 1). Often the focus of research is on the macro level developments (policy developments, structural reforms and curriculum changes etc.,). In order to explore the challenges schools face as they

negotiate demands for greater recognition for a plurality of identities, the research focuses on the perspectives of teachers and principals.

Figure 1: *Where structures, curriculum and practice overlap*



1.3 Role of the researcher

As a former past pupil of a small rural primary school in the west of Ireland, I have a personal interest in rural education. I have also a personal knowledge of the ways in which local primary schools contribute to the development of communal identities in rural areas, as well as the significant role they play in informing the individual life journeys of their pupils.

As a primary school teacher in a large Dublin school with a multicultural population, I developed a strong interest in, and awareness of, questions of identity and recognition. As a result of this interest, for my master's thesis, I explored the experiences of primary children who did not participate in Religious Instruction and sacramental preparation.

Subsequently, as an Education Officer with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), I worked on the national consultation on proposals for a curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics and contributed to the consultation report (2015). Through this process I witnessed the multiple ways that identity could be seen

to be supported, bolstered, diminished or threatened through potential curriculum change, and specifically curriculum change related to religions and beliefs. Subsequently, my work on *The Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* (2019a) led me to encounter first-hand the challenges of adequately recognising the place of the Irish language and minority languages; and that the potential effect of this was not solely, or most significantly, on the processes of language learning itself. What may be most pertinent and most significant are the threats that this could pose to identity for many, and the ways it could be felt to undermine identity. It also made me keenly aware of the ways in which those for whom the dominant language (in this case English) is their sole language are often unaware of, or somewhat blind to, the difficulties and experiences of those who speak Irish, or indeed other minority languages, and for whom they form significant parts of their identity. The misrecognition that can stem from this 'blindness' is amplified by the sheer dominance of the English language. In this way education, and schools, can become sites of misrecognition through a lack of awareness. No learning environment is neutral, and education is inherently bound up with questions of identity.

What is clearly evident to me from these experiences, is that what happens in schools is not simply about teaching and learning an objective knowledge that allows children to develop the skills they need to function as actors in the world. But rather, it is far more profound and intensely related to who we are and who we become.

1.4 Identity, recognition and primary schools

This thesis is concerned with how teachers and principals engage with and negotiate the plurality of identities within their school communities. The term plurality recognises pluralization as, in the words of Berger (2012), "a historically unprecedented situation in which more and more people live amid competing beliefs, values, and lifestyles" (p. 313).

The study is, therefore, concerned with the worldviews, cultures, value-systems and religious beliefs that people encounter and draw on as part of the processes of identification. However, this thesis is wary of reducing plurality simply to "religions, ethnicities, or bodies that operate as entirely separate, autonomous entities that can be counted and commodified in policy discourse," as Kitching (2020, p. 8) notes. Rather, plurality in this thesis refers to the myriad ways in which people are involved in processes of identity construction through their engagement with others and with the cultures, religions and value-systems that provide "horizons of meaning" (Taylor, 1997) for their lives. It relates to the ways that people encounter and engage with those around them and the meanings that are made in these encounters. Therefore, it is deeply aware of the dangers of addressing questions of identity in ways that reduce participants, their communities, and the children they teach to glib and essentialising identity labels. It recognises identity as a complex process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction in which individuals may move between different identities or draw on different components of their identity (religious, ethnic, cultural, gender), depending on context and role. And, equally, each individual may draw differently on these same-seeming components while using the same language, depending on their subjective experience and understanding. In this way identities shift and evolve with different aspects coming to the fore at different times.

A number of concepts of identity construction are of particular concern regarding the research questions in this thesis: those of boundary, peripherality and community. Boundary refers to the points where distinct identities are understood to meet and diverge. This thesis focuses on some of these, as it is at these points of meeting and diverging that tensions and difficulties emerge. All participants in this study work in schools that are on the peripheries of the mainstream cultures and forces that inform identity construction at a local level. This peripherality, then, is significant in the way in which schools come to construct their own

identity, which in turn impacts how those within these communities see themselves and the school. Central to the construction of identity in schools generally, and rural schools specifically, is the concept of community. Significantly, participants understood that school identity was formed through the prism of community.

The complexity of identity construction within these contexts raises important questions around identity recognition and misrecognition. As Taylor (1997) proposes, we come to an understanding of who we are as individuals and as members of groups through dialogue with the significant others in our lives. Therefore, the feedback we receive in these interactions informs how we come to see ourselves. Fanon (1952) described the psychological damage done to the victims of racism and colonialism through the negative image projected onto them by their oppressors. In this vein Taylor (1997) argues that those who do not have their identities adequately recognised, or misrecognised, thereby suffer a form of oppression. Much of the political conflict over the last three decades in the Anglophone world has revolved around struggles for recognition rather than struggles for resources. Therefore, as society becomes more diverse and schools more plural, the question of how identity is recognised or misrecognised becomes ever more pertinent. Although rarely the focus of such research, this question is equally pertinent to rural Stand-Alone Schools.

1.5 Recognition and policy

The desire to provide responses that more adequately recognise the identity, values and choices of individuals and groups that exist within society has been a feature of recent education policy. The increasing emphasis on the role of parental choice in the primary sector is a critical example of this. Supporting the rights of parents in choosing the type of school that they send their children to can be understood as a recognition of the need to provide people with an education that recognises identity and reflects their values (DES, 2014; DES,

2017a; DES, 2017b). Increased religious diversity is at the forefront of this policy direction.

The introduction to the Forum's Report (2012) notes that:

> Religious belief plays a sensitive and intimate part in people's lives. In Ireland, the religious dimension has been very interwoven with the primary schools' way of life. Thus, when a re-shaping of school provision is on the agenda so as to reflect greater diversity of belief systems, it is to be expected that concerns and apprehensions will be involved. (pp. 2-3)

The report argued that the changes that have taken place in the country in the last 25 years have necessitated a rethink of the current model of primary schooling. It proposed school choice and divestment of denominational schools where a demand was evident, as appropriate policy responses. These proposals have strongly informed government policy over the last decade, although change in this direction has been halting. The report also identified what it terms as Stand-Alone Schools for particular attention. In doing so, it proposed that demographic and religious changes in recent decades present particular challenges for rural schools where choice is neither a realistic nor a desirable option.

At the same time, the state has become involved in areas of learning that it had previously left to families or to school management bodies to respond to. Developments such as the *Intercultural Guidelines* (NCCA, 2006) have sought to support positive engagement with increased cultural diversity in schools. The *Aistear Framework* (NCCA, 2009) recognised the importance of supporting the identity of young children through the central theme "Identity and Belonging." The proposals for a primary curriculum in *Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics* (NCCA, 2015) were an attempt to provide a curricular response to the diversity of religions and beliefs within the primary system. The *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* (NCCA, 2019a) recognised the significance of home languages for children for whom English was not their first language. The recent *Relationships and Sexuality Education Review* (NCCA, 2019b) has

sought to explore how changing understandings of gender, sexual, and family identity should be approached in primary and post-primary schools.

These developments are part of broader trends in education internationally. As societies become increasingly heterogenous, states across Europe attempt to provide adequate curricular responses. There have been numerous education papers and policies produced by European Union institutions around intercultural education, citizenship education, values education and the role of religions and beliefs in schools (ODIHR, 2007; Faas et al, 2014). On the one hand there is a clear policy desire at national and international levels to promote respect and tolerance for diverse identities within society, whilst on the other there is a strong urge to foster social coherence and a sense of belonging. Such responses not only reflect changes within society but, importantly for this research, highlight points of challenge where questions of identity and recognition emerge as significant.

1.6 Rural Stand-Alone Schools in a plural society

Within this changing educational landscape, the current situation provides particular challenges for Stand-Alone Schools, as recognised by the Forum's Report (2012). It characterised Stand-Alone Schools as those that served a small population and for whom choice of school under another patron was not an option. The report identified approximately 2000 schools outside urban areas in this category, schools that were either three kilometres or five kilometres from their nearest neighbouring school. According to the latest figures, this would account for just under two thirds of all Irish primary schools. Given the extent to which educational discourse in Ireland has become dominated by a discourse of choice as a response to the changing nature of society it would seem apparent that inadequate attention has been paid to the singular challenges faced by these schools.

The Forum's Report (2012) recognised not just the impracticality of school choice in such circumstances but also potentially the undesirability of school choice, noting that there "is an educational and social dividend to be gained from all the children in a rural setting, village or small town attending school together" (p. 73). Reflecting the challenges identified by Parekh (2005), the report proposed the need for such schools, the vast majority of which are denominational, to be inclusive to all children including those from differing religious or secular belief backgrounds (p. 73).

While primarily focused on questions of patronage, the report identified another key characteristic of such schools that requires consideration, which is their rurality. Given the sheer number of rural schools in Ireland, this remains an aspect of schooling that is massively under-explored in the research. Indeed, the report itself does not delve too deeply into the significance of rurality within the concept of the Stand-Alone School. In policy, where addressed, rural education largely seems synonymous with deficit and decline (DES, 2013). Where policy has addressed rural education in the last few decades, the primary focus has been on rationalisation and the closure or amalgamation of smaller schools (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1991; Coolahan 1994; DES, 2013). Indeed, the relative lack of success of policy attempts to rationalise rural primary schooling speaks not only to the politically sensitive nature of the context, but also to the important role that schools are understood to play in their communities, particularly communities that are isolated (Coolahan, 1994). Schools are understood as powerful symbols of communal identity at a local level in rural areas.

1.7 Denominational education and ethos

In the largely denominational Irish context, ethos emerges as a significant component in how schools navigate their experience of the plurality of identities in their schools. An

"elusive entity," Norman (2003) defines school ethos as "the atmosphere that emerges from the interaction of a number of aspects of school life, including teaching and learning, management and leadership, the use of images and symbols, rituals and practices, as well as goals and expectations" (p. 2). While a dynamic entity resulting from the confluence of many factors in the life of a school, it is the religious component of ethos that is most distinctive in the Irish primary school system. With almost 93% of schools nationally under denominational management it has been argued (Coolahan et al, 2012) that this state of affairs causes, "a mis-match between the inherited pattern of denominational school patronage and the rights of citizens in the much more culturally and religiously diverse contemporary Irish society" (p. 1).

Of course, school ethos is a dynamic process that emerges and is created and recreated within, and by, school communities. It is not a static feature of school life that manifests itself precisely in the same manner in schools that share patrons. Nonetheless, there may be certain common features across schools. Catholic schools are, or at least are intended to be, deeply informed by their Catholic ethos. Moreover, Catholic education does not just reside in the actions, practices and vision of the school but seeks to shape the development of the whole person, not merely the religious faith or life of the individual. It is concerned with the development of character. Norman (2003) states that this approach implies that in order for a person's character to be developed they must enter into a dialogue involving faith, life and culture. It is a position that is clearly not neutral in terms of identity. Given this position, there is clearly some inherent tension within schools in which children have or develop different belief identities, or identities that may not cohere with a particular view of the world.

1.8 Teachers and principals: between local and national

As the street level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) charged with negotiating these problematic spaces in their day-to-day working lives, it is imperative to understand the experience of teachers and principals working in this complex context. As rural Stand-Alone Schools are understood to have a symbolic communal significance, while also catering to a greater plurality of identities within their communities, teachers and principals have a role mediating emerging tensions. A great deal of the responsibility for negotiating this changing and shifting space, in the absence of clear policies or guidance, rests with the professionals on-the-ground.

Teachers and principals are both insiders and outsiders, acting as conduits between the national and local. On the one hand, teachers and principals communicate the policies, the curriculum and priorities of the state to the locality, while reflecting back the needs and priorities of the local back to the national. Thus, teachers are facing in both directions; and have a unique perspective on the intersection between national and local, policy and practice.

This study, therefore, explored how ten participants (five teachers and five principals) in rural Stand-Alone Schools in Galway, Roscommon and Mayo negotiated the plurality of identities that are part of their school communities. The study took a phenomenological approach that focused on the lived experience of participants and the ways in which they constructed meaning from this experience. In doing so, it explored some of the fault lines highlighted above and delineated further in the literature review below. In describing their experiences, participants elucidated some of the dilemmas that emerge from this greater plurality. Therefore, this thesis explores the changing identities of school communities, and, in turn, the impact that these changes have on the development of the identities of the

teachers and principals themselves. In doing so, it seeks to explore complex questions around recognition.

1.9 The structure of the thesis

This introductory chapter has outlined the rationale, the research questions and the context in which the research is situated. It also presented some of the key fault lines that shape and impact on the construction of identity in rural Stand-Alone Schools, and that are relevant to the research questions posed.

In *Chapter 2: Identity and recognition*, the thesis provides a theoretical framework that conceptualises identity construction in this study and informs the processes of analysis. It proceeds to examine Taylor's (1997) articulation of the need and demand for recognition in multicultural societies, and, in doing so, proposes the moral rationale for taking seriously the processes of identity construction in the increasingly plural contexts of rural primary schools.

Chapter 3: Universes of discourse presents some of the key strands that inform the processes of identity construction in rural Stand-Alone Schools and have been identified as being of significance by recent research and policy developments. The chapter concludes by focusing on the importance of the concept of rurality and rural education for identity construction within this study and as an under-researched strand within educational research. The final section of the chapter provides a brief examination of six anthologies written at the turn of the century to celebrate the pivotal role that local primary schools play within their communities in the west of Ireland.

Chapter 4: Methodology presents a rationale for and overview of the research design. It describes the phenomenological approach taken in the study, the rationale for sampling and the processes of data analysis that were undertaken. The chapter concludes by outlining the ethical considerations.

In *Chapter 5: Findings and discussion*, the thesis presents and discusses the findings from the research under four broad themes: school community in a time of uncertainty; teacher and principal identity; diversity and identity; communication and negotiation: 'being' and 'becoming'.

Finally, *Chapter 6: Concluding chapter and implications* outlines and discusses: (a) the relevance of the research; (b) the implications of the findings for policy and practice; (c) the limitations of the study; (d) the contribution to existing knowledge and, (e) future directions for research.

CHAPTER 2

IDENTITY AND RECOGNITION

2.1 Introduction

This thesis is concerned with perceptions of identity construction in rural Stand-Alone Schools in Ireland. It focuses on points of challenge that have emerged in recent years or decades, as perceived conflicts of identity come to light in the context of social and cultural change. Thus, this chapter sets out the theoretical concepts that are central to understanding

- why questions of identity are particularly pertinent in this context?
- what is meant by identity in the thesis?
- how identity construction is considered to work in the contexts under research?

These concepts are regarded as important in the explication of the data as it is discussed and analysed in *Chapter 5*. In describing why questions of identity are particularly pertinent in the context of Irish primary schools, the thesis draws on Charles Taylor's essay, "The Politics of Recognition" (1997). This essay outlines the challenges faced by multicultural societies in recognising the plurality of identities and cultures that co-exist. It also proposes ways in which such challenges may be faced, a subject to which the thesis will return in *Chapters 5* and *6*.

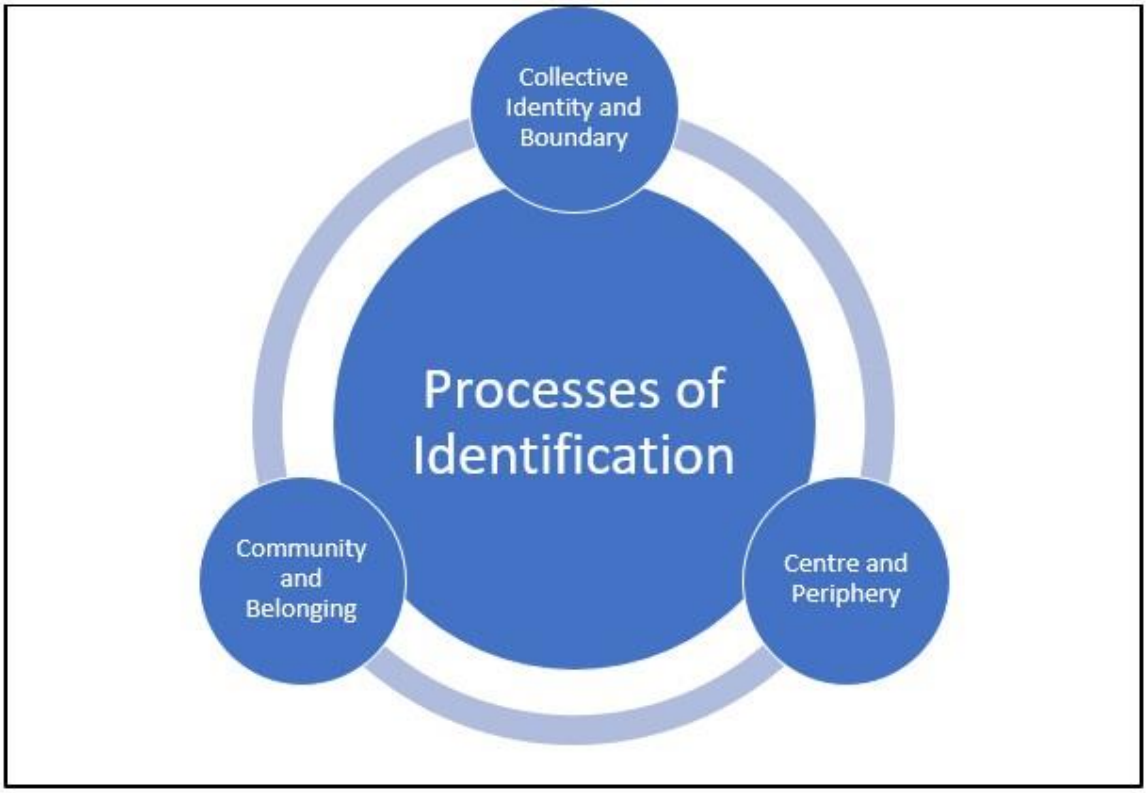
In describing how the thesis understands what is meant by identity and how it works on an interactive daily basis, it draws specifically on the work of Richard Jenkins, Fredrik Barth and Anthony P. Cohen. Together they provide a conceptual framework through which the thesis understands and analyses the processes of identity construction as they occur in school communities. The concepts that are outlined are:

- Collective identity and boundary
- Community and belonging

- Centre and periphery

These inter-related concepts are depicted graphically in Figure 2, below:

Figure 2: *Processes of identification*



2.2 Charles Taylor: identity and recognition

It would seem that Taylor's analysis of multiculturalism provides an appropriate lens through which to explore these questions and also provides a clear rationale for why these questions matter in contemporary Irish society. In his seminal essay, "The Politics of Recognition" (1997), Taylor identifies the concept of recognition as being key, not only to intercommunity relations, but also to notions of justice (White, 2016, p. 329). Taylor proposes that "not only contemporary feminism but also race relations and discussions of multiculturalism are undergirded by the premise that the withholding of recognition can be a form of oppression" (p. 36). This manifests in the public realm as diverse groups demand recognition of their various identities.

Taylor argues that the discourse of recognition is familiar on two levels: the private sphere and the public sphere. The former relates to the process of identity formation of individuals in dialogue and struggle with significant others, while the latter refers to the struggles for equal recognition by oppressed or minority groups at a political and public level. Key to both these levels is the process of struggle and dialogue with the other for this recognition. In the public realm, this is manifested as diverse groups demand recognition of their various identities. This demand for recognition is clearly evident in the world of primary schools. As primary schools become more diverse, changes to curricula as well as school structures are called for.

In a sense, these ideas emerge from a dialogue between these two levels, the private and the public. Taylor (1997) notes the way in which the emergence of the idea of an individualised identity in the eighteenth century leads to the notion of authenticity, the belief that the individual has a voice or identity particular or unique to them (pp. 28-30). This transfers to the collective, where the demand to have one's identity equally recognised, occurs not alone at the individual but at the group level. In proposing this analysis of the relationship between identity and recognition, Taylor (1997) rejects the "inward turn" of Kantian philosophy:

> In order to understand the close connection between identity and recognition, we have to take into account a crucial feature of the human condition that has been rendered almost invisible by the overwhelmingly monological bent of mainstream modern philosophy. (p. 32)

For Taylor there is a close connection between identity and recognition, and this connection derives from the way in which identity is formed or constructed. As Taylor (1997) explains, it is dialogical in nature:

This crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally *dialogical* character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our

identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. (p. 32) In order to become fully ourselves we engage in a process of dialogical identity construction. Therefore, for us to have our unique humanity vindicated requires recognition of this identity. It is this dialogical understanding of identity construction, at an individual and group level, that makes Taylor's perspective particularly relevant for this research. It is through our interactions with others that we come to an understanding of who we are and it is therefore within these interactions that we experience recognition or non-recognition. This articulation of identity and recognition coheres with the sociological concepts of identity construction defined below as key for this study.

Furthermore, a key component emerging from Taylor's analysis is the manner in which societies have sought to address this demand for equal recognition. Largely emerging from a rejection of "difference-blind" liberalism, which sees the question of rights as blind to the cultural, religious, ethnic or gender differences between people (Holtug, 2009), multiculturalist approaches have sought to redress the balance. The underlying premise is that some cultures, and Western societies, in particular, have imposed their worldview and values on others, underpinned by a sense of assumed superiority (Taylor, 1997, p. 63). This has led to the changing of curricula in order to give due recognition to those who had previously been excluded, based on the principle that "dominant groups tend to entrench their hegemony by inculcating an image of inferiority in the subjugated" (p. 66). This process seeks to redress this blindness to, or oppression of, minority cultures or groups. The attempt to address perceived historical, societal and educational imbalances is evident in the development of curriculum documents such as the *Intercultural Guidelines for Primary Schools* (NCCA, 2006), The *Primary Language Curriculum/Curriculum Teanga na Bunscoile* (NCCA, 2019a) and *Traveller Culture and History in the Curriculum: A Curriculum Audit* (NCCA, 2019c).

In denominational rural Stand-Alone Schools, traditionally considered monocultural and where education is experienced through the lens of a particular faith and worldview, Taylor's analysis raises a specific challenge: to what extent are the plurality of identities recognised?

However, while Taylor raises the question of recognition in education, applied in this instance to Stand-Alone Schools, he does not endorse a perspective in which the demands of recognition are absolute. Through the lens of curriculum, he proposes a middle way. He notes that, traditionally, curriculum has ostensibly been prescribed on the basis of *merit* or *worth*, or at least that is the conceit. While critics may argue that this had as much to do with questions of cultural hegemony as worth or merit, nonetheless, the question of worth comes into play.

Is a presumption of equal worth necessitated by the demands of equal recognition? Taylor (1997) ultimately questions the possibility of making judgements on worth or merit based on standards that are ultimately, and paradoxically, reflective of a particular ethnocentric culture. He proposes finding a midpoint between pole-positions:

> There must be something midway between the inauthentic and homogenizing demand for recognition of equal worth, on the one hand, and the self-immurement within ethnocentric standards, on the other. There are other cultures, and we have to live together more and more, both on a world scale and commingled in each society. (p. 72)

He rejects the possibility of developing "an ethic of communication or discussion from purely formalistic considerations grounded on *a priori*" (Beaulieu, 2005, p. 117), which he suggests forms an aspect of Habermas' work. Rather than develop a set of guidelines, or a framework, or rule, from *a priori*, Taylor proposes the idea of an "overlapping consensus", stating that, "it is a better way of being than simply going to war with everybody who disagrees with us on the smallest details" (p. 117). This is a position that emerges from encounter and engagement, from experience and is formed in the kind of dialogue that Taylor argues is so

fundamental to being human and forming our identities. He argues that it is "about what flows from our conception of the good and the kinds of compromises we'll have to make politically in order to realize our conception of the good" (pp. 117-118). Therefore, Taylor's analysis of the challenges that emerge in pluralist societies raises important questions for the current Stand-Alone context. For this specific research, Taylor's work poses the question as to how the Stand-Alone context recognises the increasing plurality of identities in an authentic way within the framework of their traditionally constituted schools. Through his nuanced analysis he both raises these challenging questions and attempts to point a direction forward through the seeming impasse.

2.3 What is identity?

In order to get an understanding of why questions of identity and recognition may be significant for Stand-Alone Schools, it is important to make explicit how identity is understood to transact on a daily basis in these contexts. The articulation of identity in this thesis builds on Taylor's dialogical concept of identity and is concerned with the day-to-day interactions of individuals as they live their lives. This section, therefore, develops the concept of identity that is drawn on in this thesis, in order to demonstrate its relevance to analysis of the research. Identity is a concept that is at once omnipresent, but also, somewhat opaque. Duff (2015) defines identity as:

> how people see or imagine themselves, how they relate to the social world, and how they are seen or positioned by others in their various social, cultural, and linguistic settings, and thus their sense of belonging to and legitimacy within particular social groups near and far. (p. 61)

As a broad definition, this demonstrates some of the complexity of the concept. It speaks to how people see themselves, understand who they are and their place in the various social worlds in which they inhabit. However, this thesis does not consider identity to be some '*thing*' that is fixed, rigid or stable, but rather that it is fluid and dynamic.

Reflecting postmodern concepts on identity, it proposes an approach in which identity "is no longer seen as an overarching and unified framework but, instead, as being fragmented along with the multiple social worlds that people engage in" (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011, p. 309). Hall (1990) contrasts this concept of identity with a preceding understanding that emphasised greater continuity and stability:

> In essence, the argument is that the old identities, which stabilized the social world for so long, are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. This so-called 'crisis of identity' is seen as part of a wider process of change, which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies and undermining the frameworks, which gave individuals stable anchorage in the social world. (p. 274)

The clear implication being that the ever-increasing complexity of a globalised world has led to this 'crisis of identity' and the emergence of more fragmented and unstable identities, with identity becoming a greater concern for study in the social sciences, not to mention education. Indeed, reflecting these developments Hargreaves (2017) has dubbed this educational epoch, *The Era of Identity, Engagement and Wellbeing*. However, the contrast of fixed and stable identities in the past with more destabilised contemporary identities may largely be illusory. Indeed, the title of Erikson's seminal work, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), suggests that a certain amount of instability and uncertainty may be inherent in identity, irrespective of epoch. However, Hall's description may speak to people's general understanding of identity or at least to how identity has increasingly come to be understood.

In expressing a scepticism towards understandings that reify identity(ties) as *things* or *facts* that are fixed, this work views identity as being interactional in nature and constructed through the ongoing processes of dialogue and engagement with others. In this way identity involves an ongoing process of identification. As Jenkins (2014) notes:

> To insist that identity is not fixed, immutable or primordial, that it is utterly sociocultural in its origins and that it is somewhat negotiable and flexible, is the right place to begin if we are to understand how identification works. (p. 20)

The process(es) of identification then is (are) entirely inextricable from the concept of identity used. The research is concerned with *how* identity is produced and reproduced, and considers, after Taylor (1997), that "there is no such thing as inward generation, monologically understood" (p. 37). Our identities do not stand alone. They are innately linked to our interactions with others in the social world, and in the case of this thesis, the social world revolves around the school communities in Stand-Alone contexts. Therefore, while concerned with collectivities, and collective identification, the thesis understands labels such as 'social identity' or 'cultural identity' (and indeed for that matter 'religious identity' or 'ethnic identity') as describing complex processes and resists reductive definitions.

Although concerned with how identity and the processes of identification can be challenging and problematic within primary education, the processual emphasis in the thesis also avoids simplistic binary oppositions in its understanding of identity. Much liberal and Marxist theory is understood to construct identity in binary terms between oppressor and oppressed:

> By dividing up cultures into two separate, discrete classes (oppressed and oppressor) it implies a false homogeneity of both parts, reifying them, and thus tends to downplay the interconnections, the links, the fluid boundaries and exchanges. This homogeneity of cultures can also (dangerously, in my view) portray a 'pureness', as though the culture is an organic whole protected from 'pollution' or 'contamination' in coming into contact with other cultures and social formations. (Peters, 2005, p. 437)

While such an approach may not alone be unhelpful, it presents a view of identity that is too neat and does not account for the multiplicity of ways in which individuals identify themselves at different times and in different contexts. It may also encourage the reification of identities, a process in itself that may, however unintentionally, become oppressive. This

thesis, therefore, understands identity as a complex, dynamic and relatively fluid entity that is continually in the process of being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed through our interactions with the social world. The following sections outline the components of this process that are considered to be most pertinent to the study in hand.

2.4 Identity as a process

The thesis focuses on the processes of identity and identification, and, is concerned with how people come to construct their own identities, as well as those of the school communities and members of these communities. Therefore, this thesis understands identity as a feature of human life that is inherently processual in nature.

As Jenkins (2014) notes, "(i)dentification…is the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectivities and between individuals and collectivities, of relationships of similarity and difference" (p. 19). These relationships of similarity and difference are, "the dynamic principles of identification" (p. 19) and at the very heart of the concept of identity in this study. Much contemporary debate views identity as emerging from processes of differentiation (Hall, 1996; Benhabib, 1996). However, Jenkins (2014) rejects the common concept of identity as being constructed primarily on the basis of difference, but rather sees it as an ongoing dialectic in which individuals and collectivities are constantly moving back and forth between similarity and difference. In this way people are continuously and simultaneously constructing and reinforcing perceived similarities, while establishing differences with others and other groups. One does not, necessarily, come before the other. In this way identity can "only be understood as a process of 'being' or 'becoming'" and can never be considered a settled or final matter (p. 18).

A key implication of this dynamic process for this thesis is the inevitability of patterns of inclusion and exclusion. As Jenkins proposes:

> Identity can help us to comprehend the formation of the fateful pronoun ‘we’ and to reckon with the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that it cannot help but to create. This may be one of the most troubling aspects of all: the fact that the formation of every ‘we’ must leave out or exclude a ‘they’, that identities depend on the marking of difference. (p. 22)

In describing this process of identification, and its implications, it is worth pointing out that it is not ‘real’ similarities or differences’ that the work is concerned with, but rather constructions or attributions of similarity or difference. It is also worth noting that in this dialectical process, some similarities or differences are overlooked or ignored, while others are attributed significance (Barth, 1969). Perceived similarities and differences are drawn upon in largely subjective ways to construct and maintain identities. In the research certain attributed similarities and differences are privileged and acknowledged as significant while others are diminished or overlooked in a process that is culturally and socially determined.

2.4.1 Collectivities, collective identification and boundaries

People construct identities for themselves and for others in the interplay between attributed similarity and difference. Theorists commonly refer to collective identities as either categories or identity groups (Tajfel andand Turner, 1979; Hogg, 2000; Korostelina, 2007). Categories largely refer to people who have ‘objectively’ been identified as belonging to the same identity or collectivity. This stems from a process of external categorisation that identifies people according to categories such as class, ethnicity, language or, indeed, education. It is not necessarily the case that people identified in such a way will be conscious of their identification. In contrast, identity groups emerge from a process of selfidentification, in which people consciously construct a shared identity. In this way it is a ‘subjective’ process in which people are aware of the groups to which they belong (Jenkins, 2014). This can broadly be described as the difference between the ‘subjectivism’ and ‘objectivism’ described by Bourdieu (1977; 1990). As the thesis is primarily concerned with the processes through which people construct meaning and identity in their particular social

worlds, the concept of identity group may be more relevant. However, it is important to note that while processes of categorisation may take place a long way from the realities of people's daily lives, in line with Foucault's concept of governmentality, "categorising people is always potentially an intervention in their lives, and often more" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 110). Indeed, people are often aware of these processes and the outcomes of these processes, and therefore this knowledge shapes how people come to see themselves and how they come to see others. It could be said that the distinction between categories and groups is, therefore, not watertight. For the purposes of this thesis, the terms *collective identity, collective identification* and *collectivities* will be used.

Thus, the concept of boundary emerges at the point(s) where distinct identities are understood to meet and diverge. This is a concept that is significant for the way in which identity is understood in Stand-Alone Schools, in terms of creating 'we' and 'they', and the way in which the participants make sense of the social world in which they act. In this concept the work of Fredrik Barth is particularly helpful. Barth (2000) notes that the concept of boundary sets "limits that mark social groups off from each other" and "provides a template for that which separates distinct categories of the mind" (p. 17). In this way people psychologically divide up the social world in a way that resembles the dividing up of the physical world. Barth notes that in recognising the cultural diversity in images and concepts, he is led to assert that "a boundary is a particular conceptual construct that people sometimes impress on the world" (2000, p. 19). In this way, it is an analytical tool used to distinguish between one collectivity and another. While Barth's primary interest related to questions of ethnicity, Jenkins (2014) asserts that his approach is generalisable to other conceptions of identity. The focus of Barth's approach to identity, for Jenkins, avoids studying the 'content' of ethnicity or the 'cultural' characteristics of ethnic groups, "the focus of investigation shifts outwards to processes of ethnic boundary maintenance and group recruitment" (p. 123). In

this way, “shared common sense, common knowledge and behaviour are better understood as products of boundary maintenance, rather than as defining characteristics of group organisation” (p. 123). However, the concept of boundary is fraught with the potential for misinterpretation and misrepresentation. Barth (1969) cautions against a view of boundaries (and indeed, collective identities) as rigid and unmoveable, and as mentioned above, considers the concept as something imposed on the social world in order to make sense of processes of identification. Therefore, boundaries are somewhat fluid, but nonetheless, they “persist despite a flow of personnel across” (Barth, 1969, p. 9). Boundaries are not *things* that can be found some *place*, but rather manifest themselves in interactions between people who identify themselves collectively in different ways (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). The construction of these boundaries, through processes of interaction are, therefore, significant in the continuing sense of a collective identity. Thus, Jenkins (2014) notes that:

> …difference is organised, in the first instance, by individuals in interaction; but not all interactions are equally significant in this respect. The continuity of ethnic collectivities-a better expression for the moment than groups or categories- is particularly dependent upon boundary maintenance. (p. 124)

It is, therefore, at the boundaries that ethnicity becomes meaningful for ethnic groups (Barth, 1969). Importantly for this study, it is something that takes place at the micro level of community (and, indeed, the individual) as well as at the macro level of ethnicity. This point is made by Cohen (1982a) who notes:

The same is true of localities too, and not surprisingly, for ethnicity and locality are both expressions of culture. Thus one can state a more general principle: that people become aware of their culture when they stand at the boundaries. (p. 3) Therefore, the act of boundary maintenance is not merely preservative, a process of protecting and fossilising collective identities, but rather is dynamic and generative. In this way it allows individuals and members of collectivities to maintain a sense of continuity, even as great change is taking place (Cohen, 1985). And finally, it takes place at the local, micro level, as well as

the broader macro level. Therefore, while boundaries are not considered fixed or rigid, they are nonetheless inherent in the process of identification. It is argued that the way in which these boundaries are constructed and maintained will have implications for the way in which people are 'included' and 'excluded' in school communities, and the subtle ways in which recognition is given or withheld.

2.4.2 Communities and belonging

This thesis proposes that the rural Stand-Alone Schools are to a certain extent a special case due to their singular context. *Chapter 3* will outline the 'blindness' in the research and in the literature generally to the rural, and rural education, in particular, and argues that this contributes to a misunderstanding of schooling as it takes place in these contexts. Therefore, in addressing questions of identity as they pertain to rural schools, it may be helpful to look to A.P. Cohen's (1982a; 1982b) work, previously mentioned, on rural communities in Britain. This builds on previous concepts but proposes a distinctiveness in the way in which identity is constructed and maintained in rural communities.

In postulating the potential for 'rural communities' to represent a form or forms of cultural diversity, Cohen (1982a) asserted that rural communities constructed identity at a local level that could be distinct from more macro level identities that were attributed. He rejected the notion that in industrialised states "local distinctiveness has been eliminated by ad-mass, or that 'community' is merely symptomatic of the false consciousness which conceals the reality of class and state" (p. 3). Jenkins (2014) argues that Cohen's concept of the symbolic construction of community is "indispensable, exploring how people construct a sense of themselves and their fellows as 'belonging' *in* a particular locality or setting of relationships and interaction, and *with*-if not *to*-each other" (p. 137). This is hugely significant for the research in hand and the way in which participants understand identity and belonging within their local communities. For Cohen (1982b), belonging:

> implies very much more than merely having been born in the place. It suggests that one is an integral piece of the marvellously complicated fabric which constitutes the community; that one is a recipient of its proudly distinctive and consciously preserved culture-a repository of its traditions and values, a performer of its hallowed skills, an expert in its idioms and idiosyncrasies. (p. 20)

This articulation points to the power that the concept of community has for those in rural areas, such as in this study, in constructing an identity based around a sense of belonging to a locality with the school as a focal point. Following on from this, Jenkins (2014) proposes a set of general propositions that set out a framework for community based on Cohen's concept:

> - Community membership depends upon the symbolic construction and signification of a mask of similarity which all can wear, an umbrella of solidarity under which all can shelter.
> - The similarity of communal membership is thus imagined.
> - Inasmuch as it is a potent symbolic presence in people's lives, however, it is not imaginary. (p. 137)

These symbols, therefore, support the generation of a shared sense of belonging, with community itself being a symbolic construction, and community members developing a shared sense of things. In this understanding of community, what matters is "not that people see or understand things the same, or that they see and understand things differently from other communities, but that their shared symbols allow them to *believe* that they do" (p. 139). In describing the experience, and the way in which the members of the remote Scottish island community of Whalsay create a shared sense of belonging, Cohen (1982b) notes the merging of a set of symbols, such as kinship, with the community. In doing so, they:

> …merge a tradition, a folk history, with the present. They thus make time and place a vocabulary for expressing their attachments and associations, a vocabulary which is so fluid that it can serve and mask the conflicting demands of the different sections to which they belong. (p. 20)

In this way the symbols serve a practical purpose, allowing for the reconciliation of the two key themes of continuity and change. As Cohen (1982b) adds, clearly:

> the structural basis of the society *has* changed. The relative importance attached to its various elements alters over time and with use. Yet the change is masked by the rhetoric of continuity which Whalsay people employ in their own accounts of social organisation. (p. 23)

In such circumstances, Jenkins (2014) notes, "the hardening of an apparently 'traditional' identity may actually serve as a smokescreen, behind which substantial change can take place with less conflict and dislocation" (p. 140). In the study in hand, the local school acts as a powerful symbol in the construction of local identity, providing a sense of continuity against a backdrop of significant social change.

