



How school ethos influences the integration of newly arrived migrant students into second level schools in Ireland and Malta

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ABSTRACT

This is the first empirical study to explore how ethos influences the integration of Newly Arrived Migrant Students (NAMS) into second level schools in the Republic of Ireland and Malta.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with school leaders, teachers, and parents, the article focuses on the role of ethos in the school-led integration practices in two schools - one in Ireland and the other in Malta. Although both are schools with a denominational ethos, the two units of study are located at either end of the European Union, with very different profiles and contexts. Findings suggest that, although expressed differently depending on local circumstances and traditions, for both schools, their ethos is a primary factor in their approach to integrating NAMS.

While the study is carried out in Ireland and Malta, it is also of interest to other jurisdictions where schools are faced with increasing numbers of NAMS and growing diversity amongst their student populations.

1. Introduction

Both the Republic of Ireland (henceforth, Ireland) and Malta have experienced significant inward migration in recent years. The sharp and sustained growth of immigration to Ireland dates from the late 1990s (Office for, 2019, p.12). Unlike in most other European countries where the number of second-generation immigrants is significant, many non-Irish nationals in Ireland are first generation (McGinnity et al.). Malta too has experienced a net migration increase during the last decade - one of the highest in the EU (Meehan et al., 2021).

Schools have a key role in the integration of migrant students. Addressing the needs of a newly culturally and linguistically diverse student body is not only challenging; approaches taken can vary across schools, resulting in different experiences for the students (Faas et al., 2015). Despite the influence of top level policies (Meehan et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Izquierdo & Darmody, 2019), local approaches are shaped in part by context (Morgan & Volante, 2016; Nordin, 2014), and ethos influences local school context. School ethos plays a central role in the development of positive multicultural school environments (Faas et al., 2015; Norman, 2003). However, how the ethos of a school underpins approaches to the integration of Newly Arrived Migrant Students (NAMS) remains unexplored. In addition, relatively little is known about

how school ethos underpinning practice can vary between countries 'new' to receiving migrants. To address this gap, the current article focuses on how ethos influences school-level approaches to providing support to young migrants in two countries that have in recent years experienced a significant influx of migrants - Ireland and Malta.

This paper emerges from the work of Transnational Collaboration on Bullying, Migration and Integration at School Level (TRIBES), a project focused on migrant experiences of school bullying across the European continent (O'Higgins Norman, 2020). TRIBES is a European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) action, with six working groups involving 33 European countries. Malta and Ireland are part of a working group focusing on the policies and practices 'put in place for schools to deal with . . . integration of immigrant pupils' (TRIBES, 2021). During the data gathering and analysis stages, researchers noted that two schools in two different countries (Malta and Ireland) cited ethos as a significant influence on their approach to integrating migrant students. Further, these were the only schools which claimed a denominational ethos. This paper builds on primary data collected as part of the TRIBES project in an attempt to explore this preliminary result further. The primary context of the research is the publicly funded second level school with a denominational (Catholic) ethos. The concepts of ethos, and in particular Catholic ethos, are explored in the conceptual

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framework below.

Building on previous studies of academic and social support measures available in Irish and Maltese secondary schools (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2014, 2019; Faas et al., 2015; Smyth et al., 2009, Rodríguez-Izquierdo & Darmody, 2019), this paper extends the field to include the influence of school ethos on integration supports outside those governed by top level policy. Local, school-led approaches are the focus, and how these are influenced by school ethos. It does not examine for instance government-led policies around language and academic support (European Commission, 2013), which should be visible in every school with NAMS, regardless of ethos. Rather, implementation of such policies is a next step in the wider TRIBES project.

It is not the aim of this paper to compare and contrast policies or education systems between Ireland and Malta (ie their relative strengths and/or weaknesses). Our aim is to analyse the influence of ethos (Catholic) on the integration of NAMS across two EU countries, thus providing a dual site snapshot in time of the sorts of migration issues facing schools in different countries and approaches to resolving these issues. Our study should therefore be considered an exploratory contribution to research on school ethos and migration education practices. While the study spans two European countries, the findings are likely to be of interest to providers in other countries in their quest to receive NAMS successfully. They might also be of interest to patrons and leaders charged with guiding schools to live ethos authentically.