In 'fringe' communities such as Whalsay, and rural communities at the periphery generally, people become aware of their distinctiveness and their culture through the evaluation of everyday practices, rather than formalised ceremonial displays. These activities and practices become even more value-laden in such communities, which are "continually exposed to metropolitan cultures which declare them to be parochial and irrelevant to contemporary circumstances" (Cohen, 1982a, p. 6).

Cohen's work is important in that it highlights the distinctiveness of rural communities and the way in which rural communities construct identity. This is significant for this research for two reasons. Identities in rural schools and communities are usually (and unthinkingly) considered to be part of, or subsets of, macro level identities, and are rarely considered to form identities or collective identities in their own right. For example, rural Catholic schools are understood as Catholic schools. That there may be a distinction or divergence between the two in terms of identity is never countenanced. And this occurs in the myriad of ways in which we can think of identity. The underlying assumption is that the same processes of identification take place in rural schools as they do in urban schools, because these schools and communities are subsets of the mainstream communities. Therefore, data extrapolated from urban contexts transfer automatically to rural contexts. Secondly, on the

rare occasions when rural schools or communities are considered to form some distinct identity, it is usually considered as deficit and as synonymous with backwardness or lag, a concept explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

2.4.3 Centres and peripheries

The concept of peripherality is significant in Cohen's work on rural communities in Britain and becomes a key factor in the construction of shared identities at the local level. This concept is significant for this research as the schools in questions can all be considered to be geographically and culturally peripheral. This section outlines this concept and how it is relevant to the research in hand. Fernandez (2000) proposes that:

> where there are boundaries there are centres and peripheries. It proceeds from the assumption that the experience of being in the peripheries shapes the sense of identity and the way of thinking, and also it assumes that centres have need of peripheries, not only for their own identity but because there is always something to be learned from the peripheries (p. 117).

In peripheral communities, people are aware of their existence at the margins of the mainstream culture, and this informs the symbols on which they draw and the practices in which they engage. As the participants in this study work in communities that are a long way from the centres of mainstream, dominant culture production, Cohen's (1982b) concept of peripherality becomes particularly helpful. In these communities:

> (T)he sense of belonging, of what it means to belong, is constantly evoked by whatever means come to hand: the use of language, the shared knowledge of genealogy or ecology, joking, the solidarity of sect, the aesthetics of subsistence skills. This persistent 'production' of culture and attribution of value becomes an essential bulwark against the cultural imperialism of the political and economic centres, and thus provides fundamental means by keeping the communities alive and fruitful. (p. 6)

The use of the term 'culture' by Cohen seems to strongly correspond to the concept of identity, or rather the processes of identity construction described in this section. Indeed,

Cohen later speaks of culture being the source of identity within these communities[1]. However, it is the constant construction of identity within these communities, in their participation in shared practices, that ensures the survival of this collective sense of belonging and a sense of distinctiveness. Cohen (1982b) further argues that this "consciousness and valuing of difference—the awareness of commitment and of belonging to *a* culture—is, as I suggest above, a ubiquitous feature of peripheral communities" (p. 6). It is this valuing that is ultimately the condition of their survival. As he notes elsewhere, fundamental to identity and identity-making at the periphery, "is the boundary between itself and the centre" (Cohen, 2000, p. 166). There is, however, an ambiguity in this process, as "the condition of peripherality is one of contested boundaries, hesitant admission or even denial of homogeneity, and a very uncertain sense of continuities" (Fernandez, 2000, p. 136).

The school communities in question are all to varying degrees—geographically, socially, culturally and economically, peripheral. However far from the centres of policy-making, they are nonetheless, as Catholic schools, considered culturally to be part of the 'centre'.

2.5 Conclusion

This study views identity as an ongoing and complex process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction in which individuals may move between different identities, or draw on different components of their identity (religious, ethnic, cultural, gender), depending on context and role. Drawing on Jenkins (2014), this research sees identity as being constructed on an ongoing basis in a dynamic process in which people move

[1] In this work Cohen takes the definition of culture proposed by Clifford Geertz (1975): "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning" (p. 5).

back and forth between perceived similarity and difference. In this way people are continuously and simultaneously constructing and reinforcing perceived similarities, while establishing differences with others and other groups. Of particular importance for the questions being explored in this study are the concepts of boundary, periphery and community (Jenkins, 2014; Barth, 2000; Cohen, 1982), which are drawn upon in *Chapter 5*. Building on these concepts of identity construction, the work of Taylor (1997) is pertinent in bringing to the fore the challenges that arise in the context of greater plurality. As primary schools increasingly grapple with questions of religious, gender, sexual and cultural identity, the potential for non-recognition or misrecognition emerges as evermore significant.

Table 1, on the next page, provides an overview of the conceptual framework. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) a conceptual framework "lays out the key factors, constructs, or variables, and presumes relationships among them" (p. 440). The framework below provides an outline of the key theories, concepts and contextual factors described in this chapter as well as in *Chapters 3* and *4* and that are considered significant for this research.

Table 1: *Conceptual framework*

<table>
<tr><th colspan="4">Conceptual framework</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Title
Community and identity in rural Stand-Alone Schools in the west of Ireland: The perspectives of teachers and principals</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Key theories
Identity construction: Jenkins (2014), Barth (1969, 1989, 2000), Cohen (1982a, 1982b, 1985)
Identity and recognition: Taylor (1997)
Phenomenology-Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Key concepts</td></tr>
<tr><td>Identity construction</td><td colspan="2">Context</td><td>Methodology</td></tr>
<tr><td>Identity and recognition
Collective identity and boundary
Community and belonging
Centre and periphery</td><td colspan="2">Rurality and rural education</td><td>Philosophy of phenomenology
Lived experience
Meaning attribution
Connection to theory and context</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Contextual features and moments of contestation
History of primary schooling in Ireland
Social change
Role of schools in mediating social change
Denominational primary schooling
The place of rural Stand-Alone schools in the west of Ireland
Pressure on education system to respond
Emerging liberal, plural, secular society vs traditional, religious, community-based schools.</td><td colspan="2">Policy responses
Forum on Patronage and Pluralism
Policy of choice in the system
Emergence of Mult-denominational Education: Educate Together and Community National School
Intercultural Guidelines, ERB and Ethics, Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile, RSE, Sharing Inclusive Practice Network</td></tr>
</table>

Teachers' and principals' experience

- How teachers and principals understand and experience school and community
- How teachers and principals negotiate identity on the ground
- Moments of challenge: religion, language, gender, sexuality

CHAPTER 3

UNIVERSES OF DISCOURSE

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the contextual factors of the Irish education system that impact significantly on the way in which a plurality of identities is negotiated by teachers and principals in Stand-Alone Schools in Ireland. It also situates the study within the context of the international literature on rural education. To get an understanding of why questions of identity have emerged in the Irish schools in the way that they do in this research, it is important to look at the specific factors that shape or frame the interface between school and identity at the local level. Therefore, this chapter provides a brief historical overview of the emergence of the primary sector in Ireland; its evolution over time; the significance of ethos in the Irish context; curriculum responses to changing circumstances, and the particularities of education in Irish rural contexts. It also provides a brief review of research on rural education in order to situate the experience of Irish schools within the international literature. This is particularly pertinent given the dearth of specific research on rural schooling in the Irish context. According to Gans (2012), for a proper explanation of social behaviour both structural and cultural understandings are necessary. Indeed, as Gewirtz and Cribb (2008) argue, while individuals may largely choose and negotiate their own identities, "these choices are limited by the discourses that are available to them" (p. 40). While the language of choice used here may jar somewhat with the interactionist and dialogical concept of identity proposed in this thesis (the use of the term choice may itself be an example of the influence of

available discourses), it underlines the significance of available discourses in informing the ways in which people construct their own identity. This finds resonance in the work of Barth (1989), who describes the people he studied in Bali as participating in, "multiple, more or less discrepant, universes of discourse" and whose "cultural construction of reality springs not from one source and is not of one piece" (p. 130). Therefore, this thesis proposes that these largely structural factors, taken together, shape the discursive context in which questions of identity are negotiated daily in schools and classrooms in the Irish context.

3.2 Historical context

In Ireland, the dual processes of state sponsored nation building and increasing religious dominance within education were to have a lasting impact on the education system. From the emergence of national primary schooling in the 19th century, these forces were to be the driving dynamics within the system for over a century. They were to impact significantly on the long-term structures of the system, on how people understood the role of education in society and on what transacted on the ground at school level. They also provided a significant framework for subsequent developments and a backdrop against which subsequent movements emerged, formed and reacted. This historical backdrop, therefore, has implications for the way identity translates in practice. These historical developments in education shape the cultural narratives that have informed and continue to inform the processes of identity construction as they transact on a daily basis in schools.

3.2.1 Primary education and identity in the 19th century: origins

Increasingly, in the 19th century, the state became ever more present in the day-to-day experience of the lives of people in a way that it had not been previously, reflecting "a combination of paternalism, social control and social engineering" (Smyth, 2017, p. 7). Nowhere was this more evident than in education. The century saw the emergence of

statesponsored primary schooling throughout Europe, at the vanguard of the various nationbuilding projects. Harp (1998) has described the role of schooling in the broad process of nation building in the following terms:

> In the nineteenth century, every Western nation-state attempted to create and maintain a national consciousness among its citizens. Primary schools were central in nation building, which consisted of efforts to inculcate a loyalty to the nation in common folk whose identities were usually local and religious in nature, in people who saw themselves as from a certain village and as Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish-but not really as citizens of a nation. (p. 4)

The discourses, divisions and concerns that were instrumental in shaping these systems in this period were to have a significant impact on the structure of these systems well into the 20th century and beyond. In this way, with the school system as a key driver, the nation-state attempted to foster a sense of national identity to supplant, or at least to coalesce with, local, regional and religious identities. These structures and struggles were to have a considerable bearing on the experiences of children who attended primary school throughout this period.

In Ireland the attempt to create a national school system was complicated by the religious tensions that were a determining feature of society at the time, and were highly enmeshed in political questions of the day. As Foster (1989) has noted, by the 1830s "the confessional basis of Irish political identification has become highly accentuated" (p. 302), and this had significant implications for the development of the national school system. Written in 1831, the "Stanley Letter" is considered the founding document for the modern national primary school system in Ireland. Although there were over 11,000 primary schools in existence in Ireland at the time, the letter sets out a vision for a coordinated national system of primary education (Coolahan, 1981).

Given the religious tension in the country, and with the Catholic Church growing in confidence, the school system became an important battleground for influence over the population. It is therefore significant that the informing principle outlined in the "Stanley

Letter" was that the primary school system should be non-denominational with religious instruction taught separately on specifically nominated days by clergy from the various denominations (Walsh, 2011). This was notable for two reasons: it set out a vision of education devoid of proselytism and seemed to demonstrate the state's acceptance of the legitimacy of the Catholic voice in education (Walsh, 2011). However, a key characteristic of the model introduced was that it was financially supported from the centre, but managed and run locally, by trustees. As the century progressed this local management increasingly came to be dominated by local clergymen. As we will see later in the thesis, this localism, though often overlooked in research and debate around primary education, is a striking feature of the Irish system. Over the course of the century the secular or pluralist (to use these terms anachronistically) intention informing the letter made way, as the various denominations asserted increasing control over the primary school system, with the Catholic Church emerging as the dominant player. By the turn of the 20th century, the Catholic hierarchy could state that it was generally, "as denominational almost as we could desire" (quoted in Walsh, 2011, p. 49).

Nonetheless, as the creation of a national school system was a political response aimed at controlling a colony and socialising the Irish population, the state used what methods it could to create loyalty and a common identity among the people (Walsh, 2016b). These developments manifested themselves in numerous ways, not least through the content of prescribed curricula, programmes and teacher education. In Ireland, the content of what was taught in primary schools was consciously directed towards the creation of a commonality with Britain and the British Empire. Little reference was made in the curriculum, or in reading materials used in schools, to Irish culture, history, or the Irish language (Walsh, 2016b).

It is difficult to gauge the success of such processes, and, while the influence of the state may have been hampered by the ongoing antagonistic relationship with the Catholic Church throughout the century, such emphasis often overestimates the power at the centre to impose itself on society and underestimates forces at the margins that exert their own influence. In her exploration of national identity and religion in provincial France, Ford (1993) challenges the centre-based analysis of acculturation, in which, "national identity, defined as a curiously reified object, is something imposed by the center (*sic*) on the periphery: Provincial France became integrated into the political life of the French nation as national political issues and urban values replaced those at the borders of France" (p. 5). In the Irish context, the analytical emphasis on the role of State and Church at the centre often overlooks how individuals and social groups come to define and redefine themselves, and their role in the processes of identity formation. For example, Foster (1989) notes that it was in remote rural areas where the Catholic Church was least influential (p. 341). Nonetheless, at a macro level the desire of the state to cultivate national identity and of the Church to exert increasing influence through the school system, were substantial threads running through primary education of the period and were to significantly inform the development of the system subsequently. Arguably, unlike in other European states, the primary school system in Ireland had less impact in supplanting religious identities with a national one, but rather the emergence of the Church as the significant player in education bolstered and reinforced the construction of a strong religious identity.

3.2.2 "Creating the nation": church and state symbiosis

The legacy of a state sponsored education system that was denominationally managed and controlled would significantly shape education policy over the course of the 20th century and impact significantly on the lives of children in school. Post independence, the primary education system became the key player in inculcating the cultural nationalism at the heart of

the newly independent state (Coolahan, 1981, p. 38), attempting to undo the work of primary schooling in the 19th century. In essence, what "was attempted following independence was a cultural revolution with the schools acting as the agents of change" (p. 7). In the eyes of the state and the dominant ideology of the era the primary goal of education was the mastery of the Irish language. Within this cultural and political context history was to take on an important role in strengthening 'national character'. This vision of education was to inform policy up to the 1970s. In essence this was the mirror image of and reaction to the British state's attempt to inculcate loyalty and a sense of Britishness in Ireland.

Therefore, the government was not concerned with questions of school ownership or patronage, which led to the development of a symbiotic relationship between church and state (Walsh, 2011). The state was content to allow the Catholic Church its dominant position within the education system, providing a service it could not afford (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). While ostensibly Bunreacht na hÉireann/The Irish Constitution (1937) accorded a high priority to pluralist values, it facilitated the devolution of the education system to the denominational institutions (Daly, 2009). Thus, the Constitution states in Article 42.4 that the State should 'provide for' free primary education, rather than directly providing free education. In this way the State was responsible for funding the schools through the various denominations. This, in turn, provided the religious bodies, and the Catholic Church in particular, with enormous influence over the values and attitudes that informed teaching and learning within the primary school system. This was particularly the case as the predominant understanding at the time was that, "the major function of primary education, and for those who went on to secondary education, was religious, moral and intellectual instruction" (Tussing, 1978, p. 54). The education provided in schools, therefore, was rich in literacy and morality, and significantly influenced by the Catholic Church (Walsh, 2016a). The

primary concern of the state regarding primary education in this period was directed towards the larger cultural nationalist project. As the Catholic Church acquiesced in this regard, they were left to their own devices in developing the content of instruction in values, morals and ethics. As late as 1969, the Assistant Secretary of the Department of Education, Tomas Ó Floinn could declare that:

> The purpose of education in a given society should reflect the philosophy of that society. Ours is a Christian society. We should have no apology to offer for an educational policy which consistently seeks to inculcate Christian values and principles. (New Curriculum for Primary Schools, An Múinteoir Náisiúnta, Vol. 14, No. 6, December 1969, p. 5)

The religious identity of the education system was clearly entrenched within the public mindset.

3.2.3 A growing individuality: child-centred and multi-denominational education

Yet, from the mid-1960s in particular, the cultural nationalist discourse that had dominated education began to be challenged by other discourses, most notably an economistic discourse. The focus began to shift as the education system came to be seen as an investment in economic growth and national prosperity (Walsh, 2016a). The *Investment in Education Report*, conducted in conjunction with the OECD (1966), highlighted the deficiencies in the Irish education system. Increasingly, the role of education in driving economic growth became a powerful concept. Indeed, Inglis (1998) and Garvin (2004) have argued that a significant factor in the economic delay of the country was a pervasive Catholic ethos that opposed the kind of individualism that was necessary for a modern capitalist economy to emerge. The *Primary School Curriculum* (1971) signalled a change in direction, with an emphasis on child-centred pedagogical approaches and a move away from the political project of earlier decades. This signalled a move towards an education system that was more focused on an understanding of the individual as an important actor in the economic, social and cultural worlds. Of course, while this appeared to be a seismic shift in

policy, the principles and practices at the heart of the curriculum did not necessarily become common place in Irish classrooms in the following decades (Walsh, 2016b).

While a greater emphasis was increasingly placed on the role of education in economic growth and the importance of a more child-centred approach to learning, there was still strong symbiosis between church and state. The *Rules for National Schools* (1965) stated:

> The state provides for free primary education for children in national schools and gives explicit recognition to the denominational character of these schools. (Department of Education, 1965, 4.4)

This was the first time that the state recognised the school system as being essentially denominational in character. The *Rules* also highlighted the significance of Religious Instruction in the school curriculum, underlining the inherently religious character of primary schools, noting:

> Of all parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important. Religious Instruction is a fundamental part of the school course, and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school (Department of Education, 1965).

However, Walsh (2012) notes that the changing landscape in the 1960s signalled a more hands on approach by the state and a gradual shift in the balance of power between 'the state and the private educational authorities'. O'Toole (2015) notes that these changes paved the way for

> the establishment of boards of management in 1975, the emergence of the Dalkey, Bray and North Dublin Project Schools in the 1970s, the establishment of Educate Together in 1984 and of the National Parents' Council in 1985…(p. 91).

The arrival of multi-denominational education in the form of the Dalkey, North Dublin and Bray Projects, along with the establishment of Educate Together signalled the emergence of more pluralist and individualist perspectives in primary education. The Educate Together

Charter, originally published in 1990 but, subsequently amended in 1999 and republished in 2004, marked a key milestone in recognising the diversity of identities within the state and the need for education to respect this diversity. Article 2.1 notes that

> Children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds have a right to an education that respects their individual identity whilst exploring the different values and traditions of the world in which they live (p. 1).

Throughout the document there is a strong emphasis on the need to respect and recognise identity at the level of the school and the child. The importance of recognising identity is something that is increasingly being asserted as significant in national discourse. Children's identities are not simply being taken for granted, or indeed as something to be imposed, but rather children are now considered as having an active role in the construction of identity. This reflects international developments, such as the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) which advocated recognition and respect for the multiple identities of the child as well as the national values of the state in which they were educated (Article 29).

3.3 Contemporary questions

As is the case with all systems, the historical roots of the modern primary school system have had significant consequences for contemporary features and developments. As Grace (1995) notes, many "contemporary problems or crises in education are, in themselves, the surface manifestations of deeper historical, structural and ideological contradictions in education policy" (p. 3). The role of ethos in a largely denominational system has been highlighted as a critical factor in the negotiation of complex questions of identity in an increasingly multicultural society (Donnelly, 2000; Faas, 2010). Equally, recognising the challenges for education in increasingly diverse environments, as highlighted by Parekh

(2005), there have been numerous policy and curriculum responses that have framed the discursive context around questions of values and identity.

3.3.1 The question of ethos

In recent decades there has been a growing sense that the structures of the Irish primary school system are at odds with the changing and evolving nature of Irish society (Coolahan et al, 2012). This section will set out to briefly explore what constitutes a broad understanding of ethos, and why, specifically in the Irish context it can be characterised as challenging. Given the singularity of the Irish context it seems that ethos plays, or is considered, to play, a particularly significant role regarding questions of identity in school life. The public *Consultation on ERB and Ethics* (NCCA, 2017), highlighted the central role that school ethos has in how sensitive questions may be addressed in different school types and the challenges that may arise from this. The recent consultation (NCCA, 2019) on RSE has raised similar questions. However, although we are acutely aware in this country of the significance of ethos in the educational context, it seems clear that debates have also been taking place in neighbouring countries (England, Scotland and Northern Ireland) in recent times on this issue (McLaughlin, 2005).

3.3.1.1 Understanding ethos

Conceptually, ethos is a challenging term to define, with Margaret Allder (1993) suggesting it is a 'frontier word' that exists near the edges of linguistic expressability. She suggests that it is rendered intelligible by 'connecting words', such as 'ambience', 'spirit', 'atmosphere', and 'climate' (Allder, 1993). Nonetheless, Allder draws out the following conclusions regarding the meaning of 'ethos': that it refers *inter alia* to human activities and behaviour; to the human environment within which these enterprises take place (especially the social system of an organisation); to behaviour and activity which has already occurred; to

a mood or moods which are pervasive within this environment; to social interactions and their consequences; to something which is experienced; to norms rather than to exceptions, and to something that is unique (pp. 63-69). While these conclusions outline a generic understanding of ethos, they are too broad for the questions in hand and the particular context of Irish primary school education. Two elements are particularly relevant for this thesis. The first has to with the manner in which ethos emerges from the interaction of a number of aspects of schools, implying that ethos is a dynamic entity that will be singular in every school. Secondly, the confessional component of ethos is a particular characteristic of the primary schools to be explored in this thesis. The interactionist concept of school ethos also bears resemblance to the concept of identity as proposed in *Chapter 2*. Indeed, in her doctoral research, Mahon (2017) uses the term 'Catholic identity', noting that 'identity' is more commonly used in literature in the United States of America (USA).

3.3.1.2 Ethos in Catholic primary schools

Skelly (2012) proposes two dimensions to ethos, the operative and the prescriptive. The prescriptive dimension refers to ethos as, "the formal expression of the authority's aims and objectives" (p. 3). The operative dimension refers to how the values and traditions of ethos translate in the daily practices of a school. While the prescriptive dimension evidently informs the operative, and vice-versa, the relationship between both is untidy and non-linear, as will be evident in the findings.

As described above, school ethos emerges from and is created and re-created within and by school communities drawing on a range of factors. Nonetheless, while it is not a static feature of school life that manifests itself precisely in the same manner in different schools, Catholic schools are drawing on the same prescriptive dimension. As all participants in the study work in Catholic schools, it is worth identifying and exploring some relevant underlying principles or values. Since the Second Vatican Council (1963-6), the Catholic

Church has developed a number of documents which set out a vision for Catholic education, most notably *The Catholic School* (1977) and *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988).

The vision presented in these documents is of a comprehensive, all-encompassing approach to education. All educational activity within the school is directed by the principles of Catholicism as expressed in the Gospel, something that is intended to go well beyond religious instruction (Randles, 2003). Moreover, Catholic education does not just reside in the actions, practices and vision of the school but seeks to shape the development of the whole person, not merely the religious faith or life of the individual. It is concerned with the development of character. Norman (2003) states that this approach implies that in order for a person's character to be developed they must enter into a dialogue involving faith, life and culture. However, this process is rooted in a specific vision of what it means to be human, a vision that is rooted in the Catholic understanding of Jesus Christ. It is both understandable and reasonable that Catholic schools should wish to pursue a Catholic understanding of education. To do otherwise would seem illogical. Yet, the position outlined in *The Catholic School* is open, dialogical and does not seem to propose a model of education that seeks to impose a particular standpoint on the person. It disavows 'so called proselytism' or 'imparting a one side outlook' or, indeed, offering students 'pre-cast conclusions'. It envisages an atmosphere where young people will be provided the opportunity to question and critically reflect on their own faith and culture as they develop their character (Norman, 2003, p. 9). What this would seem to suggest is a vision that, while at once deeply rooted in a particular religious belief system, is also sufficiently robust to engage in conversations that could prove challenging and uncomfortable. After all, if there is space for questioning one's own faith there is space for questioning values that underpin the authority of the school. Nonetheless, what should seem obvious is that to pursue this understanding of education

would have profound implications, as does the pursuit of any understanding of education, for the type of learning and interactions that takes place in schools.

3.3.1.3 Identity and inclusion in Irish primary schools

In the Irish context, Catholic school ethos is shaped and mediated by local factors. In Ireland the organisation that provides support and guidelines for Catholic schools is the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA). The latest handbook (2016) developed by the organisation outlines 22 characteristics that should be sought and promoted by such schools. As might be expected, these characteristics firmly set out the Catholic or Christian nature on which schools are to be run. All but seven make explicit reference to the religious ethos of the school. Indeed, the characteristics are quite far-reaching and do not merely contend with the experience within the institution of the school. For instance, pupils "are encouraged to participate in parish activities appropriate to their age" (p. 25). These characteristics promote the centrality of the particular religious understanding and experience to the Catholic school. The vision outlined in the characteristics for schools has a significant formative dimension. Regarding children with different belief or religious identities, two characteristics make reference to people of other faiths and none. The first states that a

> spirit of mutual respect is promoted within the school community. Pupils are drawn by example and teaching to appreciate and respect people of different religious affiliations and of different nationalities" (p. 25).

It is clear that respect, as envisaged by the handbook, for those who belong to other belief traditions is a core value within Catholic education. The use of the term 'spirit' would suggest that this is an approach that should inherently permeate school practice. Interestingly, in the 2007 edition of the handbook this was the only reference to 'other faiths'. In 2016, the handbook added an extra characteristic, quoted directly from a pastoral letter emanating from the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference in 2008, which states that, "the Catholic school '…is

open to generous dialogue with Christians of other traditions and those of other faiths and none, while remaining true to its own distinctive ethos'" (p. 24). The addition of this characteristic would point to an evolution in thinking regarding plurality within Catholic schools. It is an acknowledgement of the need for there to be an engagement with diverse worldviews, traditions and identities within Catholic schools.

Despite the opportunities for dialogical and open approaches that may arise from the changing nature of contemporary society, there have been recent instances in which ethos in denominational schools is perceived as potentially challenging from an educational, equality and inclusion perspective. A campaign group, 'Equate', made a number of recommendations related to school patronage and ethos in a submission to the Department of Education and Skills. One of the stated aims of the submission was that "all children…experience equality in their local school so that no child is isolated because of their identity, family background, religion or non-religion" (2016). The place of Religious Instruction in the school day, the question of school enrolment and the divestment of schools in areas where there was a demand were identified as significant areas where change questions of equality and inclusion came to the fore. Curriculum consultations on ERB and Ethics (NCCA, 2017) and RSE (NCCA, 2019) brought to light perceived clashes between school ethos and societal change.

3.3.2 Rethinking practice: structures and curriculum

As proposed above the structures of primary education have particular bearing for the way in which various identities can be recognised or not. With the emergence of a greater recognition of the rights of individuals within the education system, the increased diversity of the pupil population and the need to recognise the identity of a pupil body that is everchanging, a number of policy developments have been significant in shaping, and

attempting to reshape, the educational landscape of recent years. The legislative context and the Forum for Patronage and Pluralism (2011) are key in this regard.

3.3.2.1 The Education Act (1998)

Discourses of rights, pluralism and inclusion emerged prominently in the 1990s, and made a significant impact on the primary educational landscape. A period of substantial reform, influenced by these discourses and the changes of previous decades, the decade saw the passing of the *1998 Education Act* (Department of Education and Science) and the publication of the *1999 Primary Curriculum* (NCCA).

The *1998 Education Act* is the legislation that provides a statutory framework for the primary and post-primary school system. It sets out to provide the broad principles and objectives underpinning the education system, the rights of children regarding education and the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders (DES, 1998). Signalling a more formal and regulatory role in education on the part of the state (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011), there is evidently a tension within the legislation between the recognition of the rights of the individuals and the denominational structures of primary education. The Act sets out a holistic vision of education, stating that a school shall use its resources to, "promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school" (DES, 1998, p. 2). In Section 30, which outlines the Minister of Education's functions regarding the prescription of curriculum, subsection 2(*b*) states that the Minister, "shall have regard to the characteristic spirit of a school or class of school in exercising his or her functions under this section." The protection provided to the 'characteristic spirit', more commonly understood as ethos in practice, could be understood to privilege the position of institutions over the educational rights of the individual.

These tensions clearly impact on what transacts in Irish primary schools and have manifested themselves in various curriculum developments since the introduction of the legislation. To ensure that it is in line with the legislation, the introduction to the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum states that, as the subject, "has a moral and a spiritual dimension, its development and implementation are influenced significantly by the ethos or characteristic spirit of the school" (NCCA, 1999). This has practical implications for the approaches taken to the teaching of the subject, particularly the more sensitive aspects of the curriculum related to Relationships and Sexuality Education (Keating, Morgan and Collins, 2018; Nohilly and Farrelly, 2017). More recently, the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics met with resistance from denominational bodies who raised concerns that the proposals were incompatible with, or challenging for, the ethos of their schools. This was a significant factor in limiting the potential for curriculum developments in this area (NCCA, 2017).

While there are sections in the Act outlining the role of schools, patrons and principals, no section is dedicated to the position of learner or parent, in contrast to the various recent Education Acts in the UK. It has been contended that due to this act there is a discrepancy between the rights of individuals to religious freedom and the rights of denominational schools to uphold their ethos (Mullally, 2001).

3.3.2.2 The forum on patronage and pluralism

Given the political, social, economic, cultural, demographic and educational change of recent decades, the Forum's Report noted that there is "now a mis-match between the inherited pattern of denominational school patronage and the rights of citizens in the much more culturally and religiously diverse contemporary Irish society" (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 3). The Forum noted three structural facets of the primary education system that are

significant in addressing this mis-match, and that have bearing on the findings of this research. Firstly, it noted the high number of primary schools per head of population, and the number of small schools in particular. Secondly, it highlighted areas of static or declining population where there were already denominational schools and parental demand for a diversity of school type. Thirdly, it noted the existence of denominational Stand-Alone Schools that serve a local community and where it is not possible to provide a second school (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 2). The strong link between local communities and their schools was noted, and the key contribution of the school to a sense of local identity was highlighted.

It is also the case that over the generations Irish society has been well served by the commitment, professionalism and caring instincts of its educators. Communities traditionally display great loyalty and allegiance to their schools, and schools have tended to reflect local identity and sense of belonging as successive generations attend them. (p. 2).

Recognising the manner in which primary schools are deeply integrated into local community life, and intergenerational ties of identity and loyalty are often fostered, the Forum's Report noted the challenges of making adjustments or changes to existing provision (p. 57).

3.3.2.3 Curriculum context and identity

While the primary school curriculum is currently in the early stages of redevelopment, the *1999 Primary School Curriculum* currently provides the foundation for teaching and learning in primary schools. The *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*, which sets out the vision and aims of the curriculum, demonstrates a clear understanding of the significance of curriculum for questions of identity, and the processes through which children begin to develop their own identities. Reflecting the traditional role of primary education in fostering of a national identity, the *Introduction* identifies "developing a sense of Irish identity" as one

of fourteen key issues of relevance in primary education (p. 9). Demonstrating a recognition of the changing population and the complexification of questions of identity, it also describes "pluralism, a respect for diversity and the importance of tolerance" as a key issue (p. 9). The *Introduction* describes how various subjects, such as English, Irish and History, all contribute to the child's developing sense of local, cultural, national and global identities. In identifying pluralism as a key issue, the *Introduction* notes the centrality of the "Christian heritage and tradition in the Irish experience and the Christian identity," while describing the need to recognise the diversity of religions and beliefs in the country (p. 28). Identity in the curriculum is therefore described as multi-faceted and complex and something that the curriculum contributes to in different ways.

Subsequent curriculum developments also address the ever more complex questions of identity. The *Intercultural Guidelines for Primary Schools* (NCCA, 2006), demonstrated an awareness that increased diversity and changing perceptions of identity required a further exploration of how these could be explored using the 1999 curriculum. Five themes were identified as being significant in supporting a child's intercultural learning through the curriculum. The first two relate specifically to processes of identification: identity and belonging, similarity and difference. Interestingly, *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009), published a few years later, identified identity and belonging as one of four themes that organised learning. Although, primarily a framework for early childhood settings, the *Framework* is also used in the junior classes of primary education. The language used in the description of the theme seems to signal a change also in how identity is conceived. The *Framework* describes the theme of identity and belonging as being, "about children developing a positive sense of who they are, and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community" (p. 25). Unlike previous descriptions of identity *Aistear*'s description is a child-centred construct that begins with the child

developing a sense of who they are, rather than seeing the *Framework* as either supporting the development of a particular identity (i.e. national, cultural etc…) or recognising pre-existing identities.

Emerging from the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism, the Forum's Report recommended the development of a multi-belief curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. Reflecting trends elsewhere, Bouma and Halafoff (2009) posit that rising religious diversity in recent years has led to religion returning to policy discourse in education. According to Faas et al (2016), religious pluralism, "has become one of the primary topics within the global academic discussion in terms of equality" (p. 84). Inherently bound up with questions of religious identity in the context of greater diversity proposals were released for consultation in 2015. The proposals described how schools nurture a child's sense of their identity "through experiential learning, the creation of inclusive school environments and positive relationships between the child and their teacher" (NCCA, 2015, p. 9). This conception of identity reflects a more child-centred approach, not as much concerned with developing certain forms of collective identity but recognising the individual development of the child and the experiences and background that they bring into the classroom. This is elaborated further: "ERB and Ethics will draw upon the experience of children, the exploration of their identity and belonging, providing opportunity to express themselves in terms of their ethnic, faith and belief backgrounds" (pp. 20-21). While the proposals met resistance from denominational education on the approach to religious education generally and the expressed values, the question of identity was also a concern identified in the consultation report (NCCA, 2017a). The report noted that in visits to school—both denominational and multi-denominational—the "role that ethos plays in fostering a sense of belonging, supporting pupil identity and contributing to positive learning environments was underlined across all consultation formats" (p. 24). However, other

contributions to the consultation noted the potential conflict with the denominational identity of the school that a curriculum in ERB and Ethics would bring about. This was a strong response among some parents and denominational bodies. Also, parents whose children were not Catholic noted that the ethos could be experienced as exclusionary:

> At present they experience it as an exclusive identity, them and us. A lack of understanding and inclusion in second class has certainly left my eldest child with an unwillingness to tolerate or understand any religious belief. (Parent questionnaire, quoted in NCCA, 2017a, p. 35)

The challenge of negotiating complex questions of identity were noted throughout the document.

Recent curriculum documents have also highlighted the centrality of questions of identity to the curriculum. A key finding to emerge in the report, *Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE): Review* (NCCA, 2019b) stated that questions of sexual and gender identity needed to be explored through the curriculum at primary and post-primary levels in age and stage appropriate ways. In 2020, NCCA published a *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* that outlined the shape of a fully redeveloped curriculum. A concern with identity and the need for the curriculum to cater for the diversity of identities in Irish classrooms was evident in the eight principles. A principle on "Transitions and Continuity" in learning and education stated that: "Children's prior learning, self-worth and identity are built upon as they move from home to preschool and on to junior infants, and as they progress through primary school" (p. 6). Another principle, on "Inclusive Education and Diversity", noted that: "Inclusive education celebrates diversity and responds to the uniqueness of every child" (p. 6). This emphasis on "Inclusive Education and Diversity" was elaborated on in a stand-alone section in the document which proposes that such an approach to teaching and learning focuses "on the values and practices that enable children, as individuals, to belong, feel respected, confident and safe so they can engage in meaningful learning and reach their

potential" (p. 20). Such an approach emphasises the ways in which children develop an individual identity and the various strands, often overlapping, that contribute to the construction of this identity.

What is significant in these changes is not that there is an increasing degree of plurality in society and that, therefore, questions of identity have, in actuality, become more complex, but rather that there is a recognition of this diversity and the need to respond to it. It also signals a clear repositioning from one in which dominant narratives or discourses (national, religious, or cultural) were legitimated through school structures and curriculum, thereby, legitimating certain expressions of identity, while marginalising and delegitimating others. Approaches to identity have arguably become more focused on the way in which children construct their own individual identities, drawing on what Barth (1989) has called 'universes of discourse' or 'streams of tradition'.

3.4 Rural Stand-alone primary schools in a pluralist society

International literature suggests that rural education is an under-researched aspect of the educational landscape. In Ireland, the Forum's Report (2012) identified what it termed as Stand-Alone Schools as having a particular resonance in this country and potentially contributing to a social dividend within communities that makes school choice less desirable in many rural areas. Therefore, this section, building on previous sections, sets out the particular, contextual concerns for rural, Stand-Alone Schools. As the term stand-alone is of limited usage, emerging as it did from the Forum, the section identifies key considerations for the research questions from the literature on rural education generally. In doing this, there is a move from a broad international focus to a focus on the local level, attempting to identify and connect significant themes. Therefore, the section begins by outlining the concerns that are singular to rural education and rural educational research internationally, and relevant to the

Irish context. This approach is particularly pertinent as it demonstrates the relative neglect that rural education receives as a focus of educational research generally, while highlighting the dearth of research that has been carried out nationally. It also unearths themes and topics that may be common across systems and states. The section then proceeds to address the evolving policy context as it relates to rural schools in Ireland. In this way, it demonstrates the challenges that rural schooling seems to pose policy makers, particularly in the absence of relevant research. Finally, it also identifies key features of Irish rural schools in the west of Ireland, as identified by the schools themselves and represented in local anthologies published in recent decades. Taken together these subsections attempt to address why StandAlone Schools, in particular, are an especially important focus for the research questions posed in this study.

3.4.1 Making the case for rural education: International literature

Education in rural contexts has been the focus of significant research internationally in recent years, particularly in anglophone countries such as the U.S.A., Australia and Canada (Sigsworth and Solstad (Eds.), 2005; Corbett, 2006; Roberts and Green, 2013; Tuters, 2015; Geller, 2015; Reid, 2015; Biddle and Price Anzano, 2016; Cuervo, 2016; Jinting Wu, 2016; Pini, Mayes and Rodriguez Castro, 2017). Much of the scholarship focuses on establishing a concept of rural education as an entity in its own right. In establishing the distinctiveness of rural education, much of the research explores the challenges that the forces shaping society and education, nationally and internationally, pose specifically for rural education. In laying out a set of standards by which to evaluate and enhance rural education research, Coladarci (2007) requests that authors justify why rurality is theoretically relevant to their study. In this way the implications of the intersection between schooling and rurality can be understood more clearly.

In 2009, the *International Journal of Educational Research* published a special edition dedicated to research on rural schools and their communities in Norway, Sweden, Finland, England and Scotland. In the introductory article Hargreaves, Kvalsund and Galston (2009) set out the case for conducting research specifically aimed at rural schools and their communities. They propose four broad reasons why such research is "of interest educationally, economically, environmentally, politically and socially" (p. 81). Firstly, they describe how rural schools, typically small, present a number of paradoxes; they are seen as "a drain on the national economy, but vital to their local communities, as deficient in terms of educational provision yet performing at least as well as their urban counterpart" (p. 81). Thus, they argue that research on the educational, environmental and community sustainability of such schools is sorely needed. Secondly, they note that policies of amalgamation often appear appropriate responses for policy-makers but require greater interrogation. Thirdly, rural schools are often considered hubs of the local community. The authors note that schoolcommunity relations may diverge hugely from place-to-place and the varying levels of research conducted on this subject in different jurisdictions. Thus, they argue the case "for more substantial published research to inform educationists, social scientists and policymakers on the nature and quality of these relationships, and the short or long-term effects of school closure on the social life of a community" (p. 82). Finally, they state that the view that educational provision provided in rural schools is inferior to that in larger urban schools is another reason for conducting research specifically on rural education.

In the concluding article of the special edition, Kvalsund and Hargreaves (2009), note the uneven and intermittent nature of research on rural schools and call for more sustained study, including greater use of the local voice and the life-world perspective. They note the "dominance of the external system perspective, and the too close association between national reforms and research" (p. 147). As a counterbalance, they argue the need for:

1. New independent research focusing on all aspects of education – the school and community as learning environments; the well-being, quality of life and cultural meaning experienced by pupils, parents and teachers; teacher professionalism in small rural schools and communities; themes of school history – and the relationships between these issues.
2. High quality research starting with the community and the cultural meaning of schooling, particularly in Sweden and England.
3. Research on children's lives in and outside school and the relationship between them (p. 147).

In exploring questions of social justice in rural schools in Australia Cuervo (2016), argues that neo-liberal models of governance and policy emphasise discourses of competition, choice and equity. In so doing questions of distinctiveness, culture, and identity are pushed to the margins. Within such a model the distinctiveness and singularities of the rural context, which are significant factors for the education of the children within these schools, become minimised due to the universalising tendencies of these powerful discourses. This is evidently applicable to the Irish context where school choice has been the most significant policy response for addressing significant social change.

3.4.2 Rural schools and research: On the margins of the literature

A theme that emerges consistently within the literature is the marginality of rurality and rural education within education discourse. In the introduction to a review of small schools across several European countries, Sigsworth and Solstad (2005) note that the historical processes of industrialisation and rural-urban migration have substantially diminished rural populations in industrialised countries. These processes then strongly reinforce the norm of urban education.

The understanding of urban education being the norm is common within the literature. Indeed, the implications of this implicit conception of the urban-rural divide is articulated by Hargreaves et al (2009). They note that much of the research as well as the policy and theory that drive it fail to differentiate between urban and rural locations. Therefore, they suspect

that much of the research that does not declare where it is conducted and is likely to take place in urban and suburban settings, taking the urban setting for granted as the norm.

This tendency to view the urban as the norm and to not differentiate between urban and rural settings has been characterised by Green and Letts (2007) as 'geographical blindness'. In their work, in which they explore the relationship between space, equity and policy, they bring together 'historicality', 'sociality' and 'spatiality'. According to Roberts and Green (2013), this blindness reflects a kind of dualism whereby rural and urban schools are compared and considered as if they are essentially the same, despite differing educational outcomes.

Reid (2015) explores the experience of teachers working in rural Australia, in the context of increasing diversity and globalisation. She proposes that the "dominant perception of the rural is that it is an unchanging and monocultural space distinct and separate from the metropole" (p. 722). As such, significant global developments are not considered for their implications for rural schools, as these schools are seen to immune to the effects of supranational changes.

The rural, and by extension rural schooling, is often conceived of as being detached from the great changes and shifts taking place nationally and internationally. From this perspective, a world increasingly defined by super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007) is more easily understood as an urban phenomenon. Yet, this conception of rural education may neglect the lived experience within these contexts. Tuters (2015) notes the dearth of scholarship that exists around questions of diversity in rural settings, in the Canadian context at least, even though it is a phenomenon that touches the urban and the rural, albeit in different ways. She suggests that given the dominance "of urban people and urban beliefs over rural people…and the subsequent 'othering' of rurality" rural education can often be "overlooked in educational

literature and policy" (p. 687). In her work, she explores how teachers experience diversity in a particular rural school in Canada. Her research demonstrates similarities and differences with the experiences of teachers in urban settings. However, significantly, such settings had access to fewer "support services than their urban counterparts" compounding the challenges faced by rural students (p. 694).

Corbett (2006) connects the peripherality of rural education as a policy concern to the way in which rural areas are considered largely marginal to the concerns of globalized capitalism. In his work he describes rurality as a social condition that formal education is designed to transform "by fostering outmigration and a general orientation to urban life and to mobility" (p. 289). From this perspective "(r)urality is powerfully associated with the past, with place (which, it hardly needs to be said, is nonstandard), with stagnation, and with a kind of vague shame" (p. 295). Thus, education and education policy are considered to be inherently antithetical to a constructive concept of rural education.

Yet, while rural education may not receive the same policy attention internationally, and while specific conceptions of rural education, where they exist, tend toward a deficit understanding, rural schools tend to serve functions less likely to be served by urban counterparts. Biddle and Azano (2016) conducted a systematic review of the literature on rural teacher recruitment in the USA in order to examine the construction of the "rural school problem" in research over the past century. Significantly, they note that while "schools everywhere are facing similar issues, rural schools often face the additional burden of being one of the few local social institutions in sparsely populated communities, and sometimes also of serving as one of the largest employers" (p. 299). In this way, rural schools are often understood as taking on a local importance that urban or suburban schools do not have.

Overall, the research describes a concern with a particular type of blindness toward rural education (called 'geographical blindness', above), one that is indifferent and insensitive to the particularities of the rural. Where the particularities of the rural are viewed they tend to be view in the negative and lead to a deficit conception, as noted by Corbett (2006). Evidently. these largely deficit conceptions of the rural have important implications for how policy is constructed.

While this may certainly be the case in the North American context, in which Corbett and Tuters work, there has been some policy debate in Ireland on the role of rural schooling in recent decades. However, while education in rural areas has been part of policy debate in Ireland recently, reflecting the work of Popkewitz (1998), it has largely been characterised in contemporary discourse in terms of deficiency. Indeed, for much of the 19th and 20th centuries in modern western education systems, it has been argued that primary schooling has sought to play a key role in "educating the country out of the child and educating the child out of the country" (Corbett, 2006, pp. 296-297), preparing children for living in modern states. In this specific case, Corbett was referring to the emphasis on language as a significant aspect of this modernising project in the American context, but similar processes can be seen in modern European states (Weber, 1976; Ford, 1993; Harp, 1998). Sigsworth and Solstad (2005) argue that the educational reorganisation that took place in Scandinavia and the UK in the 1960s put forward the "powerfully resourced school" as the ideal of equal opportunity, leading to the closure of small rural schools (p. 4). Again, the ideal image of education comes from the centre of power and reflects back to the margins how things should look.

However, in contrast to the perspective in many other industrialised western countries, for much of the post independence period an idealised vision of an agrarian and rural Ireland was held among many in the ruling elite (Garvin, 2004) and, arguably, a deficit understanding of rural education has not traditionally been as strong a feature of the popular discourse here,

as elsewhere. Nonetheless, economic, social and ideological shifts have seen the structures of rural primary schooling being increasingly problematised (Coolahan et al, 2012; DES, 2013, DES, 2019).

3.4.3 Rural education and the importance of place

The 'geographical blindness' described above highlights the significance of place as a feature in the literature on rural education. In *Rural Literacies*, Donehower, Hogg and Schnell (2007) examine the lack of substantive research on literacy in rural places in the USA. In it, they consider the need to understand rurality and rural education in terms of the geographic, the demographic, and the cultural. They suggest that the lack of a stable conception of rural education exists within dominant discourses.

Following on from this Mills and Comber (2013) noted the 'spatial turn' in literacy research, in which space and place are foregrounded as "constitutive, rather than a backdrop for the real action" (p. 412). They map the increasing foregrounding of space and place as an emergent strand in literacy research. In this process, the authors note the subtle shift in which a focus on the mechanics of literacy is rebalanced with "the materiality of lived, embodied, and situated experience" (p.412). In doing so, they introduce the concept of a pedagogy that is place conscious.

In their work Pendola and Fuller (2018) explore the relationship between place and the experience of principals in rural schools. In particular, they examine the turnover of principals in such schools. In their article, they highlight the growing body of research that explores the way in which the role of principal varies hugely according to geographic locale. They propose that differences in what it means to be a principal in different socio-spatial contexts may lead to higher rates of retention or attrition. The geographic locale thus has great material significance for how the role of principal is experienced.

Related to this Wieczorek, and Manard (2018) conducted phenomenological research in which they explore the challenges and practices of novice principals in rural areas. They situated their research within the context of rural school leadership. They note the research describing the unique school-community contexts within rural communities that are characterized by a strong "sense of place" (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Schafft & Jackson, 2010). Budge (2006) conducted a case study on the influence of rurality and a sense of place on principals' beliefs on the purpose of schooling. She concludes with a call for rural principals to exercise a "critical leadership of place" and encourages principals to accept the role of schools as indicators of the welfare of the broader community. A "critical leadership of place" can be understood as combining aspects of "critical pedagogy", in which marginalized voices are re-centred in the curriculum, and a "place-based pedagogy", in which learning is rooted in the unique history, culture, environment and art of a particular place.

3.4.4 Community and identity in rural schools

Closely linked to the significance of place within schools is the often-perceived close connection between the school and local community. This is a theme that emerges prominently in the international research. Furthermore, schools are often understood as playing an important role in the construction of local identity.

Autti, and Hyry-Beihammer (2014) examined the phenomenon of school closures in rural villages in Finland from the perspective of local residents. They analysed the data using the concept of social capital. In the analysis they found that local residents were unanimous on the significance of local schools for the community. Local schools were understood not just as places in which local children were educated but as influencing community wellbeing. Furthermore, they also found that rural schools are centres of "village social life and have a crucial role in constructing a local identity" (p. 12).

In her review of 25 years of research on small rural schools in England, Hargreaves (2009) noted a complex relationship between school and community. She notes that while the school gate may be a community 'hub' for school parents, this does not necessarily correspond to a school-community relationship. In the review she notes how the relationship between school and community can be understood to have changed in recent decades along with population and policy change. She describes a shift from an assumed closeness between school and a stable local population to subsequent campaigns for schools to be kept open for fear that communities would die if they were closed as more educated and professional people moved to rural areas from the 1970s (Bell and Sigsworth, 1987; Bell and Sigsworth 1992). She describes how this has morphed more recently to calls from all sides to strengthen this relationship between school and community (Countryside Agency, 2001). However, while reviewing existing literature, Hargreaves describes the overall scarcity of research on school-community relationships in England and calls for "substantial ethnographic research, centred in the community and examining the school– community relationship" (p. 124).

While school is often understood in research to be closely connected to community and, indeed, a symbol of community identity, Hargreave's (2009) review challenges the notion of an unquestioning cosy symbiosis. A challenging interrogation of community and rural education is also evident in much recent research. Corbett (2018) describes this as "a shift from rural education analysis that focuses on an imagined homogeneity and the supposedly close-knit character of rural "communities"" (p. 1). This shift is evident in 'The ambivalence of community: A critical analysis of rural education's oldest trope' in which Corbett (2014) critically analyses the concept of community as it pertains to rural education in the literature. He argues that in rural education discourse, community is a long-established trope that "connects our pedagogical, curricular, and political arguments to Deweyan pragmatism and the idea that a proper education begins with experience" (p.603). In

problematising the concept of community, he proposes that over the past century rural education scholarship has been burdened by its inability to escape the various conceptions of community that invoke real or imagined solidarity and that are understood to serve as an impediment to modernisation and even education itself. Interestingly, he notes that in a neoliberal epoch, where school choice is perhaps the defining characteristic, and thus school communities are understood as self-selected communities, rural schools are somewhat out of step with the policy and cultural *zeitgeist*. Reflecting the recommendations of the Forum's Report (Coolahan et al, 2012), rural schools are constructed as schools where there is no choice and are problematic as a result.

In *Why rural schools matter*, Tieken (2014) explores the value of a local school to the local community in two towns in southern USA. She notes that in Delight the school is an important part of the town's identity "providing shared symbols and traditions, perpetuating a set of common values, and establishing clear boundaries" (p. 65). However, the school's role in influencing the racial dynamics in the town is examined. She describes how the school supports community cohesiveness with children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. She notes how White and Black residents come together to save the school from amalgamation, but questions at the end whether this cohesiveness points to a distinctive communal unity or whether it reflects cooperation as a matter of convenience.

In responding to Coladarci (2007), referenced above, Biddle, Sutherland and McHenry-Sorber (2019) note the exclusionary potential of community identity in rural places. In exploring the concept of 'awayness', they describe how the term 'people from away' is used by locals in rural Maine to identify who is and who is not from the local community. However, Biddle et al note the relative fluidity of the boundary label in this instance as it may be applied to community members depending on shifting interests and power at different times.

3.4.5 Teachers and principals: Responsibility, expectation and isolation

Emerging from the literature, and significant for the context of this research, is the particular role of teachers and principals in rural schools. The research highlights the considerable responsibilities and expectations that teachers and principals, in particular, experience in rural settings. In addition, there is also research that suggests teachers and prinicpals experience greater isolation in rural schools than in urban schools.

Hargreaves, Cunningham, Hansen, McIntyre, Oliver, and Pell (2007) carried out a national study among primary and secondary teachers on their perceptions of the status of the profession in England. They found that while all teachers described high levels of responsibility within the profession, this sense of responsibility was experienced as significantly greater among those teaching in small rural primary schools. While those teaching in small primary schools did not receive greater respect from colleagues, management, or pupils, they were more likely to feel respected by children's parents and the local community than were those teaching in large primary schools.

This sense of greater responsibility experienced among those in rural schools is echoed in much research from the USA. This is particularly the case for principals. Pendula and Fuller (2018) note the importance of the symbolic nature of the position of principal in rural communities. They state that in these settings, rural principals are perceived as "personally responsible for the welfare of the school and the identity of the area" (p. 4). The added responsibility that these school leaders experience as community leaders is noted elsewhere in the literature (Clarke and Stevens, 2006; Harmon and Schafft, 2009; Masumoto and Brown-Welty, 2009).

In exploring the experience of new principals in rural schools Wieczorek and Manard (2018) describe the challenges that participants faced in balancing their private lives with the

community expectations of their roles. They note that leadership responsibilities for these rural principals exceeded “traditional job responsibilities assigned to their suburban and urban peers” (p. 16). Resulting from the study, the authors describe the need to develop new leaders’ understanding of the expectations of rural school communities.

As well as experiencing high levels of responsibility and expectation, Harrison and Busher (1995) propose that teachers in small schools may also experience teacher professional isolation. The authors suggest the potential for this isolation to cause teachers to doubt the effectiveness and value of their commitment and professionalism, which in turn may impact school performance. While all teachers may suffer from this doubt, the authors note the greater potential for this taking place when teachers feel remote from the mainstream of education development. The authors suggest greater engagement with professional development may help counter this occurrence but note that much in service is not necessarily designed with the needs of small schools in mind.

Finally, the question of teacher identity in a multicultural setting was studied in a 30month study by Wenger, Dinsmore and Villagomez (2012). The study explored the identity of diverse teachers in a bilingual, multicultural, rural school with high levels of poverty in Oregan. They propose that an examination of teacher identities is important within diverse contexts, as “these identities influence how they teach and learn” (p. 2). As well as specific practices in rural schools that target the needs of particular linguistic and cultural communities, the authors suggest also that a focus on rural teacher identity can be beneficial as demographics change in rural, multicultural settings.

While teachers and principals in rural settings experience their profession in much the same way as their urban counterparts, the literature strongly suggests that there are nonetheless important qualitative differences in these experiences. Greater responsibility and

expectations are often a salient factor for professional in rural settings. Professional isolation may also be a more significant feature for teachers and principals in rural schools.

3.4.6 Rural education in Ireland: evolving policy context

Since the 1960s, debate at policy level around rural primary education has tended to focus on the need for greater rationalisation due to the large numbers of small primary schools. These debates shed light on key features of rural primary schools in Ireland as they are perceived at macro and micro levels; the proliferation of small rural schools, particularly in the west of Ireland, and the significant social role that they are understood to play within their communities.

A continuous policy of school amalgamations in the 1960s and 1970s was effectively brought to a halt in 1977 (DES, 2013). The intensely sensitive political nature of the process can be evidenced in the Dáil debates of these decades on the matter. Responding to Dáil questions on the attempt to close a small school in Kilkenny in 1967, the Minister of Education, Donagh O'Malley (TD) noted:

> From the considered recommendations made by him [*Department of Education Inspector*] and my officials, the correct thing to do was to close this school. The combined enrolment of the three parish schools would only warrant a staff of five teachers, but my Department are prepared to retain the six teachers serving at present in the three schools. I think we are doing the right thing.

The perceived social impact of closing small schools and the resistance that emerged made policy attempts to continue a process of rationalisation politically difficult. According to Mulryan-Kyne (2005), along with increasing urbanisation and a decline in birth rates, the "decline of many rural communities was blamed on these closures and amalgamations" (p. 24). There were considerable local campaigns against this policy as, according to the Department of Education, the local school "was considered to be one of the focal points of the community and any closures were seen as symbolic of the decline of the community"

(DES, 2013). In the 1990s there were further recommendations for continued rationalisation in an OECD Review (1991) and a subsequent government Green Paper (Mulryan-Kyne, 2005, p. 24). The *Report on the National Convention on Education* (Coolahan, 1994) acknowledged the inevitability of the rationalisation but recognised the role that schools play in isolated communities. While primarily concerned with the fate of small schools in particular, these debates are important in underlining the social function that rural schools are perceived to serve, beyond the purely educational.

In the last decade there have been two significant government reports that highlighted some of the challenges that rural schools simultaneously face and pose for the education system: *Report on the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (2012) and *Value for Money Review of Small Primary Schools (*2013). The *Value for Money Review of Small Primary Schools* (2013) noted:

> There has been demand for diversity of provision in the past forty years. There has been significant societal change in that period, particularly in recent times. For example, 12% of primary school pupils are of migrant origin (CSO). Many peoples' views about the place of religion in society have changed also. There is a general recognition of the need to adapt school patronage structures to meet the changing reality. (p. 42)

While noting these changes, however, the report draws attention to the wider role schools are still understood to play within their communities. In providing an overview of the key points to emerge from submissions to the review, the report noted as significant the, "positive relationships between teachers, children and parents and great community support for the school," and the, "(i)mportance of the small school to give the children a sense of place and history" (DES, 2013, p. 73). The report referred to other social, economic and environmental benefits of these schools highlighted in the submissions and the potential for closure to be

"devastating to the entire community in which they are located" (p. 73). The profound social change experienced throughout the state in the last two decades has added another dimension to debates around the shape and function of primary schools in rural areas.

In light of such change and recognising this significant social role of rural primary schools, the question arises as to how these schools, primarily denominational, can also provide the kind of recognition that ensures an increasingly diverse population feels respected and included. This was a question identified as significant by the Forum's Report (Coolahan et al, 2012). The report designated what it termed as Stand-Alone Schools as being of particular need of attention. It characterised Stand-Alone Schools as those that served a small population and for whom choice of school under another patron was not an option. The report identified approximately 2000 schools outside urban areas in this category, schools that were either 3km or 5km from their nearest neighbouring school. It stated that these account for approximately two thirds of all Irish primary schools. The report described these schools as problematic for the following reason. The vast majority of these schools are denominational and, given demographic changes in recent years, it is probable that children will attend whose belief backgrounds may not align with those of the school, or who bring value systems from home, or who themselves develop value systems, that may be understood to be at odds with those of the school. The Forum recognised, also, not just the impracticality of school choice in such circumstances but also potentially the undesirability of school choice, while also noting that there, "is an educational and social dividend to be gained from all the children in a rural setting, village or small town attending school together" (p. 73).

The report then proposed that there is a need for such schools to be inclusive to all children, including those from differing religious or secular belief backgrounds (p. 73). However, the term 'inclusive' in this instance would seem to be entirely nebulous and would seem to raise more questions than it answers. Thus, it would seem quite evident that more

research is required on these school types and to explore the extent to which a concept of recognition as outlined by Taylor (1997) is helpful in responding to these questions.

3.4.8 The local rural school at the beginning of the 21st century in the west of Ireland: an imagined community

At the end of the 20th century and the turn of the 21st century many primary schools reflected on their histories and produced anthologies to record the experiences of members of their communities, past and present. Six examples were selected for this study to explore the particular role of rural primary schools as traditionally, conventionally and colloquially understood. Firstly, they were selected due to the dearth of specific research literature on rural primary schools in Ireland. Secondly, the examples were chosen as they were all produced by the schools themselves in order to act as markers of commemoration and recognition for their own communities. They were not commissioned or supported by any external agency or institution, and neither were they part of a national project or competition. They emerged organically and locally within their settings. Thirdly, they were also chosen as they were all produced within Connacht and were all rural Stand-Alone Schools, as defined by the parameters of this thesis. Thus, this small sample provides an insight into how primary schools in rural areas reflect on and have come to understand themselves, their particular function and their role. Getting an insight into how rural schools have come to understand and imagine themselves over recent decades will be helpful in shining a light on some of the challenges these schools face as they navigate a changing social context. They also provide an insight into the particular significance of such schools in rural areas. A broad thematic analysis was used to identify significant themes in the anthologies (Clarke and Braun, 2013). The themes that emerge, reflect the international literature but also highlight key themes in the specific context being studied in this thesis. Five themes in particular emerge as significant: school as an important focal point in community; the significance of school for

community identity; the social functions of the school beyond education; the interwoven nature of religious experience and school life; and social, demographic and technological change.

The idea of the school as a key focal point in the local community is particularly evident in all the anthologies. A message from the former Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern, to St. John's National School in Co. Mayo, introducing one of the anthologies, *Rolling back the Years: St. Johns National School: Logboy 1903-2003* (2003), makes a direct connection between the local community and the school:

> A school shines a mirror on its local community and reflects back the light of learning that makes the community grow. St. John's may be small in size but its influence is enormous and when that influence stretches back over so many years, the act of celebration is all the more worthwhile. (p. 3)

The quote portrays an understanding of the place of the school within the community, and it is clearly one that the readers are intended to immediately recognise and understand. The school is a place that not only reflects the community but also supports the growth, the development or the evolution of the community. In the same anthology a letter from the then Minister for Education and Science, Noel Dempsey (TD), makes a similar point. Schools have a role beyond the activity of the pupils and the teachers:

> They are also focal points for the community and contribute significantly to the identity of an area. This school has been used as a meeting place and even as a dancing hall down the years. (p. 4)

The terminology used by the former minister clearly identifies a common conception of rural schools, one that resonates with other contributors.

Primary schools in this understanding not only contribute to the local community by providing an education for young people and stimulating development and growth, but they act as important markers and makers of identity within a locality. The local community identifies with the school, and the distinction between the school community and the local

community can become somewhat blurred. This blurring of the distinction is evident in the title of another anthology: *Gortjordan: the Heart of a Community* (1996).

Dempsey's description above highlights how the school could take on functions within rural communities beyond the educational which brought people together. As well as functioning as dancehalls, schools also functioned as polling booths. They were a significant place of social interaction within communities. Contributors repeatedly recalled meeting their neighbours and classmates in the morning and travelling to and from school together. This daily ritual marked a significant time of social interaction for the children. Past pupils also recalled activities like participating in St. Patrick's Day parade or sports tournaments.

Another aspect to clearly emerge as significant in these anthologies is the way in which school community life was interwoven with religious experience and practice. In a letter that opens one anthology the Archbishop of Tuam, Michéal Ó Néaraí (2007), states:

> (i)n recent times the strong community spirit demonstrated by the Cloughanover area is well known. This spirit is reflected not only in civic achievements, but also in its awareness of the role of the Church in our society. (*Cloughanover School and Community*, p. 7).

The anthologies are laden with references to religious ceremonies and the interconnected relationship between school and church. Recollections of first communions, in particular, and confirmations designate these events as having a particular importance in the life of the school. As one contributor noted in *Rolling back the years, Logboy School 1903-2003* (2003):

> It is a denominational system i.e. a Catholic school for Catholic children. The Catholic ethos is an intrinsic educational and formative influence on the children…There is a great spirit of co-operation there and the Catholic ethos of the school is nurtured in line with a catholic education for catholic pupils. (Fr Patrick Mullins, p. 6)

This sense is evident across all collections.

However, a sense of change is evident within the anthologies. It is clear that many participants are looking back and recalling and re-imagining their past experiences. In many cases the tone of contributors is elegiac, with a desire to remember a passing world that has changed enormously. Indeed, it is likely that a sense of being on the cusp of significant change provided a motivator for the compilation of these works. Technology and communications were not the only evidence of impending social change. It is clear in the anthologies that there has been a strong sense of inter-generational connectivity to the schools; generations of the same family attended the local school and knowledge of the members of the community is deeply rooted. The most significant form of demographic changes up until recently had been emigration, a notable sub-theme that runs through these works. However, there is some indication that the demographic make-up of these localities may be beginning to change:

> A huge demographic change has taken place in this locality in recent years, with the influx of families from outside the locality, including a number from overseas. The names on the school register, for more recent times reflects this trend. (John Reilly, *Ballyturn National School: A look back,* 2005, p. 30)

While these anthologies were compiled in the recent past, the landscape of rural schooling has changed and evolved significantly, far beyond the demographic changes noted. Yet, these accounts provide an image of rural schooling that is at once familiar and demonstrates some of the ways in which rural schools have come to be commonly seen and understood in rural communities. They represent an idealised version of how these schools had come to see themselves and their role.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the various structural forces that frame the discursive context in which identity is negotiated in rural Stand-Alone Schools. Reflecting Ball's (1994) concept of discourse and policy, this discursive context is not fixed and deterministic, but is,

as demonstrated, evolving and contingent. Furthermore, those on the ground engage with, make their own of and, indeed, shape their own social world within this macro-level context. The relationship between macro and micro levels is complex, interactionist and dialogical, as will emerge in the findings, rather than unidirectional and deterministic. The historical context of primary education in Ireland, the denominational nature of schools, the evolving curriculum context, the positionality of rural education and the way in which rural schools have come to construct their own understanding of themselves all significantly inform how teachers and principals mediate plurality within their communities. In this way the lived experience of the participants is situated within the wider national—and international—context, bringing to light the interaction between the daily experience at local level and the macro level forces that shape the discourse.

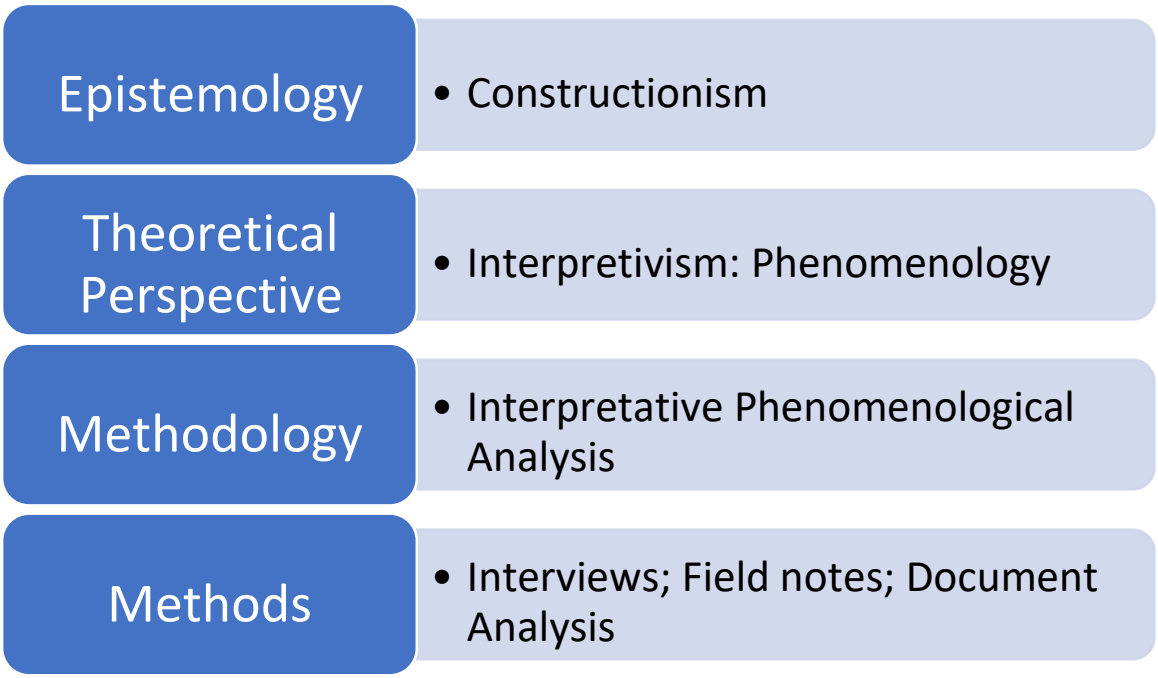
CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this enquiry is to explore the experiences of teachers and principals in rural Stand-Alone Schools of increasingly plural identities. This is in the context of significant social and demographic change and the challenge that schools and policy face in attempting to respond to this change. This chapter sets out the approach taken to the research questions that drove the research. It provides: a description of the research paradigm; an overview of the philosophical presuppositions that inform phenomenological approaches to research; a description of interpretative phenomenological analysis; a description of data collection and analysis; ethical considerations and the criteria for quality used in the study. The chapter can largely be divided into two sections; the first is concerned with the theoretical foundations of the methodology and the second with practical application of the theory. In order to provide a broad overview of the research design Figure 3, below, outlines some key components of the research and how they are related to each other.

Figure 3: *Research components, adapted from Crotty, 2015, p. 5*



4.2 Constructionism

This thesis is situated within a constructionist epistemology. In this view of the world, knowledge and truth are constructed by the mind rather than discovered (Crotty, 2015). It is concerned with how knowledge emerges and becomes significant for society. As such it is concerned with the human processes of meaning making. Crotty notes (2015) that such a perspective implies a relationship between mind and world. While knowledge is constructed, it is constructed through engagement with the world. It is not simply created out of nothingness. This thesis recognises, in particular, the social construction of meaning. From this perspective knowledge is not simply constructed monologically or internally but rather as part of a social process. Fish argues that "all objects are made and not found" and proposes that the "means by which they are made are social and conventional" (Fish, 1990, p. 186). We are thus embedded in systems of meaning that precede us and from which we draw in

order to make sense of our world. In this vein Geertz speaks of "a system of significant symbols" which constitutes culture. From this perspective, culture is not simply a construct of human activity but is also a source of human thought and behaviour. This is important for the purposes of this thesis, as participants draw on socially and culturally situated systems of meaning in order to describe and make sense of their settings.

4.3 An interpretivist paradigm

The study is driven by the following key questions:

- How do specific teachers and principals experience a plurality of identities in rural Stand-Alone Schools?
- What are the specific challenges faced by these teachers and principals?
- What are the lessons deriving from these experiences for educational practice and policy?

As stated, the study is concerned with how individuals make meaning within their particular contexts and what this process of meaning-making tells us (a) about identity construction at the local level and (b) how the interaction between this local construction of identity and wider culture and structures forces happens. Teachers and principals experience and interpret a plurality of identities within the realms of their cultural contexts-at school level, local level, and broader global level-and through the prism of their social understanding. Therefore, this study takes a phenomenological approach that sits within an interpretative paradigm.

The interpretivist paradigm contrasts with positivism which posits that objective reality can be directly experienced and that humans have direct access to this objective reality (Crotty, 2015, p. 20). In this view the nature of the physical world and the laws that guide it can be uncovered by appropriate scientific methods (Clarke, 2009). Interpretivism by contrast proposes a distinction between this objective reality of things and the complex

socially constructed world of human interaction. Schwandt (2000) notes that, “interpretivism was conceived in reaction to the effort to develop a natural science of the social. Its foil was largely logical empiricist methodology and the bid to apply that framework to human inquiry” (p. 125). While positivism proposes allegedly value free, detached observation of the human world that can uncover some of the nature of this world, interpretivism “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social world” (Crotty, 2015, p. 67). Humans are seen as living within webs of meaning that are constructed culturally and historically and that require understanding and interpretation.

Interpretivism, therefore, is an appropriate paradigm for this study as it is commensurate with the theoretical description of the construction of identity in *Chapter 2* and with the historical and cultural context described in *Chapter 3*. A conception of the world in which people are living within webs of meaning coheres with the understanding in this thesis of the ways in which people engage in processes of identification. Within interpretivism generally, three related methodological approaches are commonly used: symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics (Cresswell, 2013). This research proposes a phenomenological methodology. The next section provides an overview of key concepts in the philosophy of phenomenology and then proceeds to a description of their practical relationship to the research questions.

4.4 Phenomenology and social research

As with research typically carried out within a phenomenological approach, this chapter sets out some basic philosophical ideas that inform such research (Cresswell, 2013, p. 78). Although originally a philosophical discipline, phenomenological approaches have been widely incorporated in the social sciences, such as sociology, anthropology and psychology. Concerned with questions of direct experience, interpretation and meaning, it is an approach

that is particularly useful for exploring the concept of identity, a concept that is rooted in the interactional social world and is heavily concerned with processes of meaning-making.

Phenomenology, however, is not a monolithic enterprise. While it is beyond the remit of this thesis to explore the various approaches to phenomenology in-depth, this section sets out some relevant key concepts and explains broadly how they relate to the study; these are lived experiences and the construction of meaning, consciousness and intentionality and essences. Largely influenced by hermeneutic or interpretative phenomenology, but employing insights from Husserlian phenomenology, the study specifically employs an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, that is further expanded upon in the next section.

4.4.1 Lived experiences and meaning construction

Originating in the work of Husserl and Heidegger, phenomenological approaches to research hold "that any attempt to understand social reality has to be grounded in people's experiences of that social reality" (Gray, 2014, p. 24). Firstly, the work of Husserl establishes "the importance and relevance of a focus on experiences and its perception" (Smith et al, 2012, p. 21).

By focusing on the lived experience of participants the research focuses on the social world of the participants, how they come to understand it and construct meaning from it. Thus, it is inherently grounded in the lived experiences and meaning structure of the research participants. From a phenomenological perspective, according to Howell (2015), what is important "is our existence within the world and how we belong to our environment" (p. 65). In phenomenological approaches the claim is that an examination of experience, which is filtered through a person's unique life experience, "points to the importance of 'subjective meanings' or subjective interpretations of that experience in our understanding" (Pring, 2015,

p. 120). Therefore, to understand particular events or phenomena they need to be understood and interpreted from the perspective of the people who are involved. Meanings are understood to come in structures "and attain meaning in relation to other meanings." In focusing on the constitution of meaning, at an individual level, and meaning construction, at the social level, meaning can be studied empirically by the researcher (Aspers, 2009, p. 3). In light of the brief outline above of relevant phenomenological concepts, Cresswell (2013) states that "a *phenomenological study* describes the common meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or phenomenon" (p. 76). By examining the direct subjective experiences of the participants in this study, the research seeks to describe a common meaning of the concept of identity in rural schools.