By newly arrived migrant students (NAMS), we mean 'first generation migrant children and young people who, as they enter the formal education system of the host country, may qualify for additional support measures to assist their integration into schools (e.g. preparatory classes, additional classes in the language of schooling)' (Eurydice, 2019, p.169). Students in compulsory second level education are the focus of this study. In both Ireland and Malta, education is compulsory for all children between the ages of five/six and sixteen. It is for the most part free of charge, although private options exist in both jurisdictions (see Table 1). In both, NAMS have largely the same rights to education as native children throughout compulsory second level education (Eurydice, 2019).

The structure of the paper is as follows:

- (a) First, it sets out an overview of the educational systems and top level supports available to NAMS in second level schools in Ireland and Malta.
- (b) Next, it provides a conceptual framework for Catholic school ethos in relation to integration of NAMS with reference to Catholic social teaching.
- (c) To conclude, we discuss our findings and highlight points of significance. In short, although expressed differently depending on local circumstances and traditions, for both schools. Catholic ethos is a primary factor in their approach to integrating NAMS.

1.1. Overview of the second level school sectors and supports available to NAMS

There are a number of similarities and differences in second level provision in the education systems of Ireland and Malta, as outlined in Table 1.

In both Ireland and Malta, second level education terminates with a high stakes examination, (the Leaving Certificate and the MATSEC¹ respectively), the results of which bear significant influence on entry to university and other third level sectors. NAMS in Ireland and Malta are normally placed in a class with children the same age. Neither country applies school quotas for migrant students: children usually attend

schools in their neighbourhood/ catchment area. In both countries the state provides significant financial support to church run schools, for instance in the payment of teacher salaries and by providing a common curriculum framework.

1.2. Overview of top level school support available for NAMS

Ireland's Migration Integration Strategy which includes a broad intercultural strategy to support integration is 'well integrated into the curricula' (European Commission, 2013, p. 8). In Malta, 'Diversity' is an underlying principle of the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2012). This principle is expected to be reflected in the schools' development plans and all subject teaching, since it is also one of the cross-curricular themes within the national curriculum.

Language support to engage migrant students in learning the language of the host country is a primary target in both countries. Additional language support is provided for students who do not speak English as their first language. The language support is provided directly within mainstream schooling and also through additional language support. These supports are designed to allow individual students to participate in mainstream education on a par with their peers.

Apart from induction programmes, NAMS generally feed into already existing academic support structures for all disadvantaged students rather than receiving targeted support. This is in line with EU recommendations that 'comprehensive educational support systems addressing all kinds of individual needs contribute to the development of more inclusive education systems for NAMS in the long-run than those focusing on the targeted measures for NAMS' (European Commission, 2013, p. 5). Through the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, Irish schools offer additional support measures to disadvantaged students, including pastoral care and class tutor systems (Faas et al., 2015, p.462). A government grant (School Books Funding) is available to schools to help with the cost of textbooks. Most schools use the fund to operate a book rental scheme for a nominal fee (Citizens Information Board, 2020). In Malta all text books are provided for free to all students attending state but not Catholic schools. Likewise, students with disadvantaged economic backgrounds are provided school lunches, uniforms and other material support through a centralised scheme (Migrants Learners, 2020). Psycho-social services are offered to all students who require them.

Parents of NAMS are provided information on the education system and the progress of their children through the channels that are available to all parents including; school internet platforms, homepages, e-mail communication, information circulars, individual reports and parents' days (Meehan et al., 2021). In both jurisdictions, communication is generally in English.

Notwithstanding the differences between the two countries, their operational dimensions are similar at least where top-level supports for NAMS is concerned. Thus our focus is on local practice.

2. Conceptual framework

The Catholic church, with its long history of social teaching which advocates for inclusion and integration, especially of those most in need, is a significant provider of second level education in both Ireland and Malta. This article explores the extent to which the resulting ethos influences attitudes and practices to integration of NAMS in Catholic schools in these two countries. It draws upon the concept of ethos, specifically Catholic school ethos, to explore the approaches adopted in this regard. Generally, ethos is considered as either the formal values, beliefs and practices that emanate from a mission statement, or the informal atmosphere arising from everyday elements within a school (Faas et al., 2018), such as the "use of images and symbols, as well as the goals and expectations" (Norman, 2003, p. 2). In a Catholic school, such formal and informal aspects should emanate from that faith tradition. In

¹ MATSEC – Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations - <https://www.um.edu.mt/matsec>

Table 1
Second level education provision overview: Ireland and Malta.