4.4.2 Consciousness and intentionality

The concept of intentionality is central to phenomenology and has implications for the research carried out in this domain. In phenomenology, according to Howell (2015), there is "a general comprehension that there is a relationship between mind and world" (p. 55). Consciousness and world are not understood as two entirely separate entities, but "a holistic construction of lived experience" (p. 56). A key consideration is that consciousness is always directed towards an object, and this is described as intentionality. According to Husserl (1969), we "understood under intentionality the unique peculiarity of experiences to be the consciousness of something" (p. 242). In its capacity to direct itself toward entities, "intentionality involves mental states including beliefs, hopes, thoughts, which are directed at something" (Howell, 2015, p. 57).

This intentionality speaks to the fundamental relationship between the individual human being and the world. As Crotty (2015) notes: "Not only is consciousness intentional, but human beings in their totality are intentionally related to the world. Human being means

being-in-the-world. In existentialist terms intentionality is a radical interdependence between subject and world" (p. 45). Thus, what this concept illuminates is the interaction between subject and object, between the human and the human world and "it is in and out of this, interplay that meaning is born" (p. 45). In this way people cannot be understood as existing separately to the world in which they live. Building on Husserl's concept, Heidegger,

Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, "contribute to a view of the person as embedded and immersed in a world of objects and relationships" (Smith et al, 2012, p. 21). The emphasis on this interaction and relation means that phenomenological approaches are neither subjectivist nor objectivist, but rather constructionist. An important consideration is our understanding, then, of 'subjective meanings', given this inter-relationship between "mind and world." If, as Pring (2015) notes, "we mean by 'subjective meanings' the way in which a particular 'subject' or agent understands things, then the meanings are subjective only in a trivial sense" (p. 122). He expands by stating that these interpretations "may be mistaken" and that "an understanding of the meaning of what that person says or does is not reducible to how he or she sees it" (p. 122). Yet even if the interpretations are indeed mistaken, they are nevertheless reflective of a relationship within the human world. These interpretations, therefore, require a second interpretation. As the participants in this research are engaged in the social world of the school community and in the continual process of interpreting their experience, their interpretations tell us something significant of this world, which requires further interpretation.

4.4.3 Essences, *epoché* and interpretation

The section below looks at the concepts of essences and *epoché* as well as the role of interpretation in phenomenology and considers their significance for the research.

Dahlberg describes how the essences of phenomena are already existent in the intentional relationship between ourselves and the phenomena. In this way the world comes up to us full of meaning. Individuals engage and make sense of their world, a process that is firmly embedded in a social and historical perspective. As Crotty (2015) notes, we do not encounter phenomena and make sense of them all individually. Rather

> …we are born into a world of meaning. We enter a social milieu in which a 'system of intelligibility' prevails. We inherit a 'system of significant symbols'. For each of us, when we first see the world in meaningful fashion, we are inevitably viewing it through lenses bestowed upon us by our culture. Our culture brings things into view for us and endows them with meaning and, by the same token, leads us to ignore other things. (p. 54)

Therefore, through the direct subjective experience of the participants engaging in the particular social worlds of the Stand-Alone School, this study seeks to reveal something essential of this experience.

When turning attention to the phenomenon under focus, Husserl proposed a form of bracketing out pre-suppositions that are brought to the study by the individual. The term given to this concept was *epoché,* and was concerned with attending to the thing itself. According to Howell (2015), by "suspending or bracketing our natural attitude to the world" the aim is to get to the core of the phenomenon and "perceive it as it truly is" (p. 61). It is an approach intended to get to the essence of things. In practical terms, in research this concept is employed somewhat differently in different phenomenological traditions. In more descriptive Husserlian phenomenology, the researcher is required to leave their prior knowledge and pre-suppositions to the side and focus entirely on the experience of participants and their viewpoint as fully as possible (Sorsa, Kikkala and Astedt-Kurki, 2015). For the purposes of this study, I attempted to leave any prior knowledge and any preconceptions to the side during the interviews, in order to focus on the direct experience of participants. As this is a subject with which the researcher is familiar, I attempted to ensure

that presumptions or preconceptions were not inserted into the interview. Nonetheless, for the purposes of elaboration and clarification, participants were sometimes asked to expand or clarify to ensure points were correctly understood.

Given the social nature of the phenomenon under study, an interpretative phenomenological approach is appropriate. As questions of identity are socially, culturally and historically embedded, it is not clear that it is either possible or desirable to leave all presuppositions to one side. As noted above, phenomenological approaches draw on the concept of a lifeworld of participants, and seek to explore their direct experiences. Therefore, much phenomenological research seeks to draw on the world as it is encountered in a meaningful human experience before it is reflected upon or theorised (Brinkman, 2018, p. 580). There are debates within phenomenology as to whether the initial theorising of experience by participants falls within the bounds of phenomenological research (Crotty, 1996; Paley, 1997, 1998; Caelli, 2000). However, concepts of identity, as interrogated in this thesis may be more socially complex and may be almost impossible to entirely disentangle from some initial theorising and reflecting.

Thick description and close analysis of lived experience are used in phenomenological research to understand "how meaning is created through embodied perception" (Starks and Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1373). Events are knowable only through embodied perception. In this way the experience with the social world is immediate, as the individual is embedded entirely within it. Therefore, phenomenological approaches draw on what is evident to the experience of the individual in their lives. According to Sokolowski (2000):

> Phenomenological statements, like philosophical statements, state the obvious and the necessary. They tell us what we already know. They are not new information, but even if not new, they can still be important and illuminating, because we often are very confused about just such trivialities and necessities. (p. 57)

These thick descriptions contrast with ‘thin’ or superficial descriptions (Geertz, 1973) and involve interpretation in which layers of meaning are uncovered in the mundane acts and experiences. ‘Rich’ descriptions include various aspects and nuances of the phenomenon under study (Dahlberg, Drew andand Nystrom, 2001). The various aspects and nuances of a phenomenon allow the researcher to make greater sense of the phenomenon under study as a complex entity. The descriptions of participants (or texts, or narratives etc…) can be considered first-order constructs. According to Schütz (1962), who was the first to incorporate phenomenology in the social sciences, the researcher draws on the first-order constructs in order to develop second-order constructs, which inform the construction of theory. As this thesis employs interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the specific methodological approach taken, the practicalities of interpretation will be expanded upon below.

4.5 Interpretative phenomenological analysis

The approach taken for the analysis of the study was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative approach that initially established itself in health psychology about two decades ago and more recently has started to attract attention in social, clinical and counselling psychology (Smith, 2004). Smith asserts that IPA can be used in areas of research where the researcher is intent on exploring the personal and lived experiences of participants and how participants make sense and meaning from these experiences. Increasingly IPA is being used in the social sciences, as its ultimate aim is to explore how participants make sense of their personal and social world as well as to examine the meanings that particular events and experiences hold for participants (Smith and Osborn, 2008). According to Smith (2004), IPA studies “usually deal with significant existential issues of considerable moment to the participants and the researchers” (p. 49). However, Javornicky (2019) proposes that IPA has a

second significant aim that is particularly pertinent for this study, which is to provide "an interpretation of the phenomenological account situating it in a wider social and cultural context" (p. 89). As this study intends to connect the lived experiences of the teachers and principals in rural primary schools to broader social and cultural processes, this interpretative aspect is particularly relevant. As Javornicky (2019) expands:

> This interpretative aspect intends to take the analysis beyond the lived experience and understanding of the participants into a more speculative terrain of second-order analysis that re-describes the individual experience in terms of socio-cultural processes and theoretical constructs relevant to the research problem. (p. 89)

It is this second order analysis that draws on the theoretical and contextual components that have be identified as significant for the research questions and are developed in *Chapters 2 and 3*. The interplay between individual experience and the broad social and cultural forces shaping the lives of individuals is thus explored.

The approach to IPA is phenomenological which means that the participant's subjective experience is emphasised and central to the research (Wertz, 2005). A unique aspect of IPA is the importance of taking the researcher's active role in the process into account. IPA involves the two fold process of interpretation; the participants making sense of their lived experiences and world and the researcher making sense of the participants doing so; thus involving a "double hermeneutic" (Smith and Osborn, 2008, p. 53). According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), IPA researchers "try to understand what an experience (object or event) is like from the participant's perspective" (p. 8). In this way, the researcher is central to the process of making sense of participants' experiences and IPA is therefore strongly connected to the hermeneutic or interpretative tradition (Palmer, 1969).

According to Smith (2004), there are three characteristics of IPA: idiographic, inductive, and interrogative. IPA studies are idiographic in that they are conducted using small

sample sizes, with details about each particular case being reported on prior to cross-case analysis being conducted. This ensures that both generic themes and individual stories of participants are presented. The inductive nature of IPA studies is borne out of the use of research techniques which are flexible and allow for unanticipated themes to emerge, resulting in "exhilarating analysis" (p. 43). The interrogative nature of IPA research means that the results of analysis of are discussed in relation to existing research and do not stand alone (Smith, 2004). As a key characteristic of phenomenological approaches is the central focus on lived experience and the bracketing of preconceptions of the researcher, engagement with theory occurs at a later stage of analysis. Yet, it is this engagement with theoretical constructs, and the broader social and cultural context, that distinguishes IPA from other descriptive phenomenological approaches (Larkin et al 2006). As this study has a strong sociological emphasis, the interaction between the individual experience and the historical and sociocultural context are significant.

4.6 Data collection

4.6.1 Recruitment and participant profiles

Purposive sampling was used to select from this population. Purposive sampling lends itself well to qualitative exploratory research with flexible designs (Creswell, 2007; Denscombe, 2010; Robson, 2011). It does not provide a balanced cross-section sample, and this could be considered a weakness. However, this is balanced by the opportunity it provides for the researcher to "concentrate on instances that will best illuminate the research question at hand" (Denscombe, 2010, p. 35), making it a pragmatic choice for this research.

In phenomenology, Van Manen (2014) suggests that the commonly understood concept of qualitative sampling is not compatible with this approach. Sampling in this type of research should not be considered as drawing on an empirical subset of the population.

However, he suggests that other concepts of sampling may be acceptable and links the term back to its French root *example,* which has paradigmatic significance. Researchers more commonly refer to methods of choosing a sample or approaches to sampling rather than sampling strategies (Gentles et al, 2015).

The research participants chosen were five principals and five primary teachers in rural Stand-Alone Schools. The criteria for inclusion in the study is presented here:

- The participants were teachers, or principals, who worked in schools in rural areas that were situated at least 3 km from the nearest school. This was in line with the definition of a Stand-Alone School as outlined in the Forum's Report (2012).
- In order to get a sense of what challenges diverse identities might be considered to pose for such contexts, it was decided that the teachers or principals must have taught children from diverse religious backgrounds within the Stand-Alone school context. Given that religious identity has been identified in the Forum's Report (2012) as a significant faultline within these contexts, this was an important consideration in choosing participants. In eight out of ten of the schools, participants had experience of integrating children from different religious backgrounds. The other two participants had experience of teaching children from different religious backgrounds in other schools.
- In line with an IPA approach, a small sample size was used, as the aim is to draw on the experiences of the particular in order to gain an in-depth experience of the lived experiences and to explore the interaction between the individual and the social and cultural context.
- In line with phenomenological approaches, a range of perspectives were sought within these criteria: administrative principal, teaching principals, class teachers from a range of classes, and a support teacher. Along with this, four of the participants taught in

schools that were designated rural DEIS and three participants taught in designated Gaeltacht schools. This range of perspectives is supported in the literature on phenomenological research, which proposes that studies explore a phenomenon from a range of perspectives to better develop an essential narrative of the phenomenon.

I used two different approaches to recruit principals and teachers. Based on local knowledge I called nine schools to see if either principal or teacher would participate in the research. From this approach two participants agreed to take part in the study. Building on this experience I decided it would be best to approach teachers and principals indirectly. I contacted teachers that I knew locally and sought their support in identifying teachers and principals who might be interested in participating. I asked these teachers to contact those identified. Once those identified showed some willingness or interest in the research, I followed up with a phone call. From this method I recruited ten participants. Flowers et al (2012) propose that between four and ten participants is an appropriate number of participants for IPA when conducting research of this kind. All participants worked in different schools. Cresswell (2013) proposes that a range of perspectives of a phenomenon is used in phenomenological research in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Once I had spoken to all participants by phone and arranged a date for interview, I sent on copies of the plain language statement, the interview schedule and consent forms.

Table 2: *Overview of participants*

	Participant	Role	School
1.	**A**	**Administrative Principal**	**>250 pupils**
2.	**B**	**Teaching Principal**	**80-90 pupils**
3.	**C**	**Teaching Principal**	**<20 pupils**

4.	**D**	**Teaching Principal**	**50-60 pupils**
5	**E**	**Teaching Principal**	**40-50 pupils**
6.	**J**	**Mainstream Teacher**	**100-110 pupils**
7.	**K**	**Support Teacher**	**110-120 pupils**
8.	**N**	**Mainstream Teacher (also Deputy Principal)**	**110-120 pupils**
9.	**O**	**Mainstream Teacher**	**70-80 pupils**
10.	**P**	**Mainstream Teacher**	**70-80 pupils**

4.6.2 Interviews

The research involved semi structured interviews with ten participants, five principal teachers and five teachers. The purpose of the interviews in this study was, "to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects' own perspective" (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009, p. 24). Therefore, interviewing is described as, "intersubjective and social, involving interviewer and interviewee as coconstructors of knowledge" (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015, p. 22). This approach was consistent with the aims of my research and the philosophical assumptions that guided the study. My research explored the understandings of principals and teachers of their school communities and their attempts to negotiate complex questions of identity. It was, therefore, inherently concerned with the process of meaning-making. The research viewed the processes of understanding and mean-making as complex, multi-faceted, fluid, contradictory, socially constructed, and contextually situated.

Face-to-face interviews were used as they "enable interpersonal contact, context sensitivity, and conversational flexibility to the fullest extent" (Brinkman, 2018, p. 578). This allowed for participant and researcher to engage in a dialogical process in which each

responded to the other's expressions in order to make sense through the use of available narratives and discourses (Shotter, 1993). The interview is not a format in which the disinterested participants come with preconceived ideas that they transfer to words but "a joint accomplishment of vulnerable, embodied persons with all sorts of hopes, fears, and interests" (Brinkman, 2018, p. 577). The goal was to elicit concrete descriptions rather than abstract theorisations. By seeking descriptions of how participants experienced the world rather than why they had particular experiences, the research tools were in line with a phenomenological perspective (Brinkman, 2018).

The semi-structured interview approach was chosen because such interviews have the purpose of "obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015, p. 6). This approach allowed for greater scope in the sense-making process, providing the interview with sufficient structure for the needs of the research questions, but allowing the freedom for the interviewer to be responsive to the experiences of the participants. Within this type of interview, interviewees are provided with the opportunity to be active participants in a co-constructed process, allowing for their priorities, questions, and voices to come to the fore. This is a strength of the approach, and while it may not be possible to avoid structure in human encounters it is possible "to provide conversational structure that is flexible enough for interviewees to be able to raise questions and concerns in their own words and from their own perspectives" (Brinkman, 2018, p. 579). According to Latour (2000), interviewees can conform too readily to the researcher's agenda, which he believes leads to predictable and trivial research. He argues that research participants should be "interested, active, disobedient, fully involved in what is said about themselves by others" (p. 116). This approach required careful preparation for the interviews in order to create space for participants "to bring contrasting perspectives to light" (Parker, 2005, p. 63). Equally, a

semistructure design with open-ended questions encourages reflection and discussion, and reduces the potential of missing important data pertinent to the phenomenon, or of losing structural context (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

I took an iterative approach to the interview design, which allowed for continual adaptation to new circumstances and emerging questions and data (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Each successive interview was adjusted based on the experiences of the previous interview. The interviews followed a funnel-based approach (Brinkman and Kvale, 2009) in which they began broadly, and narrowed into more specific details after the participants had provided a contextual overview of the school community. I tried to use questions that were short and easy to understand in order to ensure a positive dynamic in which the dialogues flowed easily. As Brinkman and Kvale (2009) note, "a conceptually good thematic research question need not be a good dynamic interview question" and direct questioning may not be the best way of approaching a topic (p. 157). Nonetheless, there was clearly a relationship between my research questions and the interview questions. The initial section of the interviews focused on the school community and population, to what extent it had changed or not and the participants experience of it. This section of the interview clearly linked to the first research question. The second section of the interview focused on responses to social changes and whether they were experienced as challenges. Again, this related to the second research question. The final section of the interview focused on how schools were supported in responding to the changes and what supports they thought were absent. This related to question three of the research questions. Resulting from the experience of the pilots, the interviews shifted from a focus on diversity to clearer focus specifically on identity. This is detailed in the section below.

While interested in the lived experience of the participants rather than an abstract theory, the interviews required interpretation of these experiences by the researcher. As

Brinkman (2018) notes, lifeworld phenomena "are rarely transparent and "monovocal" but rather "polyvocal" and sometimes even contradictory, permitting multiple readings and interpretations" (p. 581). This act of interpretation and analysis is key, and a recognition that insight into the self can only be partial as we do not have full access to the forces that have created us (Butler, 2005). Equally, it recognises that the narratives that people create from their lived experience may be contradictory and riven with internal conflict. This may particularly be true for people, "on the margins of hegemonic discourse" (Frosh, 2007, p. 637). Indeed, some of the inherent contradictions and the contextually constructed nature of meaning-making and understanding are of greatest interest.

The approach taken to interviewing was interpretive. This approach is broadly concerned with understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the participant and sees the interaction that takes place between participants in the interview as creating knowledge (Edwards and Holland, 2013, pp.16-17). The data in the form of the dialogue is considered a co-construction, unlike in more positivistic approaches which see the interviewer as 'gathering' data (pp.15-17).

The ten interviews took place between May 23, 2019 and October 29, 2019. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each; the shortest interview lasted 47 minutes while the longest interview lasted 1 hour 33 minutes. Six interviews were conducted within the schools in which the participants worked themselves. Three interviews were conducted in participants' homes. One interview was conducted in a local community facility (see Table 3 below for further details). In each case, the participant and myself were the only people present. Prior to each interview, the I re-read the interview schedules and made short notes highlighting specific requirements for the interview. In this way, I was sure I informed participants of the purpose of the research and how I would use the data. Prior to the interview, I also gave careful consideration to the language I would use when posing

questions in order to ensure my own preconceptions were excluded as much as possible. Given this is an area of work in which I had done much reading, I was conscious of the need to be aware of my own presumptions and preconceptions. Indeed, from the beginning of the research process, I kept a research journal in which I wrote down my thoughts and considerations as they emerged from my engagement with the literature, with critical friends and with supervisors. This helped me become aware of my own thoughts and preconceptions regarding rural Stand-Alone Schools. In the interviews I tried to balance responding naturally and spontaneously, while also being aware of the potential of my own preconceptions to inform the process. The interviews were recorded using the recording function on my mobile phone. Before I started recording, I asked each person if they were happy for me to begin recording. During interviews I also took notes of moments, statements or aspects of the interview that seemed significant at time. Such aspects included changes of tone within the interview, significant pauses or seeming contradictions in responses. Indeed, at times participants seemed to be surprised by their own responses as if they had not considered these thoughts before. These were noted also. As soon as possible after each interview, I took time to make reflective notes (Appendix E) in a reflective journal that I kept specifically for the purpose of reflection on the interview. In this case I tried to capture what seemed immediately significant from the interview. This was done by reading over the notes taken in the interview, reflecting on what seemed to be particularly significant in the interview itself and also by considering the interview in the context of previous interviews. This process also made me increasingly aware of my own preconceptions and how I could manage them in future interviews.

Table 3: *Overview of interviews*

Participant	Interview location	Date	Interview length

1.	**A**	**School**	**23/5/2019**	**54 minutes**
2.	**B**	**School**	**13/8/2019**	**58 minutes**
3.	**C**	**Participant's home**	**24/8/2019**	**51 minutes**
4.	**D**	**Participant's home**	**15/9/2019**	**1 hour 17 minutes**
5	**E**	**School**	**31/5/2019**	**56 minutes**
6.	**J**	**Community facility**	**14/8/2019**	**1 hour 5 minutes**
7.	**K**	**School**	**5/7/2019**	**1 hour 15 minutes**
8.	**N**	**School**	**16/10/2019**	**49 minutes**
9.	**O**	**School**	**21/10/2019**	**47 minutes**
10.	**P**	**Participant's home**	**29/10/2019**	**1 hour 33 minutes**

4.6.2.1 Pilot-interviews

Two pilot interviews were conducted prior to beginning the research: one with a teacher and one with a principal, each in Stand-Alone Schools. Both participants were known to the researcher. These interviews were conducted as preparation for the study (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003), and in order to identify any flaws, limitations or issues that needed to be ironed out before beginning (Kvale, 2007). The pilot interviews revealed a number of useful findings that were helpful in conducting the research. Firstly, they confirmed that the topic of research would help unearth useful findings. A concern that I had prior to the research was that the participants would be reluctant, or would find it challenging to speak about diversity and identity in their school to an interviewer who they did not know. Secondly, as this is a topic of study about which I am knowledgeable, I found that I needed to check my own

engagement with the interviewees, so that I was not inserting my own preconceptions into the interview. Following on from this I realised that I needed multiple strategies and ways, in the interviews, of asking largely similar questions but in different ways. For the pilots, I designed research schedules. Following on from the pilots, the research schedules evolved. Initially, the research focused on diversity, and religious diversity in particular, within the school. However, resulting from the pilots, the focus of the research and the interview schedules shifted. In the pilot, it became evident that as school communities were becoming more diverse, questions of identity were coming more to the fore. Social and cultural changes forced schools to grapple with their collective sense of school identity and to consider the impact of the pluralisation of identities for this collective. The focus then shifted from diversity to a more specific focus on identity. Therefore, changes were made to the interview schedule to reflect the shift from negotiating diversity to negotiating identity. Nonetheless, the schedule maintained the same tripartite, funnel-based structure described above. Equally, many of the interviews questions remained with the emphasis placed on identity.

Another key consideration was the need for flexibility in using such a research schedule. While it was useful in getting participants to think about the research topic in advance, it needed to be used flexibly within the interviews themselves. As the interview schedule reflected the researcher's agenda rather than that of the participant, adhering to the questions as laid out had the effect of stifling the flow of the interview. Thus, the pilots were useful in significantly shaping the design of the interview process.

4.7 Data analysis

The process of data analysis followed the six steps that are set out by Smith et al (2012). With this approach the process is iterative and inductive (Smith, 2007). The six steps are: reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for

connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases. The initial analysis began with a hard copy transcription of each interview, with a wide margin at the side for making notes. Throughout the process all analysis was conducted manually, rather than by using software. This was to allow for greater familiarity with source texts. The Appendices F-K provide examples of the steps taken in the analysis process.

Step 1: Reading and re-reading

This step involved becoming immersed in the original data. The transcriptions were read alongside the original recording in order to aid the researcher's memory and to support a fuller understanding of the context. This process helped to develop a sense of the text, the tone of the interviews, how that developed and changed over the course of the interviews, and how inconsistencies came to light. The process was slow and deliberative.

Step 2: Initial noting

According to Smith et al (2012), the initial level of analysis "is the most detailed and time consuming" (p. 83). In many ways Steps 1 and 2 are inter-related and iterative. As I read and re-read the transcripts I made marginal notes (See Appendix F). Smith et al describe three levels of comments: descriptive, linguistic and conceptual. Initial noting was exploratory and tended towards descriptive and semantic comments. As familiarity with the transcripts increased and connections were made to context and theory, noting became more interpretative in nature.

Step 3: Developing emergent themes

This step involves reducing "the volume of detail…whilst maintaining complexity, in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between explanatory notes" (Smith et al, 2012, p. 91). In practice, it entailed greater focus on the exploratory comments rather than on the original text. In this step the transcript is divided into distinct chunks of text

that are considered significant. In this part of the process the data moves from being participant oriented to having greater engagement from the researcher. In Step 2, much of the noting involved myself, as researcher, rephrasing or commenting directly on the text of the transcript. In Step 3, I was required as researcher to become more situated in the data, interpreting the chunks of text into greater levels of abstraction and organising them into themes (See Appendix H). I used colour codes to group text into emergent themes. These groups changed and evolved over time as the process of analysis continued. Themes are described by Smith et al (2012) as "phrases which speak to the psychological essence of the piece and contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual" (p. 92).

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes

Smith et al note that this level of analysis is not prescriptive and allows for the researcher to develop innovative ways to organise the analysis. Once I had identified emergent themes in the hard copy transcripts, I tabulated them into a colour-coded Excel document. I entered data from interview themes into spreadsheets under relevant themes (See Appendix I). Once this was done for each interview, I exported the themes to a Word document. I printed out this document and explored the relationship between the themes within the interview in order to identify super-ordinate or overarching themes. Strategies that were particularly useful for this particular process, as identified by Smith et al (2012), were: abstraction, subsumption, polarisation, contextualisation and numeration. Abstraction required the identification of patterns between emergent themes in order to develop an overarching theme. Subsumption involved a similar process, but in this case an emergent theme became a superordinate theme. At times, difference or contradiction was highlighted in texts, and this oppositional relationship became part of the organising process, which Smith et al define as polarisation. At other times, locating significant data in the text in terms of its contextual importance for

the participant or participants became a feature of the analytical process. Finally, while not often a feature of the analysis, at times I took account of the frequency with which emergent themes arose across participants. Here, the aim was simply to look for patterns and, perhaps, unearth relative importance, rather than to be definitive or generalise.

Step 5: Moving to the next case

During the process of analysis each interview or transcript was analysed in turn, moving through the steps described above. Once I had finished Steps 1-4, I moved onto the next transcript and, in essence, each one was treated as a separate case. Thus, with each new interview, I attempted to bracket the ideas emerging from previous analysis and to approach the transcript afresh, in line with a phenomenological approach. As a researcher, I attempted to leave my presumptions aside.

Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases

The last step required looking for patterns across the transcripts. In this way I could identify connections between the interviews of different participants. While teachers and principals participated in the study, the data was not grouped accordingly. The aim of the research was to explore a range of perspectives on the experience of identity within school communities in order to get a greater understanding of the phenomenon, rather than the experience of the professionals themselves. However, where the data pertained to the particular role of the professionals themselves, this was elucidated in the next chapter. By layering the data of all participants in the same Excel document (See Appendix I), this allowed for easy comparison across cases. At times, the themes that emerged from a particular interview helped to shed light on a theme from another interview and connections were made to theory. Equally, as I moved through the analysis of the interviews, some themes changed or evolved, or came to be seen as more or less significant. The process of looking for patterns allowed for an

increasingly complex second order interpretation that clearly related data to theory. The final analysis involved a dialogue between researcher, theory and data. This activity shed new light on the process of meaning-making by participants and, in turn, certain components of theory and context emerged as more significant than I had previously thought or assumed them to be. Throughout this process of looking for patterns and finalising themes there were a number of iterations of the themes. These evolved as I engaged with the data and theory over time.

Appendix J provides an overview of the process of refining emerging themes as the process of analysis progressed. Appendix K provides an overview of the finalised themes and subthemes.

In my analysis and write-up I have attempted to follow the steps laid out above, integrating key theoretical concepts and significant contextual factors into the process while maintaining the focus on lived experience. As mentioned above, examples of the steps taken in the analysis process can be found in Appendices F-K.

4.8 Ethical considerations

The questions that are at the heart of this research study are of a sensitive nature. Therefore, there were a number of significant ethical considerations around the collection, storage, analysis and use of data.

The fact that the interviewer was the instrument in this study entailed a great deal of responsibility on my part. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) describe the "interaction of interviewer and interviewee as laden with ethical issues" (p. 22). In positivist interviews the researcher asks a series of predetermined questions and assumes the answers they receive reflect the interviewee's largely unchanging understanding of the world, revealing something about the nature of objective reality. There is, at least in theory, a certain neutrality. However,

in interpretive interviews the researcher is interested in exploring questions that are complex and nuanced, and recognises that the act of talking may influence the outcome of the talk. While O' Connell Davidson and Layder (1994) emphasise the importance of building trust, the interviewer must also be aware of the nature of the power relationships within the interview. The caring and liberating potential of qualitative interviews, initially proposed by feminist researchers has latterly been questioned, given the potential for the instrumentalisation of human relationships (Mauthner, Birch, Jessop and Miller, 2012).

Duncombe and Jessop question the ethics of 'faking friendship', and Kvale (2006) notes the danger that "a fantasy of democratic relations masks the basic issue of who gains materially and symbolically from the research and where claims of participation disguise the exertion of power" (p. 482). Regardless of how sensitively the interviewer handles the interview an underlying imbalance of power remains. Indeed, arguably, an informal approach in which the interviewer creates a bond with the interviewee may be in danger of creating a scenario in which the interviewee is manipulated. The interviewer is still the one who is seeking to gain something from the interview, and who largely drives the terms of the interview.

Given these considerations and the sensitive nature of the research topic, I was acutely aware of the need on my part to respect the engagement of participants and act with integrity and trust regarding the use of the data. Thus, I took a number of steps in order to protect the best interests of participants.

Firstly, written consent was sought from all participants. Included with the consent was an information letter that set out the aims and purpose of the research. Prior to providing the written consent form to participants, I phoned each one and explained orally the aims of the research and outlined the role of the participants. Finally, careful consideration was given to creating a trusting environment within the interviews. At the beginning of each interview,

participants were reminded that they could stop participating at any time and that they were not obliged to answer any question if they did not wish to do so. Equally, they were advised that they could ask to check the interview transcripts at a later stage if they were not sure or were unhappy with anything that was said. Finally, two participants were sent the transcript reviews were conducted with two interviewees to see if they were content with the transcription.

Secondly, interviews were transcribed on the researcher's laptop and stored in a password protected online storage account. Hard copies of the transcript were printed for analysis, but identifying features such as participant names, school names and nearby locations were removed. For the purposes of analysis and confidentiality, each participant was assigned a letter at the stage of transcription. This letter was used in place of participants' names in all hard and electronic copies. Participants names were not stored or saved anywhere, including the online storage account. To ensure I was certain of which letter pertained to which participant I created a key in which each letter was linked to participants' initials. When analysis was completed, the hard copies were destroyed.

Thirdly, while complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed for such a study, participants were assured of confidentiality. This assurance was included in the letter that I sent to participants, and they were reminded of this orally at the time of interview.

4.9 Research Quality

This thesis employed Yardley's (2000) framework for ensuring quality in the study. Smith et al (2012) propose that this is an appropriate approach for IPA studies. Yardley (2000) sets out four criteria for this purpose: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

Sensitivity to context was a significant consideration for the research in hand. It incorporates many factors including theory, relevant literature, empirical data, socio-cultural setting, participants' perspective and ethical issues (Yardley, 2000). Initially, in choosing IPA as a methodology, the research was concerned with close engagement with the idiographic demonstrating sensitivity to the particular context. Close attention was paid in the interviews and in the analysis to the specific experiences of participants and their contexts. This is outlined both in *Chapter 4* and *Chapter 5.* In the analysis many verbatim extracts from the transcripts are used giving voice to the participants and "allowing the reader to check the interpretations being made" (Smith et al, 2012, pp. 180-181). Yardley (2000) proposes that as language, social interaction, and culture "are all central to the meaning and function of social phenomena" an "awareness of the socio-cultural setting of the study" is important (p. 220). Through the literature review, knowledge of the specific school settings and sensitivity to the way language was used by participants, the research was alert to the "normative, ideological, historical, linguistic and socioeconomic influences on the beliefs, objectives, expectations and talk of all participants" (ibid., p. 220). The research also significantly engaged with the literature on identity, providing a clear theoretical basis for the analysis of the experiences of the research participants.

Commitment and rigour are related concepts. According to Yardley (2000) commitment refers to the prolonged engagement with the data whilst rigour refers to the completeness of the data collection and analysis. The data was transcribed and analysed over many months, outlined in the section above. This involved significant contemplation and attention to the data as well as discussion with a critical friend. To support the rigour of the data, triangulation was also employed through the inclusion of the perspectives of classroom teachers, support teachers, teaching principals and an administrative principal.

Transparency refers to the clarity with which the stages of the research process are detailed in the thesis. This chapter lays out the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research as well as the practical steps taken by the researcher in conducting the study. *Section 4.6* outlines the steps taken in the analytical process. The appendices provide examples of the various stages of data analysis. The thesis also sets out a coherent argument where a clear fit is evident between the theoretical perspective adopted, the research questions and the data analysed.

Yardley (2000) argues that the decisive criterion by which any research should be judged is "its impact and utility" (223). There has been much debate at national level over the last two decades around the composition of the primary school system and the changing values, belief-systems, and cultural norms within society. Yet, despite the level of debate, little research has been conducted on the actual experiences within rural education. This thesis explores the intersection between complex questions of identity, rurality and StandAlone Schools, thereby attempting a novel perspective on the debates that have largely centred around questions of rights and choice. It explores how these schools and school communities are understood to inform a sense of belonging and the way people come to see who they are.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This section outlines the key findings from the research and provides a discussion of these findings. Through the process of analysis, the following four themes emerged and are used to organise the section below: school community in a time of change; teacher identity: negotiating from the middle; diversity and identity; communication and negotiation: 'being' and 'becoming'. While the findings below are organised according to the themes to emerge from the process of analysis, they evidently respond to the research and interview questions. Broadly, themes 1 and 2 correspond to the first research question: how do specific teachers and principals experience a plurality of identities? These themes largely correspond to the first section of the interviews described in *Chapter 4*. Themes 3 and 4 largely correspond to the second research question: what are the specific challenges faced by these teachers and principals? Similarly, the themes largely correspond to the second section of the interviews. Finally, findings related to the third research question on lessons for policy and practice can be found across themes. The implications for the findings of the research is discussed in further detail in *Chapter 6*. The table below outlines these themes and subsequent subordinate themes.

Table 4: *Themes and subordinate themes*

Themes	**Subordinate themes**
1. School Community in a time of change	• Connection between school and local community • School and church • Sense of place • Diversity and change
2. Teacher Identity: Negotiating from the middle	• The role of the teacher/principal in small communities • Teacher/Principal Identity: Ambiguity and Uncertainty
3. Diversity and identity	• Articulating and Integrating Difference • 'Locals' and 'Blow-ins': shifting identities • Individuation and Choice
4. Communication and negotiation: 'Being' and 'Becoming'	• Communicating about children • Communicating with children • School identity: Being and Becoming

5.2 School community in a time of change

Stand-Alone Schools have been characterised in the Forum's Report as having a particular 'social dividend' within their communities (Coolahan et al, 2012), something clearly reflected in the literature. The anthologies analysed in *Chapter 3* pointed to the fact that these schools have often been perceived and understood as focal points for local communities. This section explores the way in which participating teachers and principals understand the place of their schools within their communities and how this shifts and changes from their perspective.

The connection between the school and the surrounding local community was articulated strongly across the interviews. This was voiced in a number of ways: a sense of place, connection with the local church, and a service or resource for the local community. However, each articulation provided an insight into the differing ways in which the schools were understood to relate to their local context.

The vision of the school community was not monolithic or uniform, but rather was complex and nuanced. Though participants often availed of the same or similar 'universes of discourse' or 'streams of tradition' (Barth, 1983) to talk about the school community, providing a strong semblance of coherence and continuity, there existed clearly also local and individual variety. Participants may have used similar language to describe processes and experiences that transact differently at the level of the particular, while simultaneously understood themselves as speaking about the same thing.

5.2.1 Connection between school and local community

Connection between the school and the local community was something described by all participants, apart from one, and was considered to be an important aspect of school life in a rural school. For Participant A, the school was consciously active in positioning itself at the

centre of the local community. As he noted, "there's a strong community spirit here in ……, and we're trying to get that centred around the school here." What this meant in practical terms was elaborated on by the participant:

> So, your experience of [*name of locality*] is you don't know it too well, do you? No? (*interviewer nods in the negative*) So, you drove in and you saw a shop, okay? Then you saw a church just down the road – a small bit and there's two pubs in the village itself. There's one housing estate and there's a community hall, a sport's hall and the school. So, it's enough to create the heart of the village and I would say that between ourselves and the board of management of this school and the parish council, deliberately might be too strong a word, but it certainly has been a focus of ours to tidy up our area, the parish council and ourselves and the board of management share an area up there and it has become the focus of attention for a huge amount of community activities.

Therefore, in this case the school consciously engaged with local community groups beyond the classrooms as a part of a process of community creation. This was understood by Participant A as a symbiotic process in which both the school and those in the local community were actively engaged.

As implied above, the physical space of the school and the opportunities it provided were considered a significant contribution within community life. Participant K described the role her school played in the following way:

> I suppose we do [*play a role in community life*] in that we bring people together and either way that's one thing we do, different school events, we'd have our sports' days and we'd have, as I said, the parents evenings and we might have information courses on maybe internet safety [*and*] first aid course. We did a first aid course in the school so parents would be coming, yeah. It would be a place where they'd meet maybe – you know, [*we have a*] fairly active parent's association.

In this description, the provision of a place and activities was significant. It was not necessarily something that was done deliberately, but rather it was understood to emerge organically from the fundamental work of the school. The school was one place in the community where people came together to meet up and get to know one another. Participant

K also described the school as a key service provider for the community. This was seen as important in an area in which services for the local community were relatively limited:

> We offer…, I always felt, as a school, I thought well we offer a fabulous service because I'd be very proud of our school, but the back-up services weren't there unless the families were really willing to commit.

Interestingly, while Participant K noted the 'supply' nature of services as a significant driver within the community, Participant J also recognised service provision as a key aspect of the function of his school in his rural community. However, in his description, the service was responding to parents' wants and was understood as more demand led.

As with Participant K above, Participant O also noted that the school provided a meeting place, in this case an informal and unplanned one, a place where people from the village came together, engaged in conversations and built relationships:

> Well, I suppose you see people waiting around for conversations at school collecting times and school drop off times and we're lucky to have a great play area across the road, so that also encourages a great sense of community. But the shop, we'll say, when the shop closed, the post office closed, all those different things meant, I suppose, another aspect of the community was gone. So, it's kind of the last remaining strong aspect of the community, I suppose, here.

This was felt much more keenly in the absence of other local amenities, whereby the school provided one of the few places in the area for people to come together. This was not something that arose from the activities organised by the school or by conscious design, at least, from the participant's perspective. While not using the discourse of service, it is nonetheless apparent in this description that the school is considered an important service provider, in an area with few other outlets. But it is clearly also an important symbolic marker. Its importance heightened by closure of other local focal points.

This sense of a seemingly organic community role emerging from the specific context was apparent in the descriptions of others. Participant B stated that:

> A lot of them [*parents*] work locally, their whole life is built around the local community and the school is a mirror of that, kind of, you know, that everything that goes on in the community, this school is kind of invited to be involved in.

In this description the local community and school were described as participating in a symbiotic relationship. The parents were described as deeply rooted in the place and the school was understood as a reflection of the local community. In this way, the principal felt an expectation that the school would be involved in community activities beyond the school day. This expectation may also have been reinforced by the principal's own experience. She had been appointed as teaching principal in the school a year before, having previously worked as a teacher in another school approximately 30 kilometres away. However, she was originally from the area and was a past pupil of the school. In such rural places there is a shallow pool of available resources. This creation of a sense of belonging to the community, therefore, helps maximise available resources by emphasising these connections and attachments between school and community.

Geographical and demographic factors were also considered as contributing to the school community connection. Participant C, a teaching principal in a Gaeltacht school, noted that due to falling population and low population density the nature of the school community had changed:

There isn't the same community, I suppose in that, they're from so many different smaller communities. What would have been a traditional school community is now, well...we would have been a traditional school, church, local community…[*it*] is now very much a school community but drawing from a number of different communities. The description exposes the challenges and limitations of language. All participants interpreted the term 'community' from the perspective of their own experience. However, it was clear that for Participant C the character of the local community had changed enormously in recent decades. Therefore, the sense of continuity with the community of the past was not as strongly felt.

The significance of place was also described by Participant O. Conversely, the school population lived close by and this was understood as having a role in how the school functioned as a community. Living in close proximity to the school (and each other) and a connection to the place itself, was experienced as instrumental in creating this sense of connection. The school was, therefore in this interpretation, the catalyst in community formation:

> The school community generally, it's very local, it's all local within I'd say two to two and a half kilometres. We have 58 children and all of the children live nearby, about 40 families and there would be a close connection. I suppose really here at the moment, the school is the hub of life because the shop is gone, you know there's a church, there's a community centre alright but the pub is only open in the evening so it's the only life a lot of people would say. You know the village, I should say, is very lifeless other than when school is on.

For Participant O, demographics also played a key role in the nature of the school community and its sense of vitality. In contrast to the experience of Participant C above, the building of a number of estates in the local village in the previous decade and a half had ensured that the school population remained relatively stable. For Participant O, then, the school provides some sense of continuity even as other community focal points close down.

When describing where the pupils in the school came from, Participant C noted that none of the children currently attending the school came from the 'traditional catchment area'. This conception of a local and traditional school community came across in all interviews, even if it was articulated differently in each case. Participant A spoke of the intergenerational nature of many of the school population and the sense that generations of particular families continued to attend the same school. This reflected a particular stream or theme that was evident in the anthologies discussed in Chapter 3.

Reflecting both the strong intergenerational attachment to the school and the significance of demographic change on rural schools Participant P noted that:

> The community would say, and the parents, that they're fighting to keep, they want to keep this school open and there's always a fear when the numbers go down that it will close, but they were in my first few meetings where–[*it was stated that*] we [*parents/school community*] don't want to have that happen, we want to have this school as long, even if there's ten pupils in it, we want to have this school as long open because you never know what will happen down the road.

At other points in the interview Participant E spoke of the interconnected nature of the school and local community and the role it has in shaping the school. It is interesting that when Participant P speaks above of the desire to keep the school open come what may, she speaks firstly of the community and then of the parents. Whether the school stays open or not has a significance beyond the education of the children who attend. The school is a very potent symbol of community and mobilises the local community to act. The action can be seen, according to Participant P, in the keen parental involvement with sacramental preparation being a particular focal point for this involvement. Therefore, when Participant P refers to community, she is speaking both of the local community and the school community. In her interviews they are largely synonymous.

The sense of a traditional school community was also reiterated by Participant J, although it was articulated somewhat differently. He spoke of the school community in the following terms:

> Yeah, the school community would be quite traditional in a lot of respects but it's (*sic*) definitely an onus in terms of education. So, the church still plays a huge part, the local GAA clubs still play a huge part and they're more the corner stones of society.

In this case, the traditional aspect of the school community lay not in a sense of place and intergenerational connection, but rather in the institutions or pillars that were significant in providing the community with its identity. As with Participant C, the school and church communities were considered closely interconnected. He felt that the church and the GAA club were more central in the life of the community, but these two other components were

considered by other participants as central pillars of community life. Interestingly, while Participant J noted the 'onus' on education, this was not an aspect that participants emphasise when speaking on the role of the school in the community.

In her interview Participated N noted:

> GAA would be massive, massive for us. Like even when our numbers last year, our numbers reached kind of a peak where we couldn't take anyone else in and I suppose parents still wanted their children to be part of, they wanted them to be in [*name of the school*] because you'd be part of the 'GAA' club in [*name of the local GAA club*], but they mightn't have wanted their children to go to [*name of the school*], but they wouldn't go to any of the other neighbouring schools because it meant you wouldn't be part of the 'GAA' in [*name of the local GAA club*] , you know.

In these descriptions, schools were considered to play or have a particular and significant role in their local communities. While there were similar emphases throughout, it was also evident that local factors, such as population change, sporting involvement, and whether schools had other amenities locally played a role in how this connection was understood.

While nearly all participants spoke of strong levels of identification between the local population and the school, one participant described a contrasting experience. For Participant P, there was a weak, indeed poor, relationship with local parents:

I think it's [*the relationship*] improving. I think in the past, I don't think there was a great relationship being honest between the school and the parents, I don't. I don't know is it that they had a negative experience and that was carried through where I wouldn't have said that parents would have come into the school to do an awful lot with the school. You know, they weren't really interested in supporting the school. This contrasts significantly with the experiences described by other participants. Participant P spoke of how some local children who would potentially be in the school's catchment area attend other local schools instead. She noted amenities such as the provision of a childcare service as strong motivators in these choices. She also noted that while there was a strong intergenerational population within her school, as with all schools, she attributed this connection to the provision of a bus service to

the school in the past rather than attachment to or identification with the school. As with her description above, a clear sense of distance was evident between the parents and the school. Interestingly, she notes that this lack of identification has long roots. She has worked in the school nearly 20 years and it predated her arrival.

Even though the schools in question were not as remote as rural schools in other jurisdictions, reflecting the work of Biddle and Price Anzano (2016), the responses of participants demonstrated the additional role that these schools played within their communities. Apart from being places of formal learning, they were resources that served the wider community. This reflected also the way in which rural schools were described in the anthologies in Chapter 3. Despite significant change in the last two decades these schools were still considered to have a purpose beyond their formal function. Equally, this conception of the rural school in the community, in line with what Donehower, Hogg and Schnell (2007) propose, needs to be understood in geographic, demographic and cultural terms. Geographic, demographic and cultural factors were all seen as significantly impacting the understanding and evolution of the school community. Lastly, across all participants, except Participant P, there was clear identification between the school community, the local community and religious community. At times, these three communities were understood as almost synonymous in the responses such was the perceived cohesion. In the one instance where this identification was not perceived, Participant P described significant challenges in the relationship between the school and the parents. In this one case, Participant P noted very little clear identification between the local population and the school community and little identification between school and church. In this case, it would seem that this lack of identification contributed to the participant's understanding of a disconnect between school and parents.

5.2.2 School and church

The strong perceived interconnection between the school community and the religious community can be understood as a reflection of the denominational nature and the specific history of the school as well as their roots in the local area. For many the relationship between the local church and school can be understood as an important symbol for the creation of the school community. In many instances the Church was described as a key part of the community, (where there was a local Church), and was closely connected to the school. Participant A described the connection to the local Church, which was approximately 100 metres from the school, in the following practical terms:

We used to send two mass servants to mass every day to serve mass daily. We stopped that this year really on health and safety grounds, not for any other reason... Participant A elaborated on this and suggested that participation in the life of the church was an important signifier for the school community:

> We would engage with an additional programme for our communion, not just regular 'Let's Grow in Love' or 'Grow in Love' or whatever it is, but another associated with the blessing of the priest, and we would have a choir at the events that would consist of eighty children never mind the children making their communion. So, it is a traditional big event and a big part of our school life, albeit that the vast majority would be like the normal mill of an Irish person who doesn't go to mass on Sunday, but it just is there at the moment.

It is clear in this description that participation in the life of the church was understood as serving an important symbolic function for the school community, beyond simply religious observance. It held huge cultural relevance and significance for the school community, even though the majority were described as non-practising Catholics.

When Participant E told parents that they would no longer be able to send children to serve mass for children protection reasons, she met considerable resistance from parents. Previously, a special needs assistant (SNA) had driven the children to the local church which was a few hundred metres from the school, but that practice had become untenable:

> So, we said to parents, "look it, we can't do it anymore because of the child safety protection and new rules" and they weren't happy, and they said, "was there any way we could come to some agreement where I'd like my child to be able to participate if a neighbour has passed away to serve for that funeral, you know?". It's only like once every two or three months, and I was really like surprised at that, because you know…is it okay, what do we do?

Participant E had been initially surprised at the level of resistance to the change. In this response, along with the school the church was a really powerful symbol for the local community. The school and church were the only two amenities in the immediate area and although they were only a few kilometres from two villages, they seemed to be constitutive of the local community. Later, Participant E noted how the local church was what differentiated this local community from the next: "I think the church is the thing, the [*names local church*] and the [*names neighbouring church*]."

The symbolic significance of the local church is evident in Participant N's response also. For Participant N, the loss of the local church through flood damage a number of years previously was considered a significant event for the local community. The school and the church in this conception of community were intrinsically linked. The church was considered to differentiate the school from other schools in the locality:

> I mean like the church in [*names local church*] went there a few years ago…if I'm very honest, it came up in conversation about maybe doing the sacraments with the schools in [*neighbouring town*], because we didn't have a church to do the sacraments, but our parents were not happy with that.

A strong attachment was clearly felt by many parents to the local church, which seemed to hold a powerful resonance. For Participant K, the link between church, school and community was described in a more personal way. It was the interaction between people, significant members of the community, that were important in constructing this interrelationship and identification. In this understanding, the local teacher and priest were

heavily involved in activities beyond the school gate or the church gate, that strongly contributed to a sense of local community:

> We had a brilliant priest here for a number of years, [*we had had*] a lot of elderly priests, and we had a guy come and he really drew the community together.
>
> He started all that [*local committees*] and they're all kept going and we were only saying this the other day, they're still being kept going by people who are now in their fifties and we were young when he came.
>
> Like God, we could pass this mantle onto somebody else now, but it's hard enough to find people to pass it onto.

This description by Participant K demonstrates the importance the local school and church could have within a rural locality and why such an attachment to both was described in interviews. Subsequently, Participant K also spoke of the role of the former principal in the local GAA. She noted that the current principal lived over an hour away and his relationship with the school and local community was different from that of his predecessors. In this way changing patterns of relationships and interpersonal interaction became significant in shaping the processes of identification. Her description also highlighted the way the local, the religious and school communities were understood to have traditionally overlapped and been almost synonymous.

The interpersonal nature and the significance of interaction in supporting the identification between school and church was underlined by Participant C. He spoke, in frustration, about the lack of priests locally, and the lack of support from the clergy locally:

> …we've very few priests so I suppose, and the population of [is very much an aging population. Like, this week alone I know there's been four funerals, three burials in the one graveyard.

Therefore, there was far less interaction with the local priest. From his perspective this was considered a negative development that was weakening the link between the school and the church. The school was therefore left to carry a greater load and the building blocks of this

once symbiotic relationship were not as solid as they had been. In addition, as with the teachers and the school, the priests and the local church were considered valuable resources in a community where resources were scare. The lack of interaction from local priests was also commented on by Participant D, as significant. This was also reflected in the response of Participant P who noted that they do not see the local priest very often. Their school was approximately eight kilometres away from the local village and this seemed to impact the relationship with the local priest: "he's already done his school duties down in the main village so we're just – oh we'll call up [*to the village*]." Throughout her interview, this sense of geographical peripherality, even to local amenities or resources, seemed to take on a particular significance for the challenges the school faces. The lack of interaction with the local priest was symptomatic of a greater sense of alienation, apathy and decline articulated by Participant P throughout her interview. While all the schools in the study were peripheral to some degree, it must be noted that Participant P and Participant D work in the two most remote schools. Both are Gaeltacht schools on the outer fringes of the west coast and are at a distance from the nearest villages.

Participant J, in his current school for less than ten years, described the relationship between the local church and school community differently. For him, along with a sports community, these local communities existed somewhat independently of each other and provided a service for the parents. What was significant here was not so much the identification with these communities, but rather the service that they provided for parents:

> But all the way down the school is the same kind of thing, that parents would be quite involved, and I think that there's a good awareness of what the church community and a school community and a sports community offers to the children.

This was also a theme that emerged in Participant J's conception of the role of school and teacher. Throughout the interview Participant J's descriptions drew significantly on discourses that could be considered neo-liberal in orientation, something that differentiated

his responses, although not entirely, from other participants. However, it is significant in that it highlights another 'universe of discourse' or 'stream of tradition' that is entering the field and informing conceptions of the role of education in rural areas, as it does everywhere.

Throughout the interviews, the significance of the local church in the construction of the school community was evident, but equally, this was understood as evolving and adapting, and largely becoming weaker. The reasons for this connection becoming weaker may reflect changing populations, norms and values, but also the diminishing resources that are available. In some cases, there was a desire to maintain the strong link to the church but changing regulations around child protection made it difficult to maintain. In other cases, there was less engagement and ownership on the part of the local population. And for Participant D and Participant P, the lack of meaningful connection between school and church was emblematic of school decline and the broader sense of peripherality and alienation experienced in these schools.

5.2.3 Sense of place

As mentioned above along with the local church, in the areas where there was a local church, the school was one a of the few local amenities in many of the communities. This alone gave the schools a prominence within a locality. As noted already, Donehower, Hogg and Schnell (2007) consider the need to understand rurality and rural education in terms of the geographic, the demographic, and the cultural. The intersection between the particularities of place and the school emerged in different ways across the interviews. Sense of place and attachment to locality have been important contributors to a sense of identity within rural schools, as evidenced in the anthologies discussed in *Chapter 3*. Significantly, although the schools in these areas were stand-alone and rural, they were often quite close to each other, within a few kilometres. Even in the more remote locations, there tended to be other primary

schools within five or six kilometres. These historical patterns of rural school establishment have left lasting impressions on the communities and how they have come to perceive themselves. The establishment of a school in a particular area was, in many cases, both constitutive and definitive of place and community.

Participant A differentiates between the local community that were intergenerational within the school and who had a specific attachment to the place:

> But, there is that group, we'll say the people that were here for years and years and years, multi-generational, there would be a strong attachment for them and you would have a lot of people looking to come back and build a house. I would say probably three times a week I'd write this letter to say this person was in school here, he is no longer seeking planning permission. Three times is a bit too much, possibly twice a week.

Participant B described the children as all living close to the school and noted that the local school community all came from within the immediate area. Significantly, and reflecting a key theme of the anthologies in *Chapter 3*, the school was considered a hugely constitutive element in the creation of a sense of local community. Unlike many of the other schools, there were no other local amenities or services near the school. She described the school location thus:

> So, yeah, a smaller rural location, you're outside and the nearest town is two miles away. Really nothing around us, you know, at all, so very much rural.

Although the school was only three kilometres from a local town, the sense that the school was on its own came across in the principal's account. Later, in the interview Participant B noted the strong attachment that the local population had with the school:

> But I suppose I've really felt it in the move back to here because in the school that I was in, even though it was a very tight knit community and everything, I wouldn't have felt the school would have had a stronger role within the community, or would have been as involved in the community as the expectation is here.

In this description, the location of the school was significant. Unlike the situation with some of the other schools, there were no other local amenities nearby. The school was entirely surrounded by fields and occasional houses. Combined with a small school population, the school was central in the community in a way that it might not otherwise have been. In her account the location of the school and its size combined to make it a focal point. Although her former school was in a town of only a few hundred people, she sensed a much closer relationship between school and parents in her current role. Place and population were understood to play a role in this evolving dynamic. Participant E's experience was similar. Along with the church, her school was the only other landmark locally. The school population was small and most families were from farming backgrounds with very strong intergenerational links.

Participant N also noted the significance of the lack of other amenities. She noted the local church as the only other significant landmark in the area but stated that it had closed. Again, the closest town was just under four kilometres away, but similarly to the account above, it was considered to constitute a different locality, separate from the locality of the school. However, while many of the accounts described a sense of rootedness within the area and community, this sense was not immutable. Participants described changing population patterns and the impact it had on the school and school community. Participant N noted that approximately 60-70% of the school population came from the locality whereas 30 to 40% come from the town. When probed on this Participant N noted:

> Yes, that would be a recent development in the last probably 9 or 10 years even though in the local town, there is a Gaelscoil in the town, and there is a boys' and a girls' school…(*further identifying details left out*) but yeah a lot of them would come out to us.

This highlighted a pattern that emerged in some of the interviews, whereby parents chose schools that were not their local schools for their children. While most participants reported

that the children attending their schools typically came from the immediate locality, this was not the case for all schools. Local economic, demographic and cultural factors were described as playing a role is these processes. For example, Participant C noted that population change and decline was a significant factor in the formation of the local school community and contributed significantly to declining school numbers endangering the viability of the school:

> Now, we have children from very scattered parts of the parish, I suppose. The children were more isolated, and the families were more isolated and, traditionally the children didn't have the same opportunities and they had to be brought to play in their friends' houses where it was at least a five-minute drive away. So, it's kind of…, it's an…, I don't know what you call it? I suppose it's the changing settlements in rural areas that is becoming…, the population is becoming more sparse.

Participant C contrasts this to traditionally when children would have come from much closer to the school and there would have been greater social interaction between the children and the locality. This change had led to higher levels of isolation. Children and members of the school community interacted far less outside of school than would have previously been the case.

What emerges from the interviews was an identification between place, school and people. The geographical location of the school strongly impacted how the school community came to see itself, but also how the school community was forced to evolve and adapt. Changing demographics and changing economic circumstances led to the nature of these identifications evolving and adapting. However, these changes were not necessarily linear or uniform. In the schools with larger populations which were more economically connected, the identification between school and place was clearly articulated, but was perhaps understood to be weakening with change. These changes can be seen as providing a tension, between 'traditional' and 'local' identities and identification and emerging patterns of identification. Yet, for the participants in the two most remote schools with relatively small populations, there was little clear identification of the school with place. However, in most cases, there

was a significant overlap between the school community and the local community, and these were articulated as almost synonymous. In other cases, the overlap was described as weaker, but a separation was articulated between school and outside communities. However, in all cases school was described as a constitutive element of community and local community identity.

5.2.4 Diversity and change

A significant factor to emerge in all interviews related to population change and its impact on the evolution of the school community. Population change did not happen in a uniform or consistent manner in all schools but depended on context. In essence, school communities either experienced a change due to local inward migration or, in one case, a long-term process of rural depopulation. For Participant C above, rural depopulation had been understood as leading to a long-term process of school decline. However, he also noted that while the traditional settlement patterns had changed leading to decline in rural areas of the parish, incoming migration into the local town several kilometres away had seen the population of the town school grow and change. Participant C noted, that although a Catholic school, he believed that a minority of the pupils were Catholic:

In all the other school catchment areas (apart from the town school) it's not as diverse. Like, in the rest of them you'd probably be talking about ninety to ninety five percent would be Catholic, but this is just the exception because of this school. It's the only school that is located I suppose with children from a number of different housing estates. It's through the medium of English, an English medium school, it's the nearest English-speaking school for that school either side of about ten or twelve kilometres. So, it's the traditional Catholic children, the traditional Catholic children going to the Gaeltacht schools whereas the people that don't want the Gaeltacht schools possibly aren't Catholic so they're going to the English-speaking school… As well as the impact of shifting settlement patterns, Participant C also brought to the fore complex questions of identity and choice that were understood, often in nuanced ways, to play a role in how school communities came be constituted and understood. In this case Participant C outlined a conflation between the concept of a traditional, local

community who were Catholic and chose Irish-medium education. This contrasted to a newer population who choose English-medium education, were less likely to be Catholic and were largely townbased.

Participant C's response also crystallised a pattern within the interviews, whereby when participants were asked by the interviewer about how identities have changed within their schools in recent years and whether their population has become more diverse, they often highlighted other local schools in large(ish) towns nearby, that were known to have a 'diverse' school population. It also underlined the complex processes through which school choice was understood to take place in rural areas. While the question of school choice is seen as more obviously an urban phenomenon and may not be considered entirely desirable in rural schools, it was nonetheless a factor informing patterns of change in these schools.

Reflecting this trend, Participant E noted a school in a town less than ten kilometres away that had a very diverse school population. Participant E noted how some parents from the town chose to send their children to rural schools. While other participants noted that parents were likely to send children from towns out to rural schools in surrounding areas, in other cases other factors were considered at play in school choice. Participant A noted that as his school was approximately ten kilometres from a large urban area, many parents chose it as it was convenient for dropping their children to school on their way to work. Equally, as it was close to a school that had recently joined the Gaeltacht schools' scheme, some parents had chosen it as it was an English-medium school and there was not a strong recent tradition of Irish in the area. It would seem that, in the descriptions, choice in its various expressions was seen as a disrupter to more traditional patterns of school composition. A distinction between a 'traditional', local, intergenerational population and a newer population that have started coming to the school in recent years was evident. As populations changed, the nature of the engagement with the community changed also. Participant K noted:

> ‘Parents’ evening’ started happening, meeting the parents at the beginning of the year. We would have often said, sure we know them, parent teacher meetings would be time enough to meet with them. You’d be meeting them informally, well I would because I lived in the community, we’d be meeting them informally outside, meeting them in church, or you know whatever, the pub or whatever you would but…Then there was a whole [*change*] so we started having parents evenings, where parents would come in and you’d have the parents from your class, say. They’d even get to know each other because they didn’t know each other. That was kind of one big change in the community.

This contrast that took place between a changed or changing community and ‘traditional’ community seemed to suggest an imagined fixed community identity which existed at one point. However, were one to find oneself somehow back at the ‘traditional’ community that was imagined to have existed at one point, it is surely the case that there would be another pre-existing community that was somehow the traditional community. All identities are in the process of changing and becoming, but this model provided a framework through which participants conceptualised what was taking place.

5.2.5 Conclusion

Participants in the study described the way in which the school and community were linked or connected. With the exception of one participant, they described the strong attachment between school, locality, church and people. In many cases a confluence existed between school, local and religious community in which they were understood as, in essence, a single community. In other cases, these communities were described as distinct yet strongly interrelated. From the interviews, it seems that factors such the size of the school community, geographical location and historical factors played a role in the extent to which these communities were enmeshed or overlapped. However, in nearly all cases, reflecting the work of Cohen (1982), schools were potent symbols that could be understood as generative of a communal sense of belonging. Interestingly, in the one case where a participant did not speak of school and community in this way, she described an alienation between the school and the

parents of the children within the school. There was no articulation of a shared sense of things or a shared way of looking at the world. This is significant for the research for, as

Jenkins (2014) notes, what matters is "not that people see or understand things the same, or that they see and understand things differently from other communities, but that their shared symbols allow them to *believe* that they do" (p. 139).

Therefore, as noted, conceptions of community are inherently bound, as described earlier, with a sense of belonging: who belongs and by extension who does not. Therefore, against a backdrop of changing demographics, social norms and increasingly plural conceptions of identity, schools grapple with the challenge of providing recognition for all while maintaining a coherence with an understanding of the 'traditional' school community. Interestingly, the perceived changing demographics of other local schools also seemed to inform how some participants came to identify these school communities as well as their own. The perception that participants had of their school community was, therefore, informed by how they understood developments in other schools locally.

It is also important to note that these schools were not just geographically peripheral but were on the peripheries of a dominant culture. While on the one hand they may be considered part of a dominant culture within primary education (i.e. Catholic schooling), they were largely geographically and economically marginal. Therefore, their experience of being part of a dominant culture was vastly different, for instance, to a Catholic school in a middleclass urban suburb. This peripherality had an impact for how identity was then constructed within these schools and communities. For example, in the interviews, participants identified the various roles that schools played in the lives of local communities, beyond education. School was where people met and socialised, its amenities were used for sports, it supported people integrating in new communities and, of course, it provided people

with a sense of belonging. The school, therefore, was often a powerful symbol of local identity, understood as tied to a deep sense of place and often bound to the local church or GAA club. Thus, in the absence of other competing outlets for identification, this peripherality accentuated the social and cultural significance of the school in rural areas.

5.3 Teacher/principal identity: negotiating from the middle

The position of the teacher or principal in rural, Stand-Alone schools was described by participants during interviews. They noted the particularity of the role they played within these contexts, the ambiguity of their professional identity and the way in which they negotiated a complex and evolving social and cultural landscape.

5.3.1 The role of the teacher/principal in small communities

The participants in the research described how the role of teacher or principal in rural schools can be perceived within the community as having a significance that it may not have in other contexts. This was articulated in a number of ways: an expectation to be involved in community life beyond the school day, the blurring of roles between teacher/principal and members of the community and greater connection with, or knowledge of, the children in your class.

In speaking about her experience of becoming principal of a small rural school, Participant B contrasted it with her experience of being a teacher in a town approximately 30 kilometres away. She described an expectation she felt to be involved in local activities outside of school life, that she had not experienced before. Describing her non-attendance at a particular meeting, she said:

> A week later one of the parents said ‘oh’, and, then, if you weren’t at the meeting like and the other local principals were [*this was noticed*] and in my previous school none of that would have happened, you weren’t expected to be at things like, you know, beyond and maybe it’s because I’m living locally, I don’t know but…

While the response above is a little unclear, Participant B was articulating the surprise that was expressed by a parent that she had not been at a local meeting. Many of the participants in the interview described the overlapping roles that they also played in various aspects of community life outside the school such as the GAA, the local church, community centre council and various other committees. The interconnected nature of rural life could be challenging to negotiate. Participant C, also involved in various aspects of local life such as development planning, noted how "In a rural area and being of this area and knowing the families on a number of different levels for a number of different years and for a number of different situations, it's quite difficult." This comment encapsulates the different roles that participants (particularly those who lived locally) had to play in their interactions in the community, and the challenge in juggling these roles successfully.

Participant J noted that the pressure to be actively part of various components of community life was something that he experienced in a subtle way as part of his role:

> It's very subtle now but there would be. I would feel it myself…..a lot of my family would be teachers as well and that's a cue I'm taking from them. To be truly involved in nurturing a child in every sense holistically you kind of have to turn up to their do's in the evening if they're doing something phenomenal like…

In this example, Participant J described how he picked up cues from those in his family who were teachers and who were teaching, or who had been, teaching locally. He also thought that engagement in this way might impact on someone's reputation as a teacher. These examples show how much of the participants' understanding of their role, and the expectations of them in their role came from the way in which they interpreted the clues they got in their interactions with those in the locality. This reflects Cohen's (1985) rejection of the concept that urban society is fundamentally more complex than rural society. He illustrates how a capacity for individuals to be able to exist in various roles in relation to others without conflict and to be able to move successfully between these roles is a characteristic of small

rural communities. Therefore, the capacity of teachers to understand the needs of those around them, the roles they are expected to play at different times and their ability to navigate this complex terrain may have implications for how well they are perceived to perform their duties.

However, negotiating the various roles in the local community was not always achieved successfully. Distinguishing the boundaries of what constituted school life or the role of the teachers and principals was not necessarily evident for participants, nor for members of the community. Participant K noted that the previous principal's involvement with local sports clubs could lead to tensions emerging for him in his role as principal:

Our previous principal maybe would have had a few parents come in roaring and shouting and the reason was that he lived locally. Well I live locally and I never had any problems but he lived locally and he would be involved in a lot of clubs and there might be outside stuff coming in here like: 'my child was left on the side line last week and now you're…', and that kind of cross curricular whatever is going on. In this way his roles as a local, a principal and a local sports club member combined to present a complex social dynamic that proved difficult to negotiate. The interconnected nature between school, locality and indeed church meant that participants often moved between roles.

As leaders in the community, expectations could be seen to fall on the teacher or school that the participants found to be excessive. The activity of sacramental preparation was provided by a participant as an example:

> I've no difficulty with faith formation within schools but I do have a serious issue with sacramental preparation. I do think an awful lot of it is thrown onto schools and, we'll say, parents leave a lot of that over to the schools. They're lazy in their preparation of their own children for sacraments.

It must be added that this expectation exists in all Catholic schools, whether urban or rural. However, in some areas schools are supported to a greater extent by the parish in preparing

for the sacraments. For example, Participant E noted how local parents took a driving role in sacramental preparation in her school with less pressure and less emphasis on the teacher. However, the example from Participant D, above, encapsulated a sense that more was expected of the teachers in rural schools than of those in urban contexts.

Participant N stated that given the local knowledge that teachers have (and that locals have of teachers) and given the fact that teachers teach children for a number of years they "take on more of a mothering role with the children." This had advantages for the child and the teacher:

> I also think you get to know the children so much better and having previously taught in a city school I would think parents come in a lot more and talk to teachers in a country school as opposed to the city school. I felt parents wouldn't have known the teachers as well because they'd only be seeing the teacher or you'd only have a particular teacher for one year maybe, whereas in a small school the children are being taught by the same teacher for a number of years.

In Participant N's example, teachers in rural contexts were understood to be more invested in the lives of the children in their communities with a potentially more involved relationship with parents. This understanding found resonance in the experience of Participant P, although she articulated it much differently. Hers was a DEIS school with significant social challenges and she noted that occasionally difficulties at home emerged in school. In her interview she described discussing with a mother the negative behaviours that her son was displaying in school. In her description of the conversation, she displayed considerable knowledge of the home factors that may have contributed to the behaviours. Interestingly, she was not local to the area and stated that this limited the extent to which she understood the home lives of the children in her school: "Like, I'm not from the area, but (*sic*) I don't know a lot of what goes on, do you know what I mean?" Nevertheless, in her interview, she demonstrated considerable insight into local factors and the challenges the children experienced in their home lives. Reflecting the more 'parental' role described by Participant N above, Participant

E described how she occasionally collected one child and brought him to sacramental preparation outside school hours, as his mother was not in a position to do so. She considered the child to be vulnerable and did not wish him to be left out.

The role of the teacher or principal then was multi-faceted and was seen as going beyond teaching and learning and reaching into aspects of life beyond the school walls. In many ways it was a balancing act. Local background knowledge and relationships could be a strength and could support schools in fostering a holistic learning environment. But equally, an inability to clearly differentiate the different roles that the participants played in their communities, or felt expected to play, could lead to a sense of pressure or expectation.

5.3.2 Teacher/principal identity: ambiguity and uncertainty

A perceived clash between the ethos of the school and changing social norms and values provided a challenge for some participants in negotiating teacher and principal identity. Negotiating perceived contradictions or conflicts between school and societal values led to some participants being unsure of their role. These challenges were expressed primarily in two areas: sexuality and religious practice.

In one case, Participant A described his uncertainty around how to acknowledge or approach the same sex relationship of one of his colleagues in a way that was respectful and provided recognition. He stated:

> …we have a member of staff who got married recently and he is gay and his husband is male obviously and I would feel uncomfortable that he might be uncomfortable, right, so I bit the bullet about two years ago I said, 'look it, the person that you talk about from time to time I know is your partner'.

Neither the reluctance of the teacher to speak openly about his relationship nor the hesitation that the principal felt in broaching the subject was something that had been explicitly dictated to them. Rather it was something they felt needed to be handled carefully. Subsequently,

Participant A described how he had put up a photo of the couple on the staff notice board as a way of providing recognition and validation for the relationship. Questions of sexuality needed to be broached tentatively. Interestingly, for Participant J, he felt teachers were uncomfortable in talking to their classes about sexuality because it potentially undermined their authority.

The challenge for a teacher, or principal, who themselves was not entirely comfortable in their own adherence to the Catholicism was raised by Participant B. She expressed uncertainty as to how to position herself. On the one hand, it seemed to her that her professional role required her to provide a particular religious example, while at the same time doing so did not entirely cohere with her personal perspective:

> It's the same as in real life, you know...a lot of Catholic's live a very watered-down version of their religion and they're happy enough to go with that. The parent body here generally are not all going to mass every week, but they live that a la carte catholic like kind of lifestyle, you know, and that's where you're kind of basing yourself on that in-between.

Participant B's explanation seemed to raise the challenge for her of executing her role authentically as a teacher. Her use of the phrase 'in real life' seems instructive, strongly implying that her role as teacher and principal required her to take a position that was not true to her own life, or perhaps some of the lives of those within the school.

While Participant B's school was strongly traditional and in many ways had changed far less than others in the area, and indeed others in the research, this ambiguity or uncertainty on her part may have reflected underlying, long-term and fundamental changes. Participant D described how her feelings towards her role in preparing children for sacramental preparation have changed over the years. While it was a role that she had not had difficulty with in the past, it was evident that it was becoming ever more difficult:

> I wouldn't have said five years ago that it [*sacramental preparation*] was a burden, but I would say it today because…, but I would label it as that because we do not see the priests. They don't know the children even by their first name on the day of their first communion. They haven't been in and they haven't seen them, and they haven't spoken to them.

In both cases, as school leaders of Catholic schools, the participants had a leading role in the faith formation and the sacramental preparation of children within their community, while at the same time there were fewer people with whom to share this load. The responsibility fell increasingly, and almost entirely, to the principals in these cases. This response reflected a comment by Participant A that "the Catholic ethos is diminishing as we go on, and certainly among the teaching cohort…" and that more teachers spoke more openly about their discomfort in teaching Religious Instruction. Yet at the same time some participants noted that teachers were under greater pressure from the diocese to teach catechism than previously.

5.3.3 Conclusion

The pressure experienced by teachers and principals above may reflect the argument by Jenkins (2012) that at times of change or threat there may a hardening of identity. Equally, it may reflect also the proposition by Cohen (1982b), that at times of flux, common symbols allow for a semblance of continuity even as significant changes are taking place. Therefore, school leaders in particular take an important role maintaining a connection with the traditions, values and culture of school community while also incorporating changing norms and values. In themselves they also act as important communal symbols. Teachers and principals take on a role as mediators of change by symbolising a continuity with the past. Therefore, they often find themselves at the centre of the seemingly irreconcilable tensions noted by Parekh in *Chapter 1*. The symbolic significance of the role, then, can be difficult to negotiate as questions of identity complexify, with teachers and principals unsure how best to respond to such challenges. For most in this study a common-sense approach was adopted; they chose to proceed cautiously in order not to make waves.

5.4 Diversity and Identity

The Forum's Report (2012), along with a slew of recent research, highlighted earlier the changes in demographics as well as changes in social norms and values that pose challenges for the current configuration of the education system. Participants spoke about the diverse identities within their classrooms and schools and the ways in which they were changing and the issues that arose from these changes. These discussions were heavily informed by the questions of identity that have emerged in recent years as being singularly important for the primary school system. Religion, sexuality, and gender were central among them.

In line with dialogical approaches to identity (Taylor, 1997; Akkerman and Meijer, 2011; Jenkins, 2014), the fluid, dynamic and interactionist conception of identity construction was strongly apparent. Reflecting the work of Barth (1969) on identity construction, articulation of boundary and boundary maintenance were evident in the interviews with participants. In this way participants described the various ways in which identities were understood as being separate from one and other, the various 'we's' and 'they's' that were understood to exist both within and outside the school community.