Country	Cost	Duration of secondary education	Second level Providers	Official Language of Education
Ireland (Republic of)	Free and universal (although a very small number of fee-charging schools exist)	5 or 6 years (depending on the uptake of an optional Transition Year between the 3 year Junior Cycle and 2 year Senior Cycle)	A mix of voluntary, including Catholic (c.50%) and state (c.50%) ¹	Bilingual – English and Irish (Gaelic). Both are compulsory although exemptions from learning Irish may apply, particularly to NAMS
Malta	Free for EU, EEA & Swiss citizens. Non-EU citizens in possession of a single work permit may apply for exemption of fees	5 years	State (c.60%), Catholic Church (c.27%) and independent sector (c.13%) ²	Bilingual – Maltese and English. Both are compulsory

¹ For further details, see [Meehan & Laffan \(2021\)](#).

² Compiled from data published by the National Statistics Office in 2021.

this paper, Catholic school ethos refers to a school culture rooted in Catholic understandings, values and relationships, and how that culture is expressed in a contemporary context (cf. [O’Connell et al., 2021](#)).

[Manchester & Bragg \(2013\)](#) state that a school often has a distinctive ethos that is influenced by the founding intention developing over time to form an identity that makes that school unique. However, although every school has a unique ethos depending on its own history and context, there are many aspects of ethos that Catholic schools should hold in common. One central aspect of these is the welcoming and inclusion of NAMS, as detailed in the following section.

[Johnson \(2003\)](#) proposes that schools which follow a “pluralistic ethos” are more equitable, purposeful and culturally responsive. A culturally responsive ethos can help to develop common understandings amongst students and staff ([Gay, 2002](#)), as well as an environment that responds to the needs of students ([Khalifa et al., 2016](#)). On the other hand, Catholic social thought teaches that Catholic schools should be responsive, welcoming communities, inclusive of all, especially those who are most in need.

2.1. Catholic social teaching

Catholic social teaching refers to the social message of Catholicism and the history of how that message has been articulated. In recent times, Pope Francis (henceforth, Francis), both through action and word, has been at the forefront of developing Catholic social teaching on care for migrants. Francis’ first pastoral visit outside Rome after his election in March 2013 was to the tiny island of Lampedusa, one of the nearest gateways to Europe for Africans fleeing poverty and conflict. There he highlighted the plight of refugees worldwide. This has been a central concern of his papacy, articulated clearly in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (2020).

Although articulated in a contemporary way for the realities of today, *Fratelli Tutti* draws on the tradition of Catholic social teaching. Care for the vulnerable and hospitality towards the stranger, is an ancient and recurring theme in Catholicism, stretching back to the oldest biblical texts. The Book of Exodus exhorts ‘you shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (Ex 22:21). The Christian Scriptures amplify this imperative: ‘For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”’ (Gal 5:14). These words of Jesus compel people to recognise Christ himself in all people, especially the abandoned or excluded (cf. Mt 25:40.45).

A central tenet of the judeo-christian tradition is that everyone is created in the image and likeness of God. ‘Since everyone is made in the image of God, then we need to recognize, honour, and respect the image of God in everyone. No exceptions’ ([Rohr, 2018](#), p.71–72). For Francis, this is central to being Catholic: ‘When hearts are open, sensitive to the difficulties of others, ‘they are capable of identifying with others without worrying about where they were born or come from’ ([Francis, 2020](#), #84). In the process, we come to experience others as part of the human family.

By acknowledging the dignity of each human person, Francis

believes humanity can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to a single family: ‘Let us dream, then, as a single human family . . . as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice’ ([Francis, 2020](#), #8). Building inclusive community then, is a central theme in Catholicism and should be a key characteristic of Catholic schools (cf. [Groome, 1998](#)). A corresponding theme is the call to serve others, above all those who are victims of poverty and injustice of any kind ([Irish Catholic Bishops Conference, 2008](#)). ‘Far from being segregated, exclusionary spaces, Catholic schools stretch outward with a common goal of creating a better world for everyone’ [Council for Catholic Maintained Schools \(CCMS\) and Catholic Schools’ Trustee Service \(CCTS\), 2022](#)). The responsibility to migrants is clear and essential for schools which claim a Catholic ethos.