5.4.1 Articulating and integrating difference

This section outlines how participants described plurality within their school communities and how they understood the identity boundaries within these communities. In doing so, it foregrounds some of the challenges schools have experienced in integrating this diversity. Thus, it highlights some of the fault lines that can emerge when school identity does not sufficiently align with that of the school population. It also brings to the fore how small levels of differences are potentially experienced more acutely in communities with high levels of perceived homogeneity, where people consider themselves largely to belong to the

same groups. Identity, in this context, was discussed in terms of ethnicity, culture, nationality, language and religion.

When speaking about the plurality of identities within their populations many of the participants noted the various collective ethnic and cultural groups that are part of their school community. It was one clear way in which participants understood identity and change within their school. For some schools this was one of the ways in which the identity of the school population had evidently changed over recent years. As Participant K noted:

> Yeah, now we have two factories in [*town less than 10km away*], one is [*names factory*]. and one is [*names factory*] and they would employ an awful lot, so we would have had Latvians, Brazilians, Polish and then it's cheaper for them to live here in [*names village*] and they tend to travel in car pool (*sic*) and travel in together if they were on shift work and whatever.

In this description, there was an evident causal relationship between economic factors and population change. Participant K noted that when the 'Celtic Tiger' hit the local area it brought about significant change. The 'Celtic Tiger' was identified as being a key causal factor of change. This highlights how the processes of globalisation can impact traditional rural communities that are far removed from the economic centres and how these interactions lead to engagement and dialogue that ultimately informs the way in which identity is understood. The way in which Participant K described the arrival of families from different national backgrounds into the school community underlines the sense that while the families were part of the school community, they were not necessarily part of the 'we' of the school community. They were a rather unsteady and transient part of the long-established narrative of the school. There was a juxtaposition between the organic evolution of the school population and the shock of the economic boom. This was highlighted later when she added:

> Yes. I suppose that's the main reason, really any one of any foreign extract (*sic*), that came to us moved to do with jobs, wherever the jobs were. We always found you know that they fitted in fine with the school and they might be just settled, and their

> English would be coming on and [*we*] put an awful lot of effort into them and all of a sudden, they're gone somewhere else.

In this case a boundary was understood to exist between 'newcomer' children and children from families more long-established in the area. 'Newcomers' who could assimilate themselves to the accepted practices of the established community were positively perceived. 'Fitting in'and 'settling' were noted as positive traits for newcomer children and families in the school communities. In other interviews the term blending in was used. Participant O spoke of Muslim children in the school who had 'a good way of blending in', a term used also by Participant D. It was added that those who blended in were accepted. Those who recognised the codes, mores, traditions and values within the school and became accommodated to them were often spoken of positively in interviews. The fact that they could integrate was understood as seen as reflecting positively on them and was acknowledged. However, when they deviated, as in cases when they left for economic reasons, frustration was expressed at the level of resources that had been invested into their education.

In communities with high levels of homogeneity minor differences could be considered significant. Participant E noted:

> Now we have one English family – now I call them English because they came from England. Now the mum was actually from [*names a town nearby*], but the dad is English, and she was born in England and spent her first four years in England and then came here…

She described how, when the family came first there was talk in the school community and the Board of Management about them: "there was a lot like 'who are they?', 'we don't know them', 'where are you from?'." Although the mother lived in a town approximately ten kilometres away for most of her life, there was still a level of apprehension in the community about how they would integrate into the school community.

While all participants noted the relatively high levels of homogeneity within their school cohort population in terms of collective identities, the challenge that schools could experience resulting from this diversity was identified by Participant A:

> We have one family of Travellers in the school at the moment, but we had 3 at one stage and 2 moved on, and one is not from our catchment area, but they had difficulty getting into other schools, so they have come to us. I'd be very aware of meeting their needs being one family in 192 families. I'm not 100 percent convinced that we embrace the Traveller culture in our school and that we welcome all, in fact I'd be sure that some of us wouldn't to be honest if I'm truthful, but I would and I would try to get it across that, 'we welcome all' .

Participant A demonstrated a consciousness that children from the Travelling community, as a small minority within their school, may face particular hurdles or barriers. This reflected the experience of Participant E who noted that when a child from the Travelling community moved to her school, there was apprehension among the parents. However, as with the new family she mentioned above, she stated that once the children had integrated into school life the anxiety disappeared. However, this response may have given the impression of a smoother journey than was likely the case and that those initial anxieties and discussions were unlikely to have entirely disappeared. This response also highlighted a trend that emerged from the interviews. Some schools more than others seemed to struggle to integrate children from some backgrounds. Given the racism and prejudice experienced by Travellers in society generally, it is perhaps of little surprise that some participants identified difficulties and resistance around integrating children from Travelling backgrounds into their communities.

While the responses above clearly demonstrate some of the challenges to resourcing that integration brings, as well as highlighting potential prejudice, they also underline a significant concern around maintaining or promoting school identity. As a teacher in a Gaeltacht school, and as part of the policy of making Irish the primary language of the

school, Participant P noted the difficulties of integrating children who moved back with their families from England or the US. She noted that there was a tradition in the community of people emigrating to England and the US, and that many of them move home in order to raise their families:

> We would find that, and I'm not blaming these now but explaining, but I suppose, the students in our school would have to speak a certain amount of English, you know, to communicate initially and then that habit stays. You know when a student, we'll say, improves then they are not inclined to use Irish as their community spoken language between themselves because they are so used to speaking English between them, [*in*] the settling down period.

Where language was a core aspect of this school's identity, this presented a challenge. And whilst the children themselves were members of local families who had attended the school, the inter-generational language change meant that the culture of the children was to some extent at odds with that of the school. While the school was heavily invested in using, maintaining and strengthening Irish as the language of all school activity, she felt that that commitment was not met by the school community broadly. This lack of confluence between the school's effort to make Irish the spoken language and the newer children's continued use of English suggested a misalignment of identity.

During interviews, there was a difficulty in talking about plurality where participants could not attach clear labels and where identity seemed more ambiguous. When asked if there were children in the school who were not from Catholic backgrounds, Participant A initially said 'no':

> No. So, all the European members that we have in, the two Indian families they're both Catholic, so there was one child out of twenty-nine who didn't make her communion this year and she wasn't, [*from*] any of the European families, she just was a lapsed Catholic whose parents decided not to pursue the Catholic religion. And then there was two in sixth, one again was just a lapsed Catholic we'll call it again and one was, two were Irish and were lapsed Catholics…

Where the boundary between identities was understood to be clear, it proved easier for participants to speak to questions of identity. In this instance it was relatively easy to identify children who came from cultural/ethnic/national backgrounds that could clearly be labelled, but questions of religious identity, at times, reflecting changing patterns and practices, proved challenging to talk about. Although, initially, Participant A responded that all children in the school were Catholic or from Catholic backgrounds, he almost immediately seemed to contradict himself by saying that a number of children were lapsed Catholics or had parents who were lapsed Catholics. Indeed, he seemed to be unsure of how many were in a particular class. This reflected the difficulty in speaking about a changing and nuanced social landscape in which traditional conceptions of identity are shifting, slowly. The way in which he spoke about this cohort contrasted strongly with the clarity with which he articulated the number of the children from Travelling background.

This contrasted with the way in which Participant O spoke of the children in her school who came from a Muslim background. When asked if any of the children came from different religious backgrounds she noted:

Just that one family. There would have been one, and one still here, and they would have been of [*a*] Muslim faith whereas the rest, everyone else is Catholic. Where participants could identify children as belonging to a particular religious faith or religious group, it was easier to describe and talk about. There was already an existing vocabulary and clearly delineated group identities that teachers could draw on. 'Nonreligious', 'non-Catholic' and 'no denomination' were also terms used by other participants to talk about children whose religious or belief identities were not clearly articulated. It suggests a difficulty of language. As children and parents' identities became more complex, or nuanced, and moved from traditional conceptions of belonging, it became increasingly challenging to talk about these identities. In turn, this seemed to reflect participant unease

about how to negotiate these ambiguous identities in the daily life of the school, something that is addressed later in the chapter. It may also reflect more simplistic conceptions that participants may have had of identities that were 'other' to their own. When speaking of more 'traditional' identities, such as Catholic, the complexity and ambiguity that may be inherent in such an identity is more familiar to participants. They had a mental map for understanding the complex ways in which people identified, or semi-identified, as Catholic. In this way participants were alert to the micro-boundaries that people create within cultures and traditions, e.g. 'Catholic', 'non-Catholic' and 'lapsed Catholic'. They were alive to the ways in which people draw on aspects of religious experience, or religious cultures, in subtle and individual ways to create their varied identities. People draw on different aspects at different times depending on their individual needs. In contrast, participants did not have same mental map to fall back on when encountering members of the school community who were drawing on unfamiliar traditions, cultures or beliefs.

5.4.2 'Locals' and 'blow-ins': shifting identities

Another way in which participants described boundary and identity was in contrasting between the established ways of describing 'traditional' identity and emerging identities. In many interviews there was a clear distinction described between an established school community and newer arrivals. Participant O noted:

> I suppose the biggest change was the building of the estates because they and there's two big estates built and quite a number of houses in each of them so that brought and it's probably largely responsible for numbers remaining as high as they are because otherwise there probably wouldn't be as many as 58 kids coming to school really, you know, because a lot of them are for want of a better word, 'blow ins' that bought houses in the estate so yeah I would see that and that would have only have happened in the last 15, I suppose, 20 years.

In this interview more recent members of the school community were characterised as 'blow ins'. The participant described how demographic change in the last two decades had

facilitated the school in maintaining a stable population. Equally, Participant J noted a similar demographic change, stating that approximately a "quarter [*of the school population*] would not be local." In this case, the children were described as coming from other countries, the city or elsewhere.

The significance of being local was portrayed by Participant E in the description of her conversation with the chairperson of her school Board of Management:

> Well, out of, not in a meeting, let's say, the chairperson had said to me, I don't know (*sic*), "where are they from again?" "what's their second name?" You know, because he's a local man and he knows everybody and he knows everybody belonging to everybody, it's just so connected, everyone is related to somebody here, and when this family came, he was very much – "where are they from?"…

As a small, traditional community there was a high level of connectedness among people and any change in school population brought a little apprehension.

For Participant N, when talking about changing school population, she noted that more of those coming from outside the traditional school hinterland were not Catholic:

> I suppose you have lots of children that are coming because the population has just increased and with that brings change as well. You would have lots of different children from I suppose different types of families, you know the ordinary mam, dad and the child – that day is kind of gone now because obviously the population has grown. I suppose we would always have had children just from a Catholic background and with that with the population increasing we would have children coming out who'd have no denomination or atheist you know coming out to us from …… [*names local town*] now.

The challenge that 'new' arrivals presented was evident in Participant K's interview. The school became considered a location where people integrated into the locality and a key place of socialisation. But, equally, despite close links between the school and community beyond, integration into the school community did not imply integration or identification outside of school.

So, the community grew as well then. We got different nationalities coming in, a lot of people from England moving over and just people from Ireland, different parts of Ireland. So, it brought in a whole [*new cohort of people*]. My husband would say to me, "well it's okay for you, you know everybody because you're in the school.", but he'd say I don't know half of the community now because they don't integrate or mix maybe as much as years ago, everybody knew what everybody else was doing. In this case the teacher was in a privileged position, sharing identities with the school community and the community outside the school. Implied in this response, and the response of the teacher's husband was that these two communities could no longer be seen to be entirely synonymous. While demonstrating the important socialisation role that the school played in integrating newer arrivals, it also showed the challenge such demographic change poses for a local community. For Participant K's husband, this change was experienced as difficult. Originally from the locality, population changes meant he no longer knew everyone, shifting his sense of community as well as his sense of himself within it. There is also a sense in this description that the newer arrivals are reduced to their identity labels. Those children whose families have come from other countries are all described as 'different nationalities', the nuance of identity being reduced to the label of nationality.

5.4.3 Individuation and choice

In discussing the various diverse identities that the children in their schools identified with, the process of individuation and identity formation was a subordinate theme to emerge. Participants spoke about this in a number of predictable and unpredictable ways. They noted how children came to express their identity through religion, gender, and ethnicity. They also noted how they began to identify themselves through their hobbies and interests. In particular, as children progressed through primary school questions of identity came increasingly to the fore.

When speaking of the challenges of talking about sensitive questions of family type and sexuality, Participant D noted that children were going through a time of questioning who they were:

> Then you don't know about any of those children themselves, especially the senior end, and they are questioning who they are, what they are, you know. You just don't know, and you'd hate to say anything that would make them feel any less themselves as children if they are questioning what they are because of what you're compelled to say or not say.

In this case, Participant D was alert to the potential for inadvertent misrecognition that children could experience in the classroom during discussions on family type or sexuality. Participant J noted in his interview that there was greater fragmentation among pupils and the various ways that they began to self-identify. He described this as a process in the following way:

> Well if you can imagine the American high school, you know you have the gangs, and [*in the senior classes of primary* school] you have the GAA gangs, well we [*other children who didn't identify with the GAA*] don't do GAA and our family don't do GAA and their family don't do GAA so we're friends, you know. They might see themselves as slightly more progressive if you want. So, they might be into more doing stuff online or they might do almost library activities at the weekend. So, you might have a core set of students who are not afraid to stand out academically, which definitely wouldn't have existed when I was going to school.

From Participant J's perspective this process of self-identification was deeply informed by popular culture and children's engagement with the online world. He also described it, not just as part of the natural development of children at a certain stage but as representing the prevailing norms "of the free market…when people have the freedom to choose and the options are there." Other participants equally noted the way in which children in the senior years, as part of the process of identity formation, began to self-identify with sub-groups. These sub-groups of identity centred around the particular interests of the children; the GAA (as mentioned already), gaming, music, horse-riding, etc. Participant B, having herself

attended the school in which she was now principal, described this fragmentation and strong identification with particular sub-groups as something that she had not herself experienced in school.

A central aspect of the process of individuation as described by the participants is the strong emphasis placed on the role of choice and the child's choice in choosing for themselves their own identity, reflecting Participant J's comments above. In his interview Participant C stated that two of the children who were in the school and who were not from Catholic families, chose to participate in sacramental preparation:

> They [*parents*] let the child make her decision herself, they let the child make her decision herself and it wasn't that she was being indoctrinated at school or brainwashed. It was that she felt it was what she wanted to do, and they had the discussion and all [*were*] in favour.

For Participant C, a key aspect of the process was that these were choices made by the children themselves in discussions with their parents. These examples demonstrate the extent to which a discourse of choice is prevalent in how participants understand the process of identity formation.

Participant P, as noted above, described how children who had moved to the school initially spoke English with the other children and that this remained a difficult pattern or habit to change. But from her interview it was evident that speaking English amongst the children was not just confined to those who have come to the school from the UK or the US, but was actually common among the children:

> So, the children would all gather here in the morning before they enter their classrooms because they're not allowed to enter the classroom until the teacher comes and takes them away for insurance purposes and all the rest. But very few people would be speaking Irish and I'm there holding my little green card going, who's going to get these today and they'll speak it while I'm going around with my cards, but they don't communicate.

Despite the school's efforts to encourage Irish as the language of everyday use, the policy faced resistance in day-to-day school life. While Participant P did not articulate it in this way, it may be understood as an expression of their own identity and rejection of school attempts to impose language. In their language choice children were identifying with the language of the mainstream dominant culture and rejecting that of the school. As a Gaeltacht school in an area with a long history of marginalisation, emigration and poverty it was likely that the social stigma attached to the language maintained some enduring resonance for the children, something that Participant P herself suggested in the interview.

Choice, and the role of the choice on the part of the child in identity construction, was considered a significant factor for the participants. Identity, therefore, could be understood as relatively fluid, with the possibility for children to move between assigned and chosen identities. However, this movement was not seen as boundless, but occurred within particular parameters or 'universes of discourse'.

5.4.4 Conclusion

During the interviews participants spoke of the way in which identity was changing within their communities. Often, these changes could be disconcerting. A certain anxiety was evident in the responses of the participants. Sometimes this anxiety was felt among members of the local community as to how these changes would impact the school community. At other times, the anxiety came from the participants themselves as they grappled with how to negotiate these changes. Ultimately, these changes shift the way school communities come to understand and think about themselves. Yet, despite this anxiety and, at times, reluctance, participants largely described how these changes were mediated relatively positively. However, while some participants emphasised 'smooth-sailing' following periods of adjustment when questions of identity emerged as pertinent, others perceptively expressed an

ambiguity and not-knowingness regarding how children and the community internalised and experienced these complex questions and shifts.

Significantly, the way that children come to construct their own identities was understood as playing an important role in these processes. Children were not simply seen as 'inheritors' of 'given' identities—whether school, family or religious etc—but were often seen as agents in the construction of their own identities. In many cases, it was the children's own choice regarding the expression of their identity that was most important and was most listened to. However, this was not always the case. Interestingly, the example of children choosing to speak in English rather than Irish in the Gaeltacht school demonstrated a determination on the part of the children to express a culture of their own, distinct from that of the school's. This proved difficult for the school to negotiate. Given that the Irish language was central to the school's mission, it left the school with a dilemma that could not easily be resolved. Reflecting the ambiguity of some participants, as noted in the paragraph above, complex questions of identity when they emerge as a point of tension cannot easily be 'dealt with' but linger and require ongoing consideration and care. The next section explores how principals, teachers and schools sought to negotiate these tensions.

5.5 Communication and negotiation: 'being' and 'becoming'

All the interviews highlighted particular pressure points, points when questions of identity came to the surface and became more contentious to deal with. These were moments when the boundary between identities, fluid though it may be, came more clearly to the fore. These moments required negotiation and communication on the part of the teachers and principals with parents and children and, indeed, among the school staff themselves.

Unsurprisingly, teachers noted Religious Education (RE) and sacramental preparation as very concrete examples of these pressure points. Participants highlighted particular

strategies to minimise the potential isolation or exclusion that children might possibly have experienced at these moments. These included having photos taken with all the children in the class for the First Communion, as well as a photo for just participants; including nonreligious songs at Christmas concerts; and, in some cases, facilitating families going on holidays at these times. As well as RE, participants mentioned RSE as raising difficult questions around identity that proved challenging to negotiate. A clash of values was identified by some between, on the one hand, a more inclusive understanding of sexuality and identity and, on the other, a traditional religious perspective that was inconsistent with contemporary norms.

The kind of back-and-forth negotiation, both internally and externally, for teachers resonates with Taylor's (1997) concept of a dialogical identity, one that is constructed in a dialogue with significant others. In negotiating these pressure points at the boundaries of identities, participants were also engaged in a process of identity deconstruction and reconstruction, something that was evident in the types of questions that the pressure points provoked for the participants.

5.5.1 Communicating about children

Sacramental preparation and Religious Education were identified as potentially being significant pressure points when tensions were experienced by schools, teachers and pupils. They were times when the boundary between identities came to the surface in these schools and children risked feeling excluded. How to minimise the feelings of exclusion that children might have felt or, indeed, how to incorporate or include children where possible, were central considerations for teachers and principals. Thus, most participants highlighted the need for communication and negotiation with parents in order to find ways to ensure the most satisfactory outcome in which the wishes of the parents and the feelings of the children were respected. On the one hand these responses largely demonstrated a desire to recognise the

rights of both the parents and the children, as well as recognising their identities. On the other hand, these interactions were often portrayed as being relatively unproblematic. Participant A described how this process typically occurred in his school:

> So, typically what's going to happen coming up to communion is about three weeks before hand there'll be an increase in activity from about two hours a week to probably about four to five hours a week and there will be three trips down to the church. Do you want him to go to the church or will I put him somewhere else? And she'll say, yeah. [*Here Participant A is describing a typical conversation with a parent around sacramental preparation*].

Here Participant A described the process as a practical matter that was a somewhat formulaic experience. In this negotiation the outcome was to a large extent predicted but the process was what needs to take place. In this case, the response of the parents was straightforward and unproblematic.

Participant C described a similar process in the case of child who was not originally Catholic, but who wished to participate in sacramental preparation:

> They [*parents*] had a conversation with me and said she'd like to make her communion and straight away I said, go and talk to the parish. They went to the parish and the parish were very amenable to it, supported it.

As in the example above dialogue with parents was important in order to negotiate the child's role. Later on, speaking of another child who was not from a Catholic background, Participant C described how, "he would have participated in all the school masses and I also checked with Mom."

A similar communication with parents was described in the interview with Participant K. In this way teacher and parent negotiated the child's role:

> I remember talking to the mum and saying totally, informally, really and like you know religion is going to be going on, I showed her the book, the children's book and the teacher's book and said read over that and see what you think. She came back and said "look I don't see anything majorly wrong there" and let her go ahead and do it.

> So she had her workbooks [*same*] as everybody else and did she say the prayers, she used to do the morning prayer and evening prayer, yeah.

A desire to ensure that parents were happy with whatever outcome was arrived at was evident in Participant N's interview. When talking about what children who did not participate in RE do during this time, she noted that this was discussed with parents.

> It very much depends; it depends on what the parents want. Our policy in school is that the children wouldn't be, like, removed from the class or anything like that and that they would take part as much as possible.

In this example, the input of the parents is considered critical to the outcome. Following on from this, it is the school's role to respond to what the parent wants and provide appropriate responses in line with parental wishes. However, this is not always straightforward. Interestingly, in her interview, Participant B relayed an apprehension that she believed parents felt regarding their communication with the school. While for most participants, this negotiation was described as straightforward and unproblematic, Participant B noted a reticence on the part of the parents as to how non-participation would be received.

I think the parents grew in confidence to be able to say to the school, actually, they weren't sure for a long time, I think, as to whether that would have been okay with the school. That's, I suppose, a communication thing and you very much had that here where we are a Catholic school where we're open to everybody, you know, and you have to kind of have a lot of chats with parents to kind of convince them of that. In contrast, Participant J noted that rather than discuss with the parents he spoke to the previous teachers: "I had, you see, fifth and sixth a lot of the time and you'd just get the story

from the other teachers."

Interestingly, Participant E noted, as described above, the strong reaction from parents when children were no longer facilitated by the school to serve mass in the local church during the school day. Traditionally, an SNA had driven the children to the church but for child protection reasons, this practice was stopped. Eventually a compromise was reached in which parents brought the children themselves and this was considered satisfactory. The

principal was a little taken aback by the strength of the reaction. For many in the school community this practice or tradition was especially meaningful. Interestingly, in this case it was the parents who raised objections and brought some pressure to bear after the initial decision. This contrasts with the examples provided of children in other schools who were not Catholic. In these instances, it was largely the teachers and principals who anticipated the difficulties that children might have.

While communication and negotiation took place with parents, there was evident also a certain expectation that parents would adapt or attempt to integrate their child into the norms of the school. In the following description, Participant D remembered the parents of a Muslim child who bought her a headscarf to match the school colours:

> I always think that the parents themselves were just amazing in a sense that in order for their child not to stand out they bought her a headscarf and the school colours were navy and gold and they had a navy and gold, like the headscarf was in two pieces and they had a navy and gold to match the uniform.

While schools noted their own efforts to negotiate an environment that minimised exclusion, efforts at integration on the part of parents were praised in some of the interviews. Parental involvement was considered key in responding appropriately to such challenges.

5.5.2 Communicating with children

Participants expressed an awareness that these pressure points could be difficult for children to negotiate. They articulated different ways in which they sought to provide a response that was inclusive and recognised the child's own identity. They described the ways in which they entered into dialogue with children.

For Participant A this was portrayed as quite an organic process in which children were asked whether they wished to talk about their own personal experience or their own belief background:

> Now, it's kind of by osmosis a little bit, it comes, you know, that nobody has looked upon us as different and by the time they get to sixth class and we're talking about the confirmation, you can talk about it – '[*Child's name*] you're not making your confirmation, do you want to talk about it? Are we okay to discuss it amongst the whole class?' And sometimes they are and sometimes they're not.

In this way, children were provided with an opportunity to participate in a way that recognised their experience. For some children this was something that they welcomed, whereas others did not want to stand out. The different ways in which children responded to these pressure points were described similarly by Participant N. Some children remained quieter and did not get involved, whereas she, "would have taught other children and they would very much have questioned from the word go how we do things in school." In this way these points became spaces of negotiation where teachers, principals and children attempted to find a reasonable solution that benefits the child.

Participant B recognised these negotiated spaces, but suggested that much of the negotiation was internal, as well as external, for the child. Each child was trying to find a space in which they could sit as both outsider and insider, to be their own individual while maintaining some form of group belonging:

> Then they're trying to be their own person and they're allowed to be their own person, but yet at some point they kind of want to join in with what's going on with the rest of the people. So, like she [*child who didn't participate in RE*] was an angel in the [*Christmas*] play.

Resulting from the discussions with the child, parent and teachers, the child decided that she wanted to take part in the Christmas play. The way in which to negotiate this boundary was addressed by Participant N when talking about teaching RE to children, particularly in second class, when children were preparing for the sacrament of Holy Communion:

> So, you know I might be talking about God and Jesus and the different sacraments and things like that and they might put up their hand and say 'oh my mom says this at home' or 'my dad says this at home' which I suppose poses its own kind of complications because you're trying to explain to all the rest of the children - number

> one, why is this child not making their communion but you're also trying to include that child because they're feeling excluded even though you're trying to include them as much as you can.

In this example, both teacher and children were attempting to negotiate a space in which the child could simultaneously be included and authentically express their own beliefs. For the teacher the challenge arose when those beliefs contradicted those of the rest of the children and the school ethos.

Participant D noted how a child in her class brought her own religious workbooks to school to use during RE:

> What they [*children from a Muslim background in the school*] decided to do actually, and it was nice in relation to inclusion now and we didn't ask them to do it but something they did do, they had their own Koran (we'll say little workbooks), and colouring books. So, if we were colouring in our 'Grow in Love', or 'Alive-O' or whatever was going on at the time book, they took out their Koran and they did their own colouring without any interference you know and they just kind of got on. If we were doing reading, they were doing reading.

In this way, the children found a means of integrating into the overall classroom experience, while working on their own religious books. For Participant D, this provided an example of successful inclusion and recognition, and also had the positive benefit of normalising difference for the other children. This contrasted with Participant N's response above, which saw the expression of difference as potentially problematic and threatening for the beliefs that were being taught in the class. However, it seemed that the initiative for this approval came from the children and parents themselves rather than the school, which may perhaps also explain why they appeared comfortable with it. More so than the above participants, Participant J expressed a wariness of highlighting difference within the classroom. He noted that, during RE, the children who were not from Catholic backgrounds, had the various Catholic RE workbooks and nominally followed along. He likened the experience of the children who were not Catholic to that of children who were from single parent families:

> I find in fifth and sixth class if you're to try and serve the child as they want to be served, you don't bring it up. It's probably not the most mature way but I just feel sympathy for the child. The same goes for a single parent to children, you know. You could do a lesson on how everybody's family is normal, but I mean I don't think it would be okay to say; now John, could you tell us about your experiences as a single child [*child from a single parent family*].

In this approach, children were not asked about whether they wished to take part or not. He noted that he never had any difficulties with parents and children never questioned the approach, which stemmed from a desire not to isolate and alienate the child, particularly as the numbers who did not participate in RE were small. This apprehension was clear in the responses of some of the participants but was not evident across all interviews. Indeed, in her interview, Participant O noted that she had asked children from a Muslim background in her class if they wished to tell the other children in their class about their practices and beliefs:

> ….the kids were asked if they felt comfortable and they did, and they just went ahead with it and everyone. There was just a great general acceptance of this is the way they pray, and this is the way we pray, and you know good to open their eyes really to it and just see.

From her perspective, the opportunity to speak to difference was considered a positive. It provided the Muslim children with an opportunity to speak about their religious identity and the other children had an opportunity to learn about another religious perspective. She noted that during sacramental preparation the Muslim children would go into another room or would stay behind in the school when the others went to practise in the Church. She had said that these experiences were largely unproblematic and had not raised any difficulties. Interestingly, however, she noted that swimming had proved potentially an isolating experience for the Muslim children:

> But then, there's the other side of it and that's the side where you'd also be aware that that's the isolation, you know, because of the way things are for them and their faith that then they would have to stay behind and do work while the rest of us are gone swimming and that can be very isolating as well for no good reason, so there's that side to watch out for as well.

In this case the issue arose because the parent had come into the school to say that their child would not be going swimming. While many participants expressed uncertainty about how to talk with children around sensitive issues, Participant P felt that children were listened to too much by their parents:

> And children are listened to and it's not just where they're going to make their communion, it's everything. You know, if they make enough of a hype about anything the parents will come in and attack us.

During her interview Participant P expressed an opinion that children were given too much leeway and that they didn't always receive appropriate direction from their parents. In the instance described she is talking about the Catholic children. She contrasted this with the past when parents decided on important matters like baptism, communion and confirmation, whereas at present, "kids have more of an influence as to where they want to go." From her perspective the school was not adequately supported. On one reading this might appear to suggest a resistance to empowering the children. However, it also expressed an alienation on the part of the parents, an alienation that was articulated throughout the interview, from the school, its educational values and the local church. This alienation was in marked contrast with the congruence expressed by Participant E between school, community, and local church.

Throughout the interviews, participants demonstrated an uncertainty as to the best ways to approach sensitive topics where there was a risk of children feeling excluded. For some, it was best not to highlight difference for fear of further excluding children. Indeed, Participant N reflected that she had taught a child for a year before realising the child was not from a Catholic family. Where children expressed a desire to share parts of their beliefs, traditions or backgrounds participants felt more comfortable in providing an opportunity to do so. However, unlike the expressed need for dialogue with parents, there was no clear feeling that such dialogue was necessary with children. If we understand identity as constructed in

dialogue, the question then arises as to what happens when much of that dialogue is characterised by silence? Indeed, what impact does that have on identity and a dialogical way of coming to being?

5.5.3 School identity: 'being' and 'becoming'

The increasing plurality of identities within schools necessitated discussions that provoked internal reflection on the identity and direction of identity development on the part of the school. As a result of this ongoing process of negotiation and dialogue, school identity came into focus for participants and the question of how it was shifting or evolving needed to be considered. This was clearly evident in the way in which some of the participants spoke around questions of gender and sexuality. However, it was also evident in how they described their experience of religious identity. Yet, religious identity was a more comfortable space for many of the participants to negotiate and was less likely to be problematised.

This was evident in Participant A's response when he said that the school culture was inclusive and welcomes everyone, "…. the culture is such that you embrace. Like, I said to you, we welcome all! Part of that deal is you know you've got to do a bit of work." However, when it came to addressing questions of sexuality he described an ambiguity and uncertainty around the school's approach:

> But I am not one hundred percent comfortable about where I'm going with that. So, all I'm doing is crossing my fingers as I mention it, and at some stage somebody is going to say, 'hang on a second this is not part of the Catholic ethos of the school', which it's not and where do we stand with it?

Participant B described how attempting to negotiate a space between what she considered to be in line with the Catholic ethos and what was in line around expectations in Relationships and Sexuality Education was problematic. She described having to straddle two seemingly contradictory positions:

> Like, in real life you have to negotiate the two and that puts you in a difficult position. So, like you're going to come across issues that we encounter. Say in the 'stay safe', like you're talking about homosexuality in a Catholic school and the kind of contradiction of that that you're kind of saying, well you're told and it's okay to say one thing because you have to live in the real world, but then somebody could equally come back to you and say you're teaching kids about stuff that you shouldn't be, you know.

In the description above, Participant B was seeking to integrate an approach to sexuality into the school identity in a way that was inclusive and consistent with school ethos. In both of the struggles described above, it was evident that both participants wished to find a way of negotiating a more consistent identity for the school, but were unsure how it would evolve. The two examples reflected the principals' attempts to navigate a complex scenario, and a large amount of this navigation seemed to take place in the form of internal reflection.

However, the negotiation involved in navigating diverse identities and the impact of that on school culture was also described in very practical terms by participants. Participant K described the negotiation that took place within the school around how children who did not participate in sacramental preparation would be catered for. These conversations took place at staff meetings at the start of the year when the shape of the children's participation was outlined:

> … we'd say look, well, F is not doing confirmation this year, neither is J or M or P so, you know, something would have to be timetabled as time goes on and if the SET teachers could, kind of, manage it or the teacher next door would keep an eye or take them in when we're gone to church or whatever.

In this way decisions around what children would do during RE were considered among colleagues. Practical solutions were found to include children as much as possible. The following example was provided of such a practical solution:

> So, what we used to do for them was; we did something on winter or seasonal at the very beginning of the concert and they participated, and then they left, they went home.

In this example Participant K was talking about a Christmas concert that took place in the church. In her interview, Participant N described the kinds of questions that the teachers and principals would have considered when preparing for the sacraments:

> Well I suppose you've and I would just have said, what are we allowing this child to do on the communion day? Is the child allowed to be in the communion class photo? Is the child allowed to get a special blessing from the priest? Is the child allowed to wear a white dress on the communion day? Are we going to allow that child sit with the choir or to sit with its class? It's laying down really clear rules really. Here, Participant N demonstrated the balancing acts that were at the heart of participants' descriptions. The practical reality of school life and the need to keep everything running necessitated a pragmatic negotiation of challenges as they arose within the school community. For Participant E, the existential threat to the school posed by population decline was a considerable worry:

> > I would be worried down the road, just the decrease in population – you know, like where are the figures going to come from? Unless you could stay open and you've people Travelling from [*neighbouring town*] or you've people coming from [*neighbouring school*].

Thus, maintaining a close connection to the symbols, traditions and history of the school, while also hopefully gaining newcomers, was part of the school's best hope for growth, indeed survival, into the future.

5.5.4 Conclusion

During the interviews, participants highlighted the importance of communication as a means of negotiating moments of challenge when questions of identity and boundary emerged as significant. Unsurprisingly, this was particularly pronounced in relation to sacramental preparation and Religious Education. For many these descriptions were described pragmatically. Perhaps surprising was the sense of ease and routine with which these conversations with parents were described. The question may be asked as to why these conversations were described in this way. As a counterpoint, it is interesting to note the

experience of the principal who felt unable to facilitate the children in her school serving Mass in the local Church during the school day. She described subsequent conversations with parents as difficult to negotiate. Such examples raise questions as to whose voices are listened to most acutely in schools. Sacramental preparation and RE were powerful symbols of communal, school identity that mobilised people to act when there was a sense that existing, traditional practices could be threatened.

Despite this, the teachers and principals demonstrated a keen sensitivity to the experience of children who risked feeling marginalised. However, communicating with children emerged as more problematic for participants. Teachers and principals often felt on unsteady ground when negotiating delicate matters of identity with children. The fear of further marginalising children or drawing unwanted and negative attention was to the forefront of participants' minds. This was expressed particularly strongly regarding sexuality and family. It was also evident, if not entirely perceived quite as challenging, in the way that teachers and principals mediated questions of religious plurality in their classrooms and schools. For some, the wisest approach could be surmised as "least said, soonest mended." And yet in other cases, participants described the benefits that could come from providing a space for children to have their voice heard, to have some choice regarding their religious experience and to express their own identity.

It is through such interactive processes of negotiation and dialogue that the similarities and differences of the plurality of identities in schools and classrooms are brought to light. In these ongoing processes children, parents, teachers and principals reflect on their own identities and those of others. As identity is never really fixed or definitive, but rather is always in a process of being and becoming, these interactions are significant in forming, but also shifting and moving, identities, if only slightly.

CHAPTER 6

RURAL STAND-ALONE SCHOOLS AND IDENTITY INTO THE FUTURE

6.1 Conclusions and implications of the research

The aim of the research was to explore the experience of teachers and principals in rural Stand-Alone Schools of an increasing plurality of identities within their communities. Given the emphasis in recent years in national and international education policy on addressing the increasingly multicultural and diverse nature of our societies, this thesis sought to interrogate the on-the-ground experience in peripheral rural contexts. Much has been in written in recent years of the challenges that the current, largely denominational primary school system faces in adapting to the rapidly changing social and cultural landscape (Donnelly, 2000; Mawhinney, 2012; Irwin, 2013; Faas et al, 2016). At policy level, school choice has been proposed as a means of bringing about a school system that better reflects these changes (DES, 2014; DES 2017a; DES 2017b). The Forum's Report (2012) noted in particular the challenge faced by what it termed the Stand-Alone School, a school in which choice was not considered a realistic or desirable option. Identifying approximately 2000 schools out of a cohort of 3100 in this category, the Report noted the social dividend that these schools paid in many communities. Given the sheer number of such schools identified, this are a cohort of schools that demand significant investigation.

The research sought to understand how teachers and principals in such contexts negotiated the increasingly complex landscape of identity; how they experienced and

negotiated greater diversity within their communities and how the identity of the school community responded and changed, if at all. The thesis employed a phenomenological approach in which the lived experiences of participants were central to the research, reflecting the concept of identity as an inherently social process of ongoing meaning-making. The thesis drew heavily on Barth's (1969) concepts of boundary and identity and Cohen's (1982a; 1982b) concepts of community and periphery in order to understand how identity was constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed within these particular contexts. Taylor's (1997) theory of recognition was utterly central in underlining the significance of identity as a relevant and important phenomenon for this particular research. In Taylor's work the question of recognition is crucial; not having one's identity, both individual and communal, recognised is considered as a form of oppression. However, Taylor recognises the challenge of such recognition in multicultural societies in which questions of identity become increasingly complex, a challenge that is reflected in the interviews of participants.

The teachers and principals who participated in the study were all based in longstanding rural schools in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon that were at least 3km from the nearest neighbouring school. While the Forum's Report recognised the particular role that Stand-Alone Schools play in their community, little empirical research has been conducted on the experience of peripheral schools of the changing social and cultural context. In line with trends in international research, much of the focus of the research on plurality and the impact of multiculturalism centres on the experiences of schools within large towns and cities. Yet, rural schools are impacted by these developments also, if only by the way in which changing cultural values and norms, discourses and policy responses impact on their day-to-day reality. Therefore, all the participants were at a geographical distance from the centre of policy making. As noted above the school context in these counties is also significant as there is a

much higher percentage of small schools in these counties than there are nationally (DES, 2019).

In this chapter the implications of the research for primary education are outlined and potential future directions for research are addressed.

6.2 Limitations of the study

While the study unearthed rich data on the experience of teachers and principals in rural Stand-Alone Schools, there are nonetheless limitations in the scope of the research. While it was beyond the scope of this study to explore the experiences of parents and children in Stand-Alone Schools these voices, as well as those of teachers and principals, are underrepresented in research.

While little research has been conducted on the experiences of parents from different backgrounds on their experience of rural primary schools specifically, some relevant research has been conducted. In a small-scale survey of the experience of minority-belief parents by Lodge (2004) found that although in general the parents had positive experiences of denominational primary schools, there remained some concerns. It was Lodge's contention that equal recognition or respect for difference was not provided in the denominational primary school system. To some extent this reflects the findings in the NCCA report (2017a) on the consultation for ERB and Ethics in which some parents from minority-belief backgrounds had positive experiences in denominational schools, whereas others found the experience to be exclusive. Much seemed to depend on the relationship between school and parents. Equally, it was beyond the scope of the research to explore the experience of children within the schools, a voice that is underrepresented in the research and that requires more attention. Kitching (2020) has empirically explored questions of social injustice, of the experience of parents and children as they negotiate Catholic and secular primary schooling

and how this shapes their development. The importance of the voice of the child in the research is evidenced by the work of Bracken and Bryan (2011) which demonstrated that well-meaning 'inclusive' interventions can be experienced as othering by the very pupils they are intended to include.

While many of the participants in the study were sensitive to the dangers of excluding and marginalising children and parents with different values, cultures or beliefs, they nonetheless all came from similar cultural backgrounds. Reflecting the relative homogeneity of the teaching profession (Devine, 2005; Heinz, 2013; Hyland, 2012; Schmidt and McDaid, 2015; Walsh and McDaid, 2016) they were 'insiders' in their school communities in their role and in their cultural backgrounds, and all came from and lived within a close geographical proximity of the schools.

In the research, while there is a significant exploration of the plurality of identities as they are expressed in school communities, there was little exploration of class and the role class plays in processes of identity construction in these contexts.

Finally, the impact of popular culture and technology as being central to the way in which children come to construct their own identities is relatively under-developed in the research. While some participants did note the potentially disruptive role of technology in identity construction, with one participant clearly articulating the impact of social media on the way in which children understand who they are and their place within the world, this was under-explored.

6.3 Significance and implications

Returning to *Chapter 1*, it is worth recalling the unparalleled dilemmas that are thought to emerge within multicultural societies, as identified by Parekh (2005). As argued by Cuban (1992), dilemmas are characterised by a degree of irreconcilability (Cuban, 1992).

Thus, the significance and implications of the research need to be considered in light of this complexity.

6.3.1 Theoretical implications

In examining the responses of participants in this research, the study drew upon the pertinent identity concepts of boundary, community and periphery to help explain how identity was constructed within these school communities. These concepts rest on the belief that identity is constructed through a dialectical process of identification in which people move between similarity and difference. Throughout the interviews, participants moved between the various 'we's' and 'they's' that they understood as existing within their communities. These categories reflected perceived religious, cultural, linguistic or ethnic boundaries as understood, but also less obvious boundaries were evident such as between those who have long-standing roots in the locality and those who have more recently joined. They, therefore, reflected the real plurality that was perceived as existing within these schools.

However, in their responses it was evident that in the participants' understanding the school communities provided, or at least sought to provide, however imperfectly, 'an umbrella of solidarity' in the words of Cohen. The school was both constitutive of a communal identity and was also part of broader local identity. In some cases, these communal identities were considered almost synonymous. Common symbols were described as being significant within this community concept; the school itself, often the local church and the local GAA was occasionally mentioned. Indeed, the teachers and principals themselves were often powerful symbols of community and played a symbolic role in the creation and maintenance of community. Such a conception of a school community illustrates the symbolic power of local schools to provide 'a mask of similarity' and a communal sense of belonging. If responses to the challenging dilemmas posed by changing values, demographics

and norms are to have any purchase or relevance, they need to take seriously this function of rural schooling in creating a communal identity and its significance within often peripheral communities. A communal identity may emerge from a collective act of imagining but it is no less potent or meaningful for that.

As this research shows, questions of boundary and recognition did emerge as challenging in these contexts. Throughout the interviews, participants described the internal boundaries that were perceived as existing within school communities. Sometimes these boundaries were culturally constituted and created a barrier to recognition. For example, Participant A who noted the inclusive mission of his school ('We welcome all') but subsequently wondered to what extent members of the Travelling community were fully recognised and welcomed within the school community by everyone. Of course, other participants noted the difficulties for those who were not Catholic at times such as Religious Instruction and sacramental preparation. Other participants noted the ways in which the parents and the children themselves responded and adapted to these circumstances and, in these cases, assimilation was largely understood as a responsibility for the child and their families.

Peripherality was helpful in explaining the way identity was constructed within these schools. *Chapter 3* outlined the many ways in which rural education is often underresearched and the specific needs and characteristics of schooling in such contexts are not recognised. Indeed, little research has been carried out in the Irish context on these schools. This peripherality impacts the way in which these school communities have constructed their own identities centred around local symbols that are meaningful to the people within these schools. Some participants expressed a certain degree of isolation and felt that they had little support in negotiating complex questions of identity, religious and sexual identity in particular. Given the failure to recognise the particularity of these contexts, the extent of

social and cultural change and the imaginative failure to provide alternative symbols that are meaningful to people's lives, it is little wonder that some participants noted a hardening of attitudes with regard to the Catholic identity of schools, from parents and from patrons.

In addressing complex questions of identity for rural Stand-Alone Schools it is worth returning to Taylor's work on recognition and identity. Taylor (1997) argues that

> it is reasonable to suppose that cultures that have provided the horizon of meaning for large numbers of beings, of diverse characters and temperaments, over a long period of time—that have, in other words, articulated their sense of the good, the holy, the admirable—are almost certain to have something that deserves our admiration and respect, even if it is accompanied by much that we have to abhor and reject. (pp. 7273)

Therefore, Taylor postulates that engagement on a basis of respect with the various cultures that have provided meaning for people over time is an important starting place for the recognition of identity. In his analysis he does not expand significantly on exactly what he means by this, but it is clear from "The Politics of Recognition" that in describing cultures, he is referring to culture at a more macro level (national identities, religions, linguistic communities). Before outlining how Taylor's concept may be useful, it is important to first outline its limitations for this research. The approach emerges from the debates at the end of the 20th century around how to respond to increasingly multicultural societies at a macro level. The focus on culture at the macro level then fails to fully acknowledge the complexity and nuance of identity that is constructed culturally (and, of course, dialogically) at different levels from the macro to the micro. It fails to acknowledge the significance of factors such as peripherality, local culture and community as contributing to the cultural landscape that significantly informs the processes of identification that need to be taken into consideration. Taylor's view of culture may be overly bent towards a macro-level constructs (such as religion or ethnicity); his analysis would suggest that it is only 'major' cultures that need to be factored in when we think about identity and recognition. Indeed, this would seem

somewhat in contradiction of his own dialogical concept of identity construction, in which we form our identity in dialogue with significant others.

In the everyday reality of people's lives, it is these cultures, subcultures, local cultures and aspects or refractions of mainstream cultures that are perhaps most significant in the processes that shape and construct their identity. From the findings of the participants in this research, I would suggest that it is these components of identity that most require recognition; that their contribution in providing 'horizons of meaning' in people's everyday lives is validated. Indeed, in many rural communities, it is the local community and those symbols of communal life that provide rich 'horizons of meaning' for people as they construct their own identities. This is not to denigrate the significance of macro level conceptions of culture, but a rebalance is needed.

Once we conceive of identity and the cultural hinterland that informs its construction in this more nuanced way, there are two other components that emerge as significant for questions of recognition for Stand-Alone Schools: these are largely school identity and pupil identity.

Therefore, recognition regarding school identity in rural Stand-Alone Schools is complex. It is important to note that a failure to recognise the specific needs and characteristics of these schools and the role that they play within their communities is evident in much of the national discourse around questions of identity and diversity. Firstly, in this study all schools were Catholic, and this was significant to the identity of the schools and how questions of identity transact within their communities. Secondly, the rural peripherality of these schools places them within a subset or subgroup of mainstream schooling, and this peripherality forms part of the way in which schools construct their identity. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, the importance of schools as powerful symbols of local

communal identity requires recognition and serious consideration. Without a recognition of this particularity, it is likely that any attempt to bring change or reform to these contexts will be slow or met with resistance. It is likely to be perceived as a denial of a valid sense of identity.

Secondly, clearly recognition for the plurality of identities and the pluralities of ways in which children construct their own identities is something that these schools grapple with. Even for those who were conscious of the need to recognise the various cultural expressions and identities in their classrooms, it was an area that teachers and principals were not entirely surefooted on. As these schools were Catholic, the plurality of identities within their community sometimes posed challenges when conflicting value-systems or different belief systems existed. Evidently, there exists the potential risk of a dominant culture or worldview imposing an image of inferiority onto those whose identities are outside of this contextual mainstream. Therefore, some awareness of the need for recognition for those whose identities are potentially marginal-or indeed peripheral-within such contexts is required.

Therefore, to return to the work of Cohen (1982a; 1985), the challenge for these rural Stand-Alone Schools is to continue to strive to provide a communal sense of belonging for the members of their communities, while recognising the internal plurality of identities that exist within their communities. There is a need also, as Taylor (1997) points out, to avoid an inauthenticity and homogenising tendency that such a demand for recognition could bring. By recognising not just the plurality of identities but also the barriers that exist to this recognition, they can better adapt and evolve to respond to changing contexts.

6.3.2 Implications and recommendations for policy and practice

This research demonstrates the need to recognise the significance that rural schools have within their communities. It also demonstrates the need to take seriously the role these

schools have as important symbols of local, communal identity. Without this as a starting point any attempt to respond to the dilemmas outlined throughout this thesis are unlikely to progress to any degree. With this in mind, this section argues for a set of responses at a national and local level to address these challenges.

- Firstly, on foot of the evidence presented in the thesis, this section calls for greater consideration to be given to the specific needs of rural education as it responds to a changing social landscape. This requires the articulation of a clearer vision of how we understand rural Stand-Alone Schools into the next few decades of the 21st century.
- It also proposes that identity and belonging need to be more clearly foregrounded in national curriculum as such questions are likely to come increasingly to the fore in the coming years.
- At the local and classroom level, it proposes that pedagogical responses are supported that are responsive, relational and context specific.
- For these responses to be effective and genuine, it is argued that pupil voice and parental voice need to be central to such efforts.
- In order to help rural Stand-Alone Schools negotiate dilemmas such as those outlined in the research and others that they face, it is argued that establishing communities of practice at a local level would provide support.
- Finally, consideration needs to be given to when Religious Instruction and sacramental preparation take place in denominational schools.

6.3.2.1 Time for a coherent and comprehensive policy approach for rural education

Chapter 3 and *Chapter 5* have described the experience of identity in rural primary education from the perspective of teachers and principals, and specifically Stand-Alone schools. Although questions around the structure and composition of the primary education

system in rural areas have been brought to light at various points (Coolahan et al, 2012; DES, 2013; DES, 2019) in recent years there has been little response at national policy level.

Nearly a decade on from the Forum's Report (2012) little has been done to address the place of rural Stand-Alone Schools or the questions of 'mis-match' between the composition of the school structure and the changing nature of society. Indeed, the focus more latterly has shifted to addressing the future of small schools (DES, 2019).

Given the particular role of education in these settings, the social changes that are taking place, and the challenges that result from this, as identified in the research, it would seem that a more coherent, comprehensive and long-term policy approach is required. In recent years, the Department of Education has enacted a *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* (DES, 2016) which is supported in the Department by a dedicated Gaeltacht Education unit. This recognises the unique linguistic context of Gaeltacht schools and seeks to maintain and secure "the vitality of Gaeltacht areas as the home of Irish-speaking communities" (p. 6). According to the Department's website, the role of the unit is to ensure high quality Irish language education in schools recognised as Gaeltacht schools. From this research, the question arises as to whether such state-level recognition is needed for StandAlone primary education in order to support rural communities address the challenges identified in this research and elsewhere faced by their schools. As society continues to change it is likely that the 'mis-match' noted above will surely continue to grow. To date responses have been ad-hoc, responding to political fads, with minimal long-term impact or benefit. It is argued that the vision of the rural schools provided in submissions to the Forum's Report (2012), the *Value for money of small primary schools* report (2013), in the anthologies analysed in *Chapter 3* and in the findings in *Chapter 5* is strongly rooted in a traditional concept of school community that needs to be robustly interrogated in order to

meet the needs and demands of a changing society. In interviews, teachers and principals often expressed uncertainty around how to best cater to the growing plurality of identities within their classrooms, with a lack of official support being regularly highlighted. Therefore, a comprehensive approach that articulates a vision for primary schooling addressing the overall needs and challenges of rural primary schools over the next few decades would seem to be required. The specific questions arising from the research that warrant a policy response are:

- What is the broad vision for primary schools in peripheral rural settings and how do we understand the role of these schools in the 21st century? Are the descriptions of the role of primary schools as articulated in *Chapters 3* and *5* still relevant or fit-forpurpose?
- Given the growing diversity of identities, values and cultures in our communities do we envision denominational schools as they are currently constituted continuing to provide the important social dividend described in the Forum's Report (2012)?
- Developing on from this, do we need to articulate a more comprehensive and clear definition of the Stand-Alone School than the somewhat vague concept outlined in the Report? Do we need to reconceptualise these rural schools more explicitly as community schools, or indeed common schools as conceptualised by McLaughlin (2005)? How would such Stand-Alone Schools function as community or common schools into the next few decades of the 21st century?
- Is there a need to differentiate between rural Stand-Alone Schools in different parts of the country where contexts may be substantially different? By choosing to focus on the experience in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon, this thesis addressed a geographical region with a very high level of small rural schools in an economically and politically peripheral part of the country.

- How would such a policy for rural education address the question of small schools and resourcing?

Given the disjointed nature of policy responses to the various challenges faced by rural primary schools in the last decade, and to begin a process of policy formulation, it is suggested that a broad consultative forum would be beneficial to further define and support the role of rural Stand-Alone Schools for the coming decades. While the Forum's Report (2012) proposed that Stand-Alone Schools have a social dividend within their communities, it is argued here based on the research that without a considered and comprehensive approach to schooling in these contexts, any such social dividend is likely to be increasingly incidental. Such benefit has derived and derives from the committed professionalism and good will of school staff and communities. As questions of identity continue to become ever more complex, communities more diverse and the challenges more intractable such benefit may diminish without an overarching vision and framework of support.

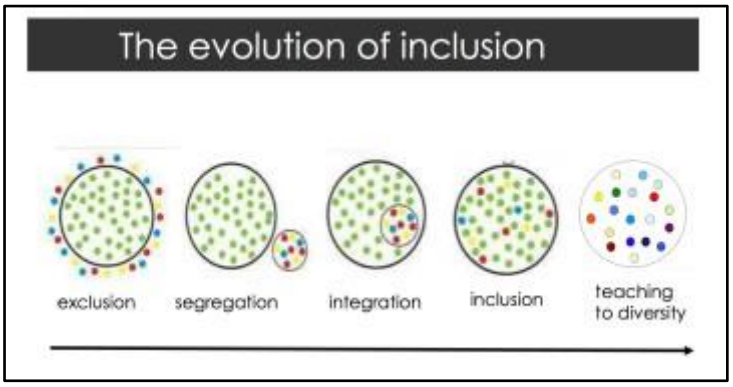
6.3.2.2 Curriculum and identity

As outlined in Chapter 3 the state has responded to the need to recognise the plurality of identity in our primary schools through curricular initiatives in recent years. Developments such as the *Intercultural guidelines for primary schools* (NCCA, 2006), *Education about religions and beliefs (ERB) and ethics: Consultation proposals* (NCCA, 2015), *Traveller culture and history in the curriculum: a curriculum audit* (NCCA, 2019b), and a *Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools* (NCCA, 2019a) are driven, or partly driven, by a recognition that some identities may not be adequately acknowledged or recognised in the curriculum and the day-to-day reality of Irish classrooms. However, the success or otherwise of these initiatives could be debated. With the current redevelopment of the entire primary school curriculum underway, beginning with the publication of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020), the

question arises as to whether identity and belonging should be foregrounded more comprehensively and clearly. Emerging from this question, then, is how the plurality of identities specifically within rural Stand-Alone Schools will be supported within a national curriculum.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* sets out the purpose and shape of a future curriculum describing the vision, principles, key concepts and components in broad strokes, defining the learning and teaching parameters within which schools will work. This presents the opportunity to foreground concepts of identity that are inclusive and conscious of the plurality of identities that are within our school communities. It would seem that the central theme of "Identity and Belonging" as set out in *Aistear: The Early Childhood Framework* (NCCA, 2009) provides a strong basis to begin from, recognising the individuality of each child and the need for belonging. In the section "Inclusive Education and Diversity", the draft framework states: "Inclusive education and diversity centres on the values and practices that enable children, as individuals, to belong, feel respected, confident and safe so they can engage in meaningful learning and reach their potential" (p. 20). It elaborates and recognises that each child varies in terms of, "their competency, language, family background, age, culture, ethnic status, religion, gender and sexual identity" (p. 20). In this way it reflects an evolving understanding of inclusion as demonstrated in the adapted Figure 4, below (Moore, 2016, pp. 2-4).

Figure 5: *The evolution of inclusion, adapted from Moore, 2016*



The diagram above provokes the viewer to think about how a curriculum, and indeed a classroom, can both recognise the individuality of all, while simultaneously create a sense of belonging. However, in the Framework, the concept of identity is rather thinly articulated, and it is largely unclear how it will translate into the development of the specifications for curriculum areas and subjects. The "My Stories" strand of the *Goodness Me, Goodness You* (NCCA, 2018) multi-belief curriculum in Community National Schools provides a good example of how curriculum can support children in developing a sense of who they are as individuals while also seeking to nurture a sense of belonging within their relationships and communities.

Therefore, this thesis proposes that the development of the curriculum area of Wellbeing would contribute to, and embed, the concept of identity articulated in the section on inclusive education and diversity. This would connect clearly with the aim of the curriculum area, as the section in the framework states:

> Wellbeing supports children's social, emotional and physical development now and into the future. It enables children to develop self-awareness and knowledge, build life skills and develop a strong sense of connectedness to their school and to their community and wider society. (NCCA, 2020, p. 13).

By embedding a clearly articulated concept of identity into the organisational structures and learning outcomes of the curriculum area, this would build on the Aistear theme of "Identity and belonging" and support schools to respectfully negotiate the diversity of cultures, religious, ethnic and sexual identities in their communities. Given the denominational nature

of most primary schools, particular explicit attention needs to be paid within this curriculum area to the recognition of the variety of religions and worldviews in our classrooms. Such provision would support children, parents and teachers in the rural Stand-Alone Schools who do not identify as Catholic to see themselves recognised in the national curriculum. It would also support the school communities in catering to the diversity within their contexts. As some participants noted, this can sometimes be more challenging when the numbers of children who belong to diverse religions or worldviews are fewer. This would also clearly build on the recommendations of the *Consultation on the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics: Final Report* (NCCA, 2017).

6.3.2.3 Pedagogy: relational, responsive and context specific

Of course, while the national curriculum provides an overarching framework for the broad structure and content of teaching and learning at a macro level, it does not dictate what transacts at the classroom level. What emerged during the research was the various ways that teachers and principals attempted to respond to challenges presented by such diversity of identity. For some, drawing less attention to difference was the most salient response. However, others grappled with trying to balance between recognising difference and not further isolating those who may already feel isolated. Therefore, context specific pedagogical approaches seem necessary. Wyse, Hayward and Pandya (2016) conceptualise pedagogy "as an intervention in the development of an individual: through teaching that is informed by the history, values and ideas of the culture in which the teaching is enacted" (p. 3). Essentially, pedagogy relates to the teaching and learning as it takes place in schools and classrooms. There are three key features of pedagogy relevant to questions of identity such as these; relevant pedagogy is relational, responsive and rooted in the specific context. Firstly, for appropriate approaches to be used an awareness on the part of teachers is required of the nuances of identity within their classroom and a "relational knowledge and understanding of

the children, their families and the community" (NCCA, 2020, p. 21). This awareness and relational knowledge allows for a reflexivity on the part of the teachers and schools to have a sense of the ways in which belonging may be fostered, but equally where community members may potentially feel marginalised. Therefore, secondly, an emphasis on positive relationships within the school community can support the development of responsive pedagogical approaches. As the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* notes, "All relationships and interactions within the school community—formal and informal—contribute to a responsive pedagogy" (p. 21). Culturally responsive pedagogical approaches have been advocated for multicultural learning in recent decades. Reflecting Taylor (1997) these approaches recognise the ways in which dominant cultures can negatively impact those who are traditionally marginalised or in a minority and how classroom narratives and practices may reinforce the dominance of particular identities while further marginalising others (Pirbhai-Illich, Pete and Martin, 2017). Responsive pedagogies require educators to be aware of the ways in which cultural dominance may manifest itself in the classroom, normalising and reinforcing some identities while marginalising others within their communities. Through such awareness, educators can create new practices or narratives that support the recognition of all pupils, and indeed parents and teachers. Such awareness and reflexivity were evident in some of the interviews of the participants. However, at times the potential for marginalisation was not recognised or indeed when it was teachers or principals were sometimes unsure how to respond. Thirdly, the particular school context is an important contributor to appropriate pedagogical responses. The draft framework states that appropriate pedagogical strategies reflect the "culture(s) of the school and community" (NCCA, 2020, p. 22). While the recommendations in the framework are vague regarding this, recognition of the centrality of school culture to all pedagogical strategies and approaches is critical.

Building on Taylor's work this recognises the contribution rural Stand-Alone Schools make in the lives of their children and communities and the efforts teachers and principals make to create inclusive environments. While recognising the value and contribution of rural StandAlone Schools, context specific responsive pedagogical approaches also require selfexamination and, indeed, the need to reflect on school culture to see if it needs to adapt.

6.3.2.4 Voice: authentic listening

Evidence of this type of reflection and self-examination was evident in the emphasis that participants placed on dialogue and communication. Time and again, positive communication with parents, and to a lesser extent children, was seen as being at the root of positive approaches to challenges that could emerge. Reflecting the pedagogical approaches above, a recognition of the role that pupils need to have in the creation of positive learning environments in which they feel respected and recognised is important. Therefore, in the processes of identity construction, an awareness that pupil voice is an intrinsic component is vital. Indeed, the relationship between voice and a sense of belonging has been outlined in research (Scorgie and Forlin, 2019). Bracken and Bryan (2011) have demonstrated how pedagogical interventions designed to create inclusive environments can often be experienced as alienating and othering by young people. Flynn (2013) has proposed an approach to student voice that builds on earlier models by Lundy (2007) and explicitly recognises what she terms as 'authentic listening'. In this way children and young people need to not alone be given the opportunity to use their voice on issues that matter to them, but to know that their voices are listened to. 'Authentic listening', therefore, involves an authentic dialogue, that contributes to responsive pedagogical practices.

6.3.2.5 Supporting schools: communities of practice

A key feature of identity construction is that it is a social process in which people are continually engaged. Given that some of the questions that arise in the context of increased

plurality are highly sensitive, participants in the research often felt uncertain and expressed a lack of support. In order to support schools in enacting responsive pedagogical approaches that rely on pupil voice, communities of practice can provide a framework in which schools can collaboratively explore responses and approaches to challenging questions. Indeed, school clusters are increasingly used to support locally based responses to national changes.

Between 2017 and 2018 the Sharing Inclusive Practice Network (NCCA) provided a forum for different school types to meet regularly and share their pedagogical approaches to multicultural classrooms and communities. Similarly, locally based school clusters are supported by An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) to help develop school responses to the new Gaeltacht schools policy. Communities of practice that are inherently collaborative, locally based and facilitated by professional development bodies such as the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) may be better placed to support schools to develop appropriate responses.

6.3.2.6 Religious Education and sacramental preparation

Time and again throughout the research sacramental preparation and Religious Education emerged as a time of challenge and uncertainty for teachers regarding the plurality of identities within their classrooms. In his work on ethos, McLaughlin (2003) characterises the challenges arising from religious education in common schools as 'dilemmas' rather than 'problems' because he suggested there are no simple one-size-fits all solutions. It would seem that there are a number of considerations that may be proposed that may help schools negotiate these particular times.

- Consideration should be given to when Religious Instruction and sacramental preparation take place. As many schools work closely with parents and parishes there

may be opportunities to move sacramental preparation and components of Religious Instruction to weekends or after schools.

- Building on and connected to responsive and relational pedagogies proposed above, there may opportunities in class for inter-belief dialogue. Such approaches create an open and safe space in which children from different belief backgrounds can bring their beliefs into the classroom (Ipgrave, 2004; Hill, 2013; Kieran, 2017). This reflects the experience of some participants (but certainly not all) who welcomed the opportunity for children to talk about their own beliefs.

6.3.3 Future directions for research

Reflecting international trends, rural education in Ireland is hugely under-researched given the sheer number of rural schools.

This research was conducted with principals and teachers in rural Stand-Alone Schools as they had a particular vantage point, as professionals charged with enacting national policy and curriculum on the one hand, while teaching in and leading local school communities on the other. It was a small-scale exploratory study but suggests that with the changes in society difficult questions of identity are increasingly being faced by these schools. In order to better support rural schools to adapt, to change or to respond to such challenges, more wide-ranging research into the experiences and perspectives of teachers and principals is required.

While participants often spoke of their interactions with parents, they are clearly unable to speak for their experience. Therefore, the voice of parents, particularly of parents with minority identities, need to be reflected more closely in the research. The *Report on the Consultation for ERB and Ethics* (NCCA, 2017) and the RSE review (NCCA, 2019) highlighted issues among parents around sensitive questions of religion and sexuality.

Kitching (2020) has explored questions of plurality with parents and children in denominational primary schools. However, research that explores these experiences through the specific lens of rurality and rural schooling would be hugely beneficial for gaining an understanding as to how such schooling is to adapt and change. It is evident from this and other research that the context, the needs and the functions of rural schools are qualitatively different from urban schools. Therefore, they require responses that examine their particularity in-depth and take this particularity into serious consideration.

An absent, but significant, voice in this research was the voice of the child. Teachers and principals spoke of their interactions with children, the way they sought to provide learning environments that recognised their distinctiveness, their interpretations of how the children negotiated the common school space and the degree to which they felt children at ease or ill at ease. At times, participants were highly sensitive to the potential for children to feel marginalised and isolated, and at other times, less so. However, regardless of the sensitivity of the participants to the experiences of children, the voice of the children themselves is utterly crucial to understanding this experience and responding appropriately.

6.4 Closing remarks

This study explored complex questions posed by the emergence of an increasing plurality of identities within rural Stand-Alone Schools. It recognised the roles and challenges participants faced in: enacting national education policy and curriculum; adapting appropriately to social change in their communities; reflecting the values, identity and heritage of their local primary schools and all the time providing inclusive and respectful learning environments for all children. In exploring questions of identity through the lenses of community and belonging, boundary, peripherality, and of course rurality it brought to the fore the difficulties of providing appropriate recognition as set out by Taylor (1997).

Questions such as who is and who is not recognised through engagement in the day-to-day activity of school life or in the engagement with broader national level curriculum and education policy emerge as significant. As a policy of choice is undesirable for such contexts and considering the number of schools that can be described as stand-alone, it would seem that serious consideration needs to be given at a policy level to rural education generally and how best it can continue to serve its communities into the future. As the research has highlighted, and as has been highlighted elsewhere, these schools have played an important symbolic role providing an 'umbrella of solidarity' within their communities. Globally, the last few years have demonstrated the potential for contested questions of identity to lead to profound social and political fissures that shape and re-shape the world in which we live. If, as Hargreaves (2017) has suggested, we are in the educational era of *The Era of Identity, Engagement and Wellbeing*, the research begs the question as to how Stand-Alone Schools can provide this 'umbrella of solidarity' for rural communities, while ensuring that children at risk of marginalisation are appropriately recognised and feel a sense of belonging. The thesis makes a number of recommendations. It strongly argues for serious consideration to be given to the significance of rural schooling and how it can genuinely and authentically respond to the challenges it faces. It proposes the need for questions of recognition (Taylor, 1997) to be utterly central to this consideration; questions about how identity, tradition, and sense of place of a school community can be acknowledged while providing a learning environment that recognises the plurality of identities within. Ultimately, the research suggests the need to think deeply about how we understand the role of rural education; how we can develop an understanding of Stand-Alone Schools as well as practices and supports that allow these schools to respond to the challenges of changing communities and society.

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Appendix A: Plain Language Statement

Plain Language Statement for Principals participating in Individual Interviews

Diversity and Inclusivity in Stand-Alone Rural Schools in Ireland

Dear Principal,

My name is Colm Ó Cadhain and I am a primary school teacher, currently on secondment with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). I am currently undertaking Doctoral research in DCU Institute of Education, St. Patrick's Campus, Dublin City University, which has been partly paid for by the NCCA. I am planning a research project that focuses on the diversity-religious diversity in particular-in rural Stand-Alone Schools. The aim of the project is to explore how diversity, specifically religious diversity, manifests itself in the classroom, and the opportunities and challenges that this brings. I wish to explore how schools respond to these challenges or conflict when they arise in the classroom. The research aims to look at how teachers and principals understand their role in creating inclusive school communities. It will look their role in fostering the individual identity of their pupils within inclusive communities. This research is important as it gives an insight into how rural StandAlone Schools negotiate the changing nature of Irish society.

I would like to invite you to take part in this study by participating in an interview with me which will last 60 minutes and will take place in the evening time at a time convenient to you. Participating in the interview will involve a discussion about your school community and the diversity, specifically the religious diversity, that exists within in it. During the interview you may find yourself talking about some of the opportunities and challenges that you see as emerging. Your opinions or comments will be very valuable. I feel that the interview may benefit you as this will be a nice opportunity for you to reflect on your opinions and school practices around diversity. At any point during the interview, you can withdraw from participating and your decision will be respected without question. The confidentiality of information provided will be kept within limitations of the law.

You are welcome to receive feedback on the project throughout the process and upon its completion. In any reports on the project, individual participants' names will be replaced by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. All recordings on the researcher's Dictaphone will be kept in a secure location in her office filing cabinet. All electronic data will be stored on a password encrypted laptop. These data will be appropriately disposed of within five years, in accordance with DCU Data Protection Policy.

I would be grateful if you could contact me by phone or email before 10th May and inform me if you wish to participate in the research. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at any stage. Alternatively, you may wish to contact my Supervisor and/or an independent person, if so, please contact the administration's office using the details below. Sincere thanks for reading this information letter and for considering your participation in this proposed study.

Yours sincerely,

_____

Colm Ó Cadhain colm.ocadhain@mail.dcu.ie
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Research Office,
Dublin City University,
Glasnevin Dublin 9.
Tel: (01) 7007816

Plain Language Statement for Teachers participating in Individual Interviews

Diversity and Inclusivity in Stand-Alone Rural Schools in Ireland

Dear Teachers,

My name is Colm Ó Cadhain and I am a primary school teacher, currently on secondment with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). I am currently undertaking Doctoral research in DCU Institute of Education, St. Patrick's Campus, Dublin City University, which has been partly paid for by the NCCA. I am planning a research project that focuses on the diversity-religious diversity in particular-in rural Stand-Alone schools. The aim of the project is to explore how diversity, specifically religious diversity, manifests itself in the classroom, and the opportunities and challenges that this brings. I wish to explore how schools respond to these challenges or conflict when they arise in the classroom. The research aims to look at how teachers and principals understand their role in creating inclusive school communities. It will look their role in fostering the individual identity of their pupils within inclusive communities. This research is important as it gives an insight into how rural StandAlone Schools negotiate the changing nature of Irish society.

I would like to invite you to take part in this study by participating in an interview with me which will last 60 minutes and will take place in the evening time at a time convenient to you. Participating in the interview will involve a discussion about your school community and the diversity, specifically the religious diversity, that exists within in it. During the interview you may find yourself talking about some of the opportunities and challenges that you see as emerging. Your opinions or comments will be very valuable. I feel that the interview may benefit you as this will be a nice opportunity for you to reflect on your opinions and school practices around diversity. At any point during the interview, you can withdraw from participating and your decision will be respected without question. The confidentiality of information provided will be kept within limitations of the law.

You are welcome to receive feedback on the project throughout the process and upon its completion. In any reports on the project, individual participants' names will be replaced by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. All recordings on the researcher's Dictaphone will be kept in a secure location in her office filing cabinet. All electronic data will be stored on a password encrypted laptop. These data will be appropriately disposed of within five years, in accordance with DCU Data Protection Policy.

I would be grateful if you could contact me by phone or email before 10th May and inform me if you wish to participate in the research. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at any stage. Alternatively, you may wish to contact my Supervisor and/or an independent person, if so, please contact the administration's office using the details below. Sincere thanks for reading this information letter and for considering your participation in this proposed study.

Yours sincerely,

_____

Colm Ó Cadhain colm.ocadhain@mail.dcu.ie
Tel: 08XXXXXXXX
REC Administration,
Research Office,

Dublin City University,
Glasnevin Dublin 9.
Tel: (01) 7007816

Appendix B: Ethical Approval

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU

Mr Colm Ó Cadhain
Department of Human Development

2nd May 2019

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2019/073**

Proposal Title: **Diversity and Inclusivity in Stand-alone Rural Schools**

Applicant(s): **Mr Colm Ó Cadhain**

Dear Colm,

This research proposal qualifies under our Notification Procedure, as a low risk social research project. Therefore, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this project.

Materials used to recruit participants should state that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Philbin

DCU
Research & Innovation

Dr Mark Philbin
Interim Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
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Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Diversity and Inclusivity in Stand-Alone Rural Schools in Ireland Consent Form

Purpose of the Research
The aim of the project is to explore how diversity, specifically religious diversity, manifests itself in the classroom, and the opportunities and challenges that this brings to rural schools. The research aims to look at how teachers and principals understand their role in creating inclusive school communities. It will look their role in fostering the individual identity of their pupils within inclusive communities.

Requirements of participation in this research study
You will be required to attend an individual interview with the researcher if you choose to participate in the study. This will involve an open discussion with regard diversity within your school and your thoughts about the how schools respond to this. You will only be asked questions relating to your experiences of diversity within your school community and your thoughts on this topic. You will be free to refuse engagement in the discussion at any point during the interview if you do not wish to speak or if you feel uncomfortable discussing your opinions or experiences. You will be free to leave the interview at any stage if you so wish. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will take place at a time suitable for you.

Every effort will be made to protect the anonymity of all participants. The names of participants will not be used in any written report. This guarantee of anonymity is promised within the legal limits to data anonymity.

Confirmation that involvement in the research study is voluntary

I am aware that if I agree to take part in this study that I can withdraw from participation at any stage. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the Research Study have been completed.

Participant– Please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question).

I have read (or had read to me) the Plain Language Statement *Yes/No*

I understand the information provided in the Plain Language Statement
Yes/No

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study
Yes/No

I have received satisfactory answers to all of my questions
Yes/No

I understand that I will be required to attend an interview
Yes/No

I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded
Yes/No

I have read and understood the information in this form. The researcher has answered my questions and concerns, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I give my consent to take part in this research project.

Participant's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Schedules

Individual Interview Schedule for Principals

This is a semi-structured interview schedule. Questions will not necessarily be asked in the order that they are presented. It is envisaged that participants may steer the conversation at times and many of the proposed items on the schedule for discussion may be indirectly approached in this way.

Introduction of Researcher

As you are aware, my name is Colm Ó Cadhain and I am currently engaging in a Doctoral study based on the experiences of teachers and principals in rural Stand-Alone Schools, and the way in which these schools negotiate diversity within their communities. Today, I would like to talk to you today about your own lived experience. I will ask questions but you are not obliged to answer questions. As you are aware from the initial consent form, with the exception of my Supervisor, no one will have access to this information and when reporting findings, a pseudonym or a fictional name will be used to protect your identity and to ensure confidentiality at all times.