Catholic schools can help realise this vision by creating what Francis terms a ‘culture of encounter’ that is rooted in the dignity of all people, who share a common humanity ([2013](#), #21). A true ‘encounter’ is not just with people who think alike, but with those from outside one’s own circle, with those who are different ([Francis, 2020](#), #85, #90, #147). The presence of different cultures in schools is a source of mutual enrichment for everyone. His development of Catholic social teaching in this regards amounts to a call to cultural responsiveness, not just as a way to meet the needs of students, but as a source of human transformation.

In short, Catholic social teaching, from its genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures to its most recent articulation, reminds Catholic schools of their role as warmly inclusive communities that enable all to flourish, and their responsibility to integrate and promote people from all cultures, particularly those who are most in need. Of course this is not exclusive to Catholic thought. For instance, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes ‘When we move from the politics of ‘Me’ to the politics of ‘Us’, we rediscover those life-transforming, counterintuitive truths . . . that a nation is strong when it cares for the weak, that it becomes rich when it cares for the poor, that it becomes invulnerable when it cares about the vulnerable’ ([Sacks, 2020](#), p.21). Inclusion and care as ideas and ways of living are integral to other faith traditions and worldviews, and to many systems of education. It is not the objective of this paper to compare or contrast denominational schools in this respect. The specific aim here is to investigate if and how the case study schools fulfil this mandate.

3. Materials and methods

This is the first cross-national study to explore the role of school ethos in the integration of NAMS. The study adopts a case study methodology (in this case, dual-site), as this allows one to focus on an in-depth exploration of the actual case ([Creswell & Poth, 2013](#)). St Anne’s Secondary School in Ireland (henceforth St Anne’s) and St John’s Catholic College² in Malta (henceforth St John’s) form the dual sites. Both schools were set up by Catholic religious orders with the intention

² Both pseudonyms

of providing education in that tradition. However, the religious orders differ slightly in founding charism (see below). Other differences are mainly to do with context.

St John's is open to children of all religions, and is oversubscribed. In 2022, as in previous years, the demand for Catholic schools in Malta saw more than twice as many applications as places available (Archdiocese of Malta, 2021). The population of the secondary section of St John's is about 500 students. Admission to the school follows the Regulations of the Secretariat for Catholic Education (Archdiocese of Malta, 2022), where vacant places in the schools are filled in by a centralised ballot system. Any child who wants to attend a Catholic school can apply. Those who are drawn first in the public ballot have first preference regarding which Catholic school on the island to attend. This system ensures that every applicant from any walk of life has the possibility to attend a Catholic school, despite demand exceeding capacity. In practice, however, the popularity of Catholic schools amongst the middle classes means that St John's caters largely for this demographic. The mission of the school is to follow the teachings of the founding religious order: to foster men and women compassionate for others, committed to persons in need. The NAMS attending this school, about 2% of the population, are from Eritrea, Libya, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Ethiopia.

St Anne's is a public school with a Catholic ethos in the tradition of the Presentation Sisters, now part of a lay Catholic trust. This vowed faith community was founded in Ireland by Nano Nagle (1718–1784) to minister to the impoverished Catholic population, living at the time under harsh anti-Catholic laws. By the time of her death, Nano had opened seven schools for poverty-stricken children across Cork city, and founded the Presentation Order, who today continue her education and social justice and inclusion work (Nano Nagle Place, 2021). Located in the heart of an urban area, St Anne's, like St John's, is open to all religions. The student population (all girls) is approximately 300. Like 99% of second level schools in Ireland, it is non-fee-paying. By and large it caters for students of a low socio-economic index, with higher than average ethnic and religious diversity. From less than 1% in 2005, the proportion of immigrant students now stands at 40%. This school has DEIS³ status, meaning it is recognised and supported in caring for an educationally and economically disadvantaged population. With a mission statement which includes welcoming students in the tradition of the Presentation Order, St Anne's hosts students from many different countries of origin including Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Poland, Lithuania, Brazil and Ukraine. Some of the school literature is translated into 15 languages.

The data are drawn from six in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between the two schools. Interviews lasting approximately sixty minutes were held with a school leader (principal/headteacher or assistant headteacher), subject teacher who works with NAMS/NAMS coordinator, and a NAMS parent in each school (Table 2). These in-depth interviews explored practices to integrate NAMS at school level and the rationale behind these practices. Interviews with the school leaders and teachers were held in English/Irish/Maltese in the respective country, according to the preference of the interviewee.⁴ As the parent participants were sufficiently proficient in English to participate fully, these interviews were held in English. Full ethical approval was obtained from both Dublin City University and University of Malta Research Ethics Committees.