Background information and school community

1. Can you tell me about your school community generally?

Prompts (if needed)

- *How many children in the school?*
- *Do all the children live nearby?*
- *Is there a close connection between the school and the community? How does this manifest itself?*

2. Can you tell me your position within the school community and the community more generally?

Prompts (if needed)

- *What is your role in the school?*
- *Do you live locally?*
- *Can you tell me about the community generally?*

3. How has the school population changed in recent years?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Can you talk to me about the diversity within the broader community? within school community generally.*
- *Can you talk to me about the diversity of children from different religious and belief backgrounds? How many children in the school from diverse backgrounds?*

Responses to diversity within the school community

4. What do see have been the benefits of a more diverse community?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you think that this has provided benefits for the school community generally? In your experience what have these benefits been?*
- *Can you talk to me about the engagement between school and different communities?*

5. What do you think have been the key issues or challenges that have emerged as a result of this diversity?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Have particular topics or themes emerged in the classroom that are challenging? Can you describe your experience of particular instances?*
- *Have particular topics or themes emerged at the school level that are challenging? Can you describe your experience of particular instances?*
- *Can particular times of the year be challenging? Can you tell me about this? Why do you think that these can be difficult?*
- *Do you think that these have been challenging for children? For parents? For the school management and staff? Why?*

6. How would you describe your responses at a classroom level to these issues or challenges?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Can you tell me why you responded to the challenges that arose in this way?*
- *Did you talk with the parents?*
- *Did you talk with other teachers about this?*
- *Have discussions around this these questions arisen at Board of Management level? If so, can you talk to me about these?*

7. What has helped support your responses to the challenges that have arisen around diversity?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you have school policies that have been useful in this regard? If so, tell us about these?*
- *Have there been resources/parts of the curriculum/parts of the patron's programme that you have found helpful in dealing with issues? If so can you tell me how have you found these helpful?*
- *Have you spoken with colleagues/principals in other schools about their experiences?*

8. How do you feel that this has contributed (or not) to the creation of an inclusive school community?

Prompts (if needed)

- *How do feel that these responses have contributed to an inclusive school community?*
- *Have you had any feedback from parents around this?*

9. How do you think that this has supported the individuality or the individual identity of the children?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you feel that it's important that children's own identity is supported within the school?*
- *Do you think that there is a difficulty between promoting an inclusive school community and supporting the individual identity of each child?*
- *What can be the barriers to supporting the children's identity within the school?*
- *Can the ethos of the school be challenging? Are the expectations of parents an issue in your experience?*

Supporting Diversity within schools

10. Drawing on your experience and your responses, what should the role of schools be when creating a sense of community?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you feel that there is more generally that schools can do more to support inclusive classrooms?*
- *What do you think schools' role should be around creating inclusive school communities? Around supporting the identity of individual children?*
- *Do you think that the expectations of schools are too high? Should be higher?*

11. How could schools and teachers be supported in creating inclusive school communities in the context of greater diversity?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you think that school policy could have a role to play? If so how?*
- *Would greater parental involvement be helpful? If so how?*
- *At a broader national level would policy changes help? Do you think the curriculum could better support this?*

12. How could schools and teachers be helped in fostering individual identity within these contexts?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you think that school policy could have a role to play? If so how?*
- *Would greater parental involvement be helpful? If so how?*
- *At a broader national level would policy changes help? Do you think the curriculum could better support this?*

13. What do see as the broad barriers to schools fulfilling this role to the extent that they can?

Closing

- *Would you like to say anything more?*
- *Do you have any questions?*

Thank participant and invite him/her to contact researcher if he/she have any queries

Individual Interview Schedule for Teachers

This is a semi-structured interview schedule. Questions will not necessarily be asked in the order that they are presented. It is envisaged that participants may steer the conversation at times and many of the proposed items on the schedule for discussion may be indirectly approached in this way.

Introduction of Researcher

As you are aware, my name is Colm Ó Cadhain and I am currently engaging in a Doctoral study based on the experiences of teachers and principals in rural Stand-Alone Schools, and the way in which these schools negotiate diversity within their communities. Today, I would like to talk to you today about your own lived experience. I will ask questions but you are not obliged to answer questions. As you are aware from the initial consent form, with the exception of my Supervisor, no one will have access to this information and when reporting findings, a pseudonym or a fictional name will be used to protect your identity and to ensure confidentiality at all times.

Background information and school community

14. Can you tell me about your school community generally?

Prompts (if needed)

- *How many children in the school?*
- *Do all the children live nearby?*
- *Is there a close connection between the school and the community? How does this manifest itself?*

15. Can you tell me your position within the school community and the community more generally?

Prompts (if needed)

- *What is your role in the school?*
- *Do you live locally?*

16. How has the school population changed in recent years?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Tell me about the diversity within the school community generally.*
- *Tell me about the diversity of children from different religious and belief backgrounds. How many children in the school from diverse backgrounds?*

Responses to diversity within the school community

17. What do see have been the benefits of a more diverse community?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you see this as providing an opportunity to learn about one and other? What do you think that children can learn?*
- *Have children the opportunity to talk about their own backgrounds in the classroom? Can you talk to me about this experience?*

18. What do you think have been the key issues or challenges that have emerged as a result of this diversity?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Have particular topics or themes emerged in the classroom that are challenging? Can you describe your experience of particular instances?*
- *Can particular times of the year be challenging? Can you tell me about this? Why do you think that these can be difficult?*
- *Do you think that these have been challenging for children?*

19. How would you describe your responses at a classroom level to these issues or challenges?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Can you tell me why you responded to the challenges that arose in this way?*
- *Did you talk with the children? Did you talk with the parents?*
- *Did you talk with other teachers about this?*

20. What has helped support your responses to the challenges that have arisen around diversity?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you have school policies that have been useful in this regard? If so tell us about these?*
- *Have there been resources/parts of the curriculum/parts of the patron's programme that you have found helpful in dealing with issues? If so can you tell me how have you found these helpful?*

21. How do you feel that this has contributed (or not) to the creation of an inclusive school community?

Prompts (if needed)

- *How do feel that these responses have contributed to an inclusive school community?*
- *Have you had any feedback on these approaches?*

22. How do you think that this has supported the individuality or the individual identity of the children?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you feel that it's important that children's own identity is supported within the school?*
- *Do you think that there is a difficulty between promoting an inclusive school community and supporting the individual identity of each child?*
- *What can be the barriers to supporting the children's identity within the school?*
- *Can the ethos of the school be challenging? Are the expectations of parents an issue in your experience?*

Supporting Diversity within Schools

23. Drawing on your experience and your responses, what should the role of schools be when creating a sense of community?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you feel that there is more generally that schools can do more to support inclusive classrooms?*
- *What do you think schools' role should be around creating inclusive classroom? Around supporting the identity of individual children?*
- *Do you think that the expectations of schools are too high? Should be higher?*

24. How could schools and teachers be supported in creating inclusive school communities in the context of greater diversity?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you think that school policy could have a role to play? If so how?*
- *Would greater parental involvement be helpful? If so how?*
- *At a broader national level would policy changes help? Do you think the curriculum could better support this?*

25. How could schools and teachers be helped in fostering individual identity within these contexts?

Prompts (if needed)

- *Do you think that school policy could have a role to play? If so how?*
- *Would greater parental involvement be helpful? If so how?*
- *At a broader national level would policy changes help? Do you think the curriculum could better support this?*

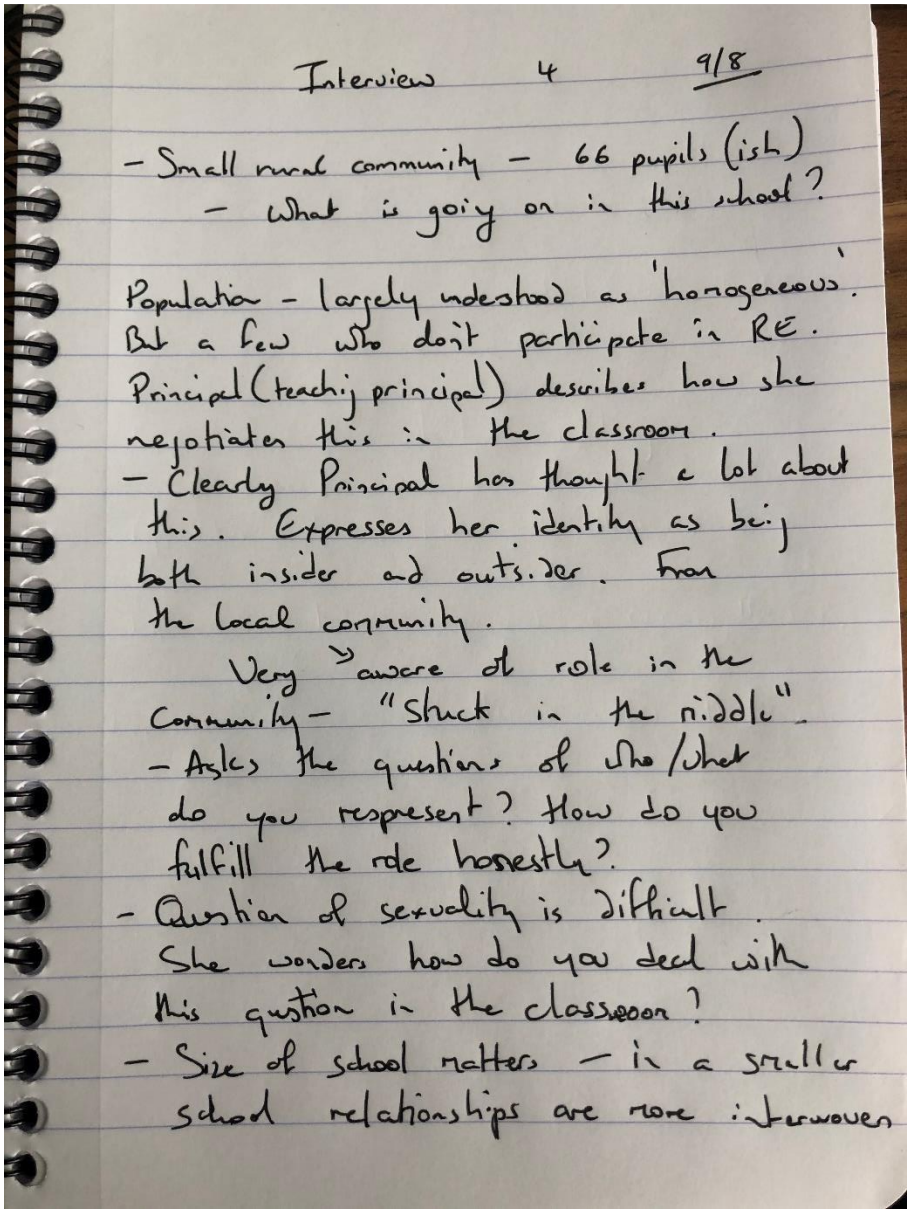
26. What do see as the broad barriers to schools fulfilling this role to the extent that they can?

Closing

- *Would you like to say anything more?*
- *Do you have any questions?*

Thank participant and invite him/her to contact researcher if he/she have any queries

Appendix E: Sample of extract from Researcher Fieldnotes



Interview 4 9/8

- Small rural community - 66 pupils (ish)
  - What is going on in this school?

Population - largely understood as 'homogeneous'. But a few who don't participate in RE. Principal (teaching principal) describes how she negotiates this in the classroom.
- Clearly Principal has thought a lot about this. Expresses her identity as being both insider and outsider. From the local community.

  Very aware of role in the community - "stuck in the middle".
- Asks the questions of who/what do you represent? How do you fulfill the role honestly?
- Question of sexuality is difficult. She wonders how do you deal with this question in the classroom?
- Size of school matters - in a smaller school relationships are more interwoven

Appendix F: Sample of Interview Extract

Preceding this extract the participant was telling the interviewer about herself, her previous experience and how long she has been in her current role.

Interviewer: You were just telling me a little bit about yourself…

Participant: Yeah. I'm here two years now, two years it will be coming up to two years in October. So, I would have come from _____, which is a DEIS school, but it was more in a big town, and that had its own problems you know. _____ is quite a busy spot. Now there is a lot of schools around it and children and parents do have more of a choice and you wouldn't think that because it was a girl's school and we had the boys up to first class and then they go onto the boys school, we were the girls after that – all girls only, but there's a lot of schools in the area outside – just outside of town like _____, term and other places, where you would notice that people who couldn't travel were coming to our school and who hadn't transport or cars. People who could there was an awful lot going out to the country schools would you believe.

Interviewer: And can I ask, why do you think, and you may not know but why do you think that was?

Participant: Well I suppose _____ itself is a tough little town now at the moment because the _____ has changed everything. There's an awful lot of the _____ . Now, there was a few of the town people who lived and wanted to keep it going, but there was this element of kind of going out to the country. Yeah, it was disappointing because we had a great school, fantastic staff, we were really well trained and we had you know good numbers, we had about one hundred and thirty children I must say, we had one hundred and thirty which for a town, I suppose, you know…

Interviewer: It's not bad.

Participant: Yeah, but there was still a few that were just kind of overlooking us and kind of going out [*to the country schools*].

Interviewer: Sorry I meant to say _____, do you mind if I just take notes just for myself?

Participant: Yeah. Of course.

So, when I came here, I just found it an awful difference from being in the middle of the town with the noise and the buzz and there was constant people coming and looking for PE practice and here then I just found this really quiet, you know it took a little bit of time to get used to, but now I love it.

Interviewer: What would have been the main differences that you noticed when you started?

Participant: The sound, the noise and I suppose, then I got used to that and then it was why isn't there someone coming to the door, why isn't there knocks at the door because I had (*sic*) constantly being called out of class because I was a teacher/principal in _____. So, that wasn't happening and I was able to stay with my class and have a full day and I mightn't be disturbed at all, you know.

Interviewer: Can I ask, why do you think that was, it is because it was a bigger school?

Participant: Bigger school, more issues, there was a lot of dealing with _____, you might have the odd parent that is just demanding to see me straight away. The secretary couldn't manage a lot of things and would have to come up to me to find out (what will I say about this/what will I say about that), and then you could have the odd behaviour thing where I'd have to deal with a child outside.

So, I was called out an awful lot even though I made it clear I don't know how many times – just leave me alone in the classroom until whatever breaktimes and I'll deal with it, but sometimes everyday really there was somebody coming to the door.

Interviewer: And that role of teacher/principal you know at the best of times there's a lot to doing it, it's a very demanding role, you're combining two roles really.

Participant: Yeah, one hundred per cent, and like if my children in the class are happy and they're learning then everything else kind of works out well, because I found at the beginning

when I became principal and I was really like, 'oh do they want me to run downstairs immediately', and I'd answer that call, you know. The phone had to be answered a certain way, it was probably just a salesman and I thought, why did I even do that? You know it was such a waste of time, but after my first four or five months in the role I said, 'okay that's it now', because I had to, I could see the kids get a bit restless or she won't be in, she's gone outside again and I felt there was a bit of control being lost with the classroom, so I said, that's it while I'm teacher/principal they're my number one, 'my class', and everything else is outside of that. So breaktimes and after school I would deal with admin stuff and meetings and things like that. So, I think once I put that out and I kind of said to the secretary, (look no, I'm not dealing with it, you have to tell them), you know, and things started to work a bit better. I could see the children were happier, I was happier, I love (*sic*) and sure that's what I'm a teacher number one and then everyone kind of got used to that, the parents would have got used to that as well. But still you'd have the odd – you would have (*incidence or interruption*), every day.

Interviewer: It's just the nature of the school life, things come up unexpectedly

Participant: and it has to be dealt wit

Interviewer: yeah, and sometimes there is nothing you can do.

Participant: No, but here it's got different.

Interviewer: Well tell us about this community here?

Participant: Yeah, so this is like a very local community, like it's very local – everybody knows everybody. So, another thing that I would have noticed, you know, like the parents are more like you would tell one parent something and it would be where everyone would have it the following day or even an hour even at the end of school.

So, if I talk to someone at eleven o'clock by the end of the day all the parents would know if it was something that had to be, and I mightn't have got a chance to write a note or whatever. So,

things fly around quickly, they're very…, they would ring people about other things, 'what did Sean get for homework?', if he forgot to bring home his journal, so they're really in touch. So, you have to be aware of that, but that's not a bad thing either.

They're very involved, they are really… I don't want to say they're babied but the parents here in this community are very involved, they want to know everything they are doing, they have a say – not a negative but a good say in everything they're doing, you know? They want to know, why are they doing that? Not like being nosey but they just want to help to do the work, so I know what I'm doing, so I know what I'm doing at home.

Interviewer: Would you find that different to let's say your experience before?

Participant: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: Yeah, I suppose maybe they trusted me, but I was there like eleven years at that school and at the end the only time I might meet parents was I suppose at a parent/teacher meeting, and then they might say, 'why are they doing that again?' and 'why are they doing that novel?' So, they kind of trust me to get on like she knows what she's doing from reputation or whatever in years or I suppose they didn't know me here as much and maybe they were like… and now to be honest that was [*the*] first year to be honest, second year now I haven't had many like they know what I'm at and they know that I mean the best for the kids and that I'm doing my best, you know, and that I'm pushing them to their ability and what they're able for and that I'm, you know, more open.

They would have said that, that the previous principal might not have been as open, but I kind of just tell them, I tell the kids straight out if I'm going to be off a day and I tell them why – I'd say I'm on a course tomorrow and I won't be here but you're going to have a teacher here, you know, this is _____ or whatever and he's going to be here tomorrow while I'm off on the course.

So, I tell them and then they tell the parents and then I don't have to answer – where are you going? Or anything like that.

Interviewer: There's no questions coming back

Participant: No.

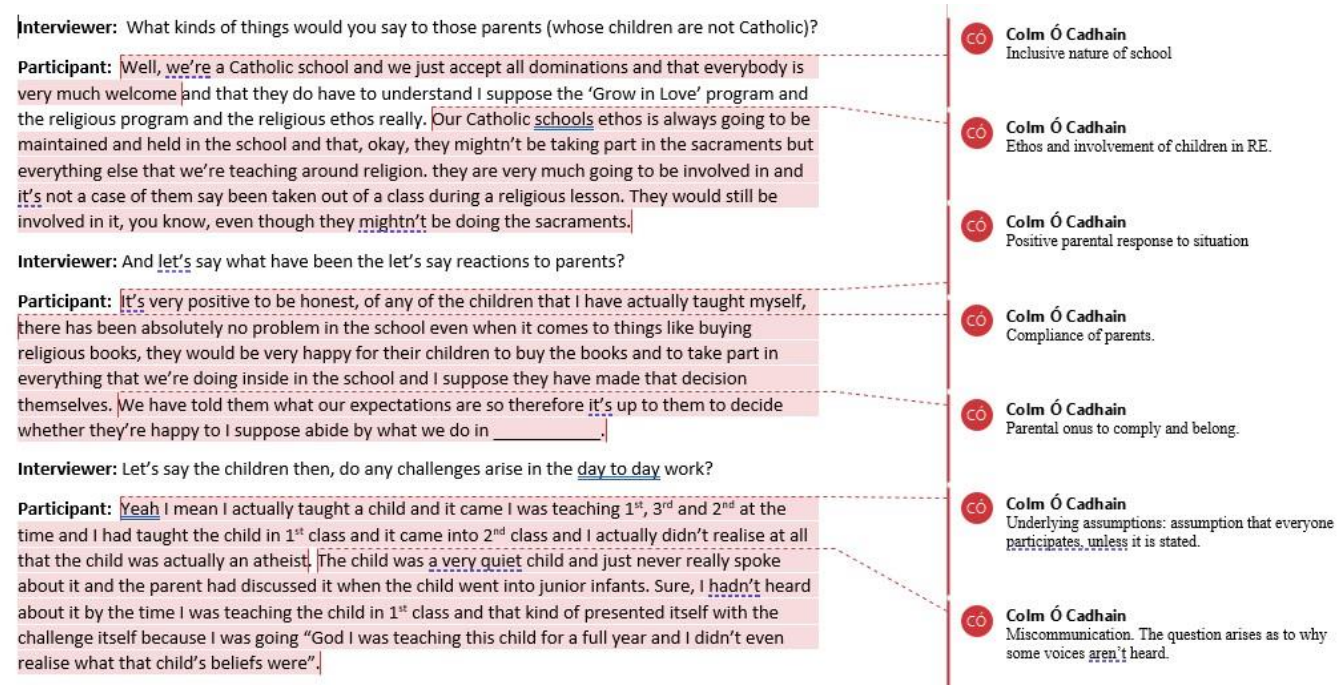
Interviewer: You've probably, you're touching on it there I think to some extent but something around the links between the school and the community. How would you describe it?

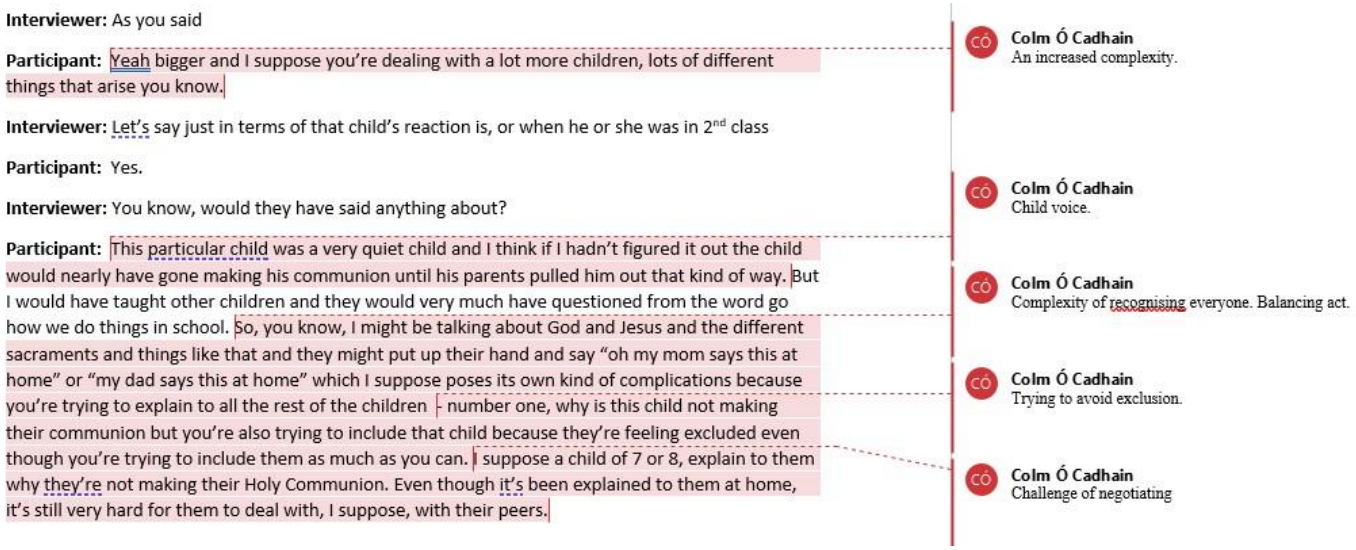
Participant: Very tight here. The community would say and the parents that they're fighting to keep, they want to keep, this school open and there's always a fear when the numbers go down that it will close, but they were in my first few meetings where– we don't want to have that happen, we want to have this school as long, even if there's ten pupils in it, we want to have this school as long open because you never know what will happen down the road. A lot of the kids who go to school here, their parents went to school here and their grandparents went to school here. So, that's how close it is. So, we had grandparents day last year and the grandparents came in and they had nine and some had too good memories of it to be honest because of the time that the teacher years and years ago, there was a very strict teacher I think and lots of them would have bad memories of it, but the parents would have had better memories and the kids anyone with older siblings have better memories. So, they still really want and like they're very strong and they're very supportive as a group and as parents they really, really are, you know.

Interviewer: So, for them the school is kind of a central piece of their community.

Participant: You can see it yourself like this is the crossroads here, just the little t, this is the school and the church is up the road and there's nothing else, and you know they're very important to them.

Appendix G: Initial Noting





Appendix H: Emergent Themes: Colour-coding for connections

Well, we're a Catholic school and we just accept all denominations and that everybody is very much welcome and that they do have to understand I suppose the 'Grow in Love' program and the religious program and the religious ethos really. Our Catholic schools ethos is always going to be maintained and held in the school and that, okay, they mightn't be taking part in the sacraments but everything else that we're teaching around religion. they are very much going to be involved in and it's not a case of them say been taken out of a class during a religious lesson. They would still be involved in it, you know, even though they mightn't be doing the sacraments.

It's very positive to be honest, of any of the children that I have actually taught myself, there has been absolutely no problem in the school even when it comes to things like buying religious books, they would be very happy for their children to buy the books and to take part in everything that we're doing inside in the school and I suppose they have made that decision themselves.

We have told them what our expectations are so therefore it's up to them to decide whether they're happy to I suppose abide by what we do in _____.

Yeah I mean I actually taught a child and it came I was teaching 1st, 3rd and 2nd at the time and I had taught the child in 1st class and it came into 2nd class and I actually didn't realise at all that the child was actually an atheist. The child was a very quiet child and just never really spoke about it and the parent had discussed it when the child went into junior infants. Sure, I hadn't heard about it by the time I was teaching the child in 1st class and that kind of presented itself with the challenge itself because I was going "God I was teaching this child for a full year and I didn't even realise what that child's beliefs were." The mother came in at the start of 2nd class and she just asked me what was going to happen this year because the children obviously were going to be making their communion and was I aware that this particular child wouldn't be making their (*communion)* and she presumed that I was aware of it because she had spoken to the junior infant teacher. But because, again, the school was getting bigger it just bypassed me and it didn't make its way to me. So she just approached the school and I actually was very honest and said I didn't even realise that that was the case, you know, the child had never said it to me and I suppose that is a challenge in itself because I suppose you feel like you've kind of let the child down or you've let the family down because you didn't know, you know. But I suppose had the school been even smaller I would have heard but as the school is growing bigger you know you miss things. You don't know everything as in when I started in _____, like that because it was so small I knew all the children, I knew so much about them. Whereas now because the school has gotten so much bigger children will come to _____ and leave _____ and I probably wouldn't even know them at all, you know.

Yeah, bigger and I suppose you're dealing with a lot more children, lots of different things that arise you know.

This particular child was a very quiet child and I think if I hadn't figured it out the child would nearly have gone making his communion until his parents pulled him out that kind of way. But I would have taught other children and they would very much have questioned from the word go how we do things in school. So, you know, I might be talking about God and Jesus and the different sacraments and things like that and they might put up their hand and say "oh my mom says this at home" or "my dad says this at home" which I suppose poses its own kind of complications because you're trying to explain to all the rest of the children - number one, why is this child not making their communion but you're also trying to include that child because they're feeling excluded even though you're trying to

include them as much as you can. I suppose a child of 7 or 8, explain to them why they're not making their Holy Communion. Even though it's been explained to them at home, it's still very hard for them to deal with, I suppose, with their peers.

Appendix I: Connections across themes

	A	B	C	D
1	Community	School Choice	Pupil identity and diversity	Challenges and Tension
2	So, I'm a newly appointed princ	I think they're going to increase hug	So, we've a very very kind of modulus kinc	I suppose the fact that they're non-religious
3	I moved from a bigger school;	Yeah, we have to. There's no choic	So, in the school I taught in previously, we	So, it's a harder one to.... I find it more challe
4	Yeah, generally most of the lar	Well maybe if the parents and again	It's a lot more diluted as they say in their in	Yeah, the parents all in all, I'd say the familie
5	But I suppose I've really felt it in	the move back to here because in	Now, somewhat when I was in the school p	But at that point the teacher in her own expe
6	I think it's because it's a smaller	school. You know, you are pooling	They didn't like attention to be drawn to th	Not really, but I can see it's becoming more
7	Now, when it came to the com	munion, they went away on holidays	I left it at that very very discreet and was cc	Then I came back to the school and the new
8	So, it's so hard to break away f	rom that in a smaller school. You w	I felt so the younger two in fourth class it w	: Yeah, well we did the 'stay safe' this year sc
9	They didn't like the expectation	to have to go to mass once a mon	And I say the fourth-class kids are really nc	Now, somewhat when I was in the school pr
				It does when and that's where I'm saying
				it's harder now because they're not doing
				something else. They're not doing a
10	Are we actually inclusive like?	That's the one bottom line basically.	Yeah, the definitely do. I suppose we would	different programme, they're not doing any
11	There's nowhere to hide in a rur	al school or that or even the fact th	They're kind of starting to question things	So, it's kind of saying, well why do we have t
12	Exactly! People know if you're	married or not married, have kids or	You can even see them talking about like a	Yeah, I had a few questions this year now to,
13			Yeah, exactly, exactly! And they're proud of	Like, when are we going to transition away fr
14			I suppose I always felt that I was between ty	I think the parents grew in confidence to be a
15			Music is huge here like massive, you know	So, it's so hard to break away from that in a
16			It's going to have to, it's going to have to	definitely because you're going to and I'm jus
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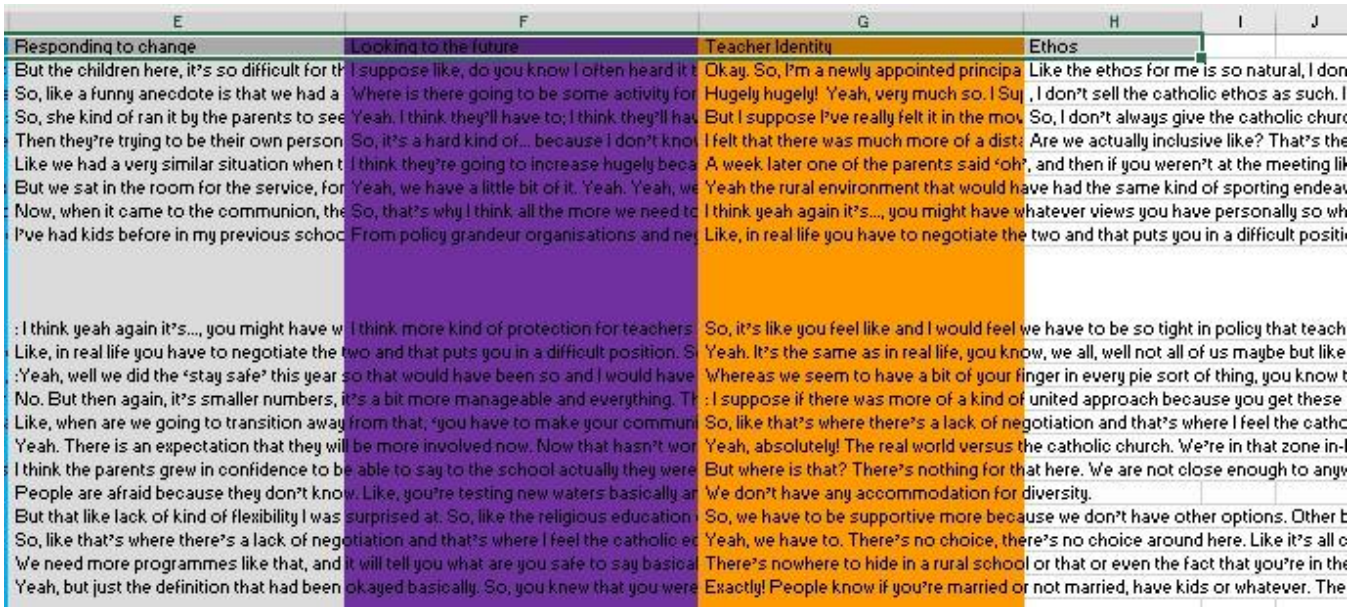

	E	F	G	H	I	J
	Responding to change	Looking to the future	Teacher Identity	Ethos		
	But the children here, it's so difficult for th	I suppose like, do you know I often heard it t	Okay. So, I'm a newly appointed principa	Like the ethos for me is so natural, I don		
	So, like a funny anecdote is that we had a	Where is there going to be some activity for	Hugely hugely! Yeah, very much so. I Sup	, I don't sell the catholic ethos as such. I		
	So, she kind of ran it by the parents to see	Yeah. I think they'll have to; I think they'll hav	But I suppose I've really felt it in the mov	So, I don't always give the catholic churc		
	Then they're trying to be their own person	So, it's a hard kind of... because I don't knov	I felt that there was much more of a dista	Are we actually inclusive like? That's the		
	Like we had a very similar situation when t	I think they're going to increase hugely beca	A week later one of the parents said 'oh',	and then if you weren't at the meeting lik		
	But we sat in the room for the service, for	Yeah, we have a little bit of it. Yeah. Yeah, we	Yeah the rural environment that would have	had the same kind of sporting endeav		
	Now, when it came to the communion, the	So, that's why I think all the more we need to	I think yeah again it's..., you might have	whatever views you have personally so wh		
	I've had kids before in my previous schoc	From policy grandeur organisations and ne	Like, in real life you have to negotiate the	two and that puts you in a difficult positi		
	: I think yeah again it's..., you might have w	I think more kind of protection for teachers	So, it's like you feel like and I would feel	we have to be so tight in policy that teach		
	Like, in real life you have to negotiate the	two and that puts you in a difficult position. S	Yeah. It's the same as in real life, you know,	we all, well not all of us maybe but like		
	:Yeah, well we did the 'stay safe' this year	so that would have been so and I would have	Whereas we seem to have a bit of your finger	in every pie sort of thing, you know t		
	No. But then again, it's smaller numbers, i	t's a bit more manageable and everything. Th	: I suppose if there was more of a kind of	united approach because you get these		
	Like, when are we going to transition away	from that, 'you have to make your communi	So, like that's where there's a lack of negotiation	and that's where I feel the catho		
	Yeah. There is an expectation that they will	be more involved now. Now that hasn't wor	Yeah, absolutely! The real world versus the	catholic church. We're in that zone in-l		
	I think the parents grew in confidence to be	able to say to the school actually they were	But where is that? There's nothing for that	here. We are not close enough to anyv		
	People are afraid because they don't know	. Like, you're testing new waters basically ar	We don't have any accommodation for	diversity.		
	But that like lack of kind of flexibility I was	surprised at. So, like the religious education	So, we have to be supportive more becau	se we don't have other options. Other b		
	So, like that's where there's a lack of negot	iation and that's where I feel the catholic ed	Yeah, we have to. There's no choice, there's	no choice around here. Like it's all c		
	We need more programmes like that, and it	will tell you what are you safe to say basica	There's nowhere to hide in a rural school	or that or even the fact that you're in the		
	Yeah, but just the definition that had been	okayed basically. So, you knew that you were	Exactly! People know if you're married or	not married, have kids or whatever. The		

Appendix J: Refining themes

Version 1

1. Community

2. School choice
3. Pupil identity and diversity
4. Challenges and tension
5. Responding to change
6. Looking to the future
7. Teacher identity
8. Ethos
9. Identity: other challenges

Version 2

1. School-community eco-system
2. Expressions of plural identities
3. Ethos
4. Points of challenge: inclusion, isolation and irrelevance
5. Negotiation and dialogue
6. Choice as a response to complexity
7. Teacher Identity
8. Looking to the future
9. Identity: other challenges

Version 3

1. Community and identity/community: continuity and change
2. Identity and challenge
3. Negotiation and dialogue

4. Looking ahead: Where to from here?

Appendix K: Final themes and sub-themes

Themes	**Sub-themes**

5. School Community in a time of change	• Connection between school and local community • School and church • Sense of place • Diversity and change
6. Teacher Identity: Negotiating from the middle	• The role of the teacher/principal in small communities • Teacher/Principal Identity: Ambiguity and Uncertainty
7. Diversity and identity	• Articulating and Integrating Difference • 'Locals' and 'Blow-ins': shifting identities • Individuation and Choice
8. Communication and negotiation: 'Being' and 'Becoming'	• Communicating about children • Communicating with children • School identity: Being and Becoming

Appendix L: A Typology of Phenomenological Methodologies

Table 5: *A Typology of Phenomenological Methodologies: Taken from Gill (2014, 122)*

Table 1. A Typology of Phenomenological Methodologies.

	Phenomenology					
	Descriptive phenomenology (Husserlian)			Interpretive phenomenology (Heideggerian)		
	Sanders's phenomenology	Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method	van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology	Benner's interpretive phenomenology	Smith's interpretative phenomenological analysis
Disciplinary origin	Organization studies	Psychology	Pedagogy	Nursing	Psychology
Methodology as	Technique	Scientific method	Poetry	Practice	Craft
Aims	To make explicit the implicit structure (or essences) and meaning of human experiences	To establish the essence of a particular phenomenon	To transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence	To articulate practical, everyday understandings and knowledge	To explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world
Participants (sampling)	3-6	At least 3	*Unspecified*	Until new informants reveal no new findings	1 or more
Key concepts	• Bracketing (epoché) • Eidetic reduction • Nomematic/noetic correlates	• Bracketing (epoché) • Eidetic reduction • Imaginative variation • Meaning units	• Depthful writing • Orientation • Thoughtfulness	• The background • Exemplars • Interpretive teams • Paradigm cases	• Double hermeneutic • Idiographic • Inductive
Applications in organization studies	Kram and Isabella (1985)	McClure and Brown (2008)	Gibson (2004)	Yakhlef and Essén (2012)	Murtagh, Lopes, and Lyons (2011)