We chose the schools by means of purposive sampling: second level schools with recent experience of NAMS and their families. Interview data were subjected to a process of inductive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Guest et al., 2013). The researchers independently identified the main codes from the set of interviews from the respective

³ DEIS - Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: an initiative of the Irish government to recognise and support schools serving disadvantaged populations (see Introduction).

⁴ English is an official language in both Ireland and Malta

Table 2
Participant profiles.

	St Anne's Secondary School (Ireland)	Anonymised designations (Ireland)	St John's Catholic College (Malta)	Anonymised designations (Malta)
Leader	Irish, Catholic	IL	Maltese, Catholic	ML
Teacher	Non- Irish, Non- Catholic* ⁷	IT	Maltese, Catholic	MT
Parent	Non-Irish, Hindu	IP	Non- Maltese, Muslim	MP

⁷ This participant did not identify her faith tradition, but mentioned during the course of the interview that she was non-Catholic. All other participants volunteered their faith tradition during interviews.

case-studies, and then triangulated their findings to identify three broad themes (see results below).

The study is limited by sample size. With a sample of just six, research results cannot be generalised to a larger population (Flick, 2011). However, it is not our aim to offer generalisations. Indeed, Labaree (2004) proposes that educational research should not be deemed as generalisable as there are too many circumstantial variables constructing the findings. Rather, this is an exploratory study which seeks to explore a particular issue (in this case, how Catholic school ethos influences integration of NAMS) in an attempt to identify where further research might be focused. Another possible limitation is the profile of parent participants, both of whom had a degree of involvement with the school and sufficient levels of English to participate. Parents of NAMS do not always share this profile. We dealt with this by probing and critically analysing their responses, and by triangulating all responses within and between each set of interviews.

4. Results

The results indicate that, although operating in different contexts, the integration strategies and practices adopted by the two schools are inspired by their founding religious orders, which contribute to their particular expressions of ethos.

Contextual differences are clear. To begin, the profiles show a marked difference in the proportion of NAMS in the school populations. Whereas the proportion of migrant students at St. Anne's is 40%, at St. John's it is limited to barely 2%. Second, St. Anne's caters largely for students of low socio-economic backgrounds. On the other hand, although St John's is regulated by Malta's ballot system for choosing schools, the popularity of Catholic schools amongst middle class families means it caters largely for that demographic. Further, unlike St John's where experience of NAMS is both recent and limited, St Anne's demonstrates a twenty-year history and quite a mix of ethnicities and religions amongst the student population, with many Islamic students. Another difference reflects the profile of the migrants themselves. NAMS at St. Anne's are often the children of economic migrants who settled in Ireland by choice, whereas at St. John's they are refugees who have been forced, sometimes under dire circumstances, to leave their native countries.

On face value, the two contexts (40% economic migrants vs. 2% refugees) may seem incomparable. The two schools are serving different communities in different contexts, and the practices they adopt to address the needs of their NAMS reflect these differences. However, both are inspired by their ethos to be inclusive schools, albeit in their own ways. The overarching approaches in this regard are: (1) establishing a culture of inclusion, (2) fostering a caring community, (3) encouraging a whole school approach. Thus ethos as an inspiration emerged as a common factor in the dynamic and context appropriate practices adopted by the two schools.

(1) *A culture of inclusion*

The call for a culture of inclusion is declared in both schools' official public documents and statements. The mission of St John's is to foster compassionate people committed to those in need. However, the recent changes to the enrolment policy at St John's has been somewhat controversial: although the school is oversubscribed, with more than twice as many applicants as places available, it was decided to add a small number of places for refugees. The decision came as a response to the founding religious order's outreach to NAMS, and the growing sense of responsibility to include a broader social dimension in the school population. The school leadership had to win over local parents to this way of thinking and convince them of the obligation and mutual benefit of this decision – a process which took time, patience and determination. Echoing the mutual transformation of Francis' culture of encounter, ML explains how they decided to 'enrol [migrant] students who we are aware have difficult social backgrounds. This offers a more profound education experience to *all* students.'

Strategic practice accompanies this change in enrolment. For instance, at the beginning of the scholastic year, classes attend seminars where they 'choose a motto and they have to work towards that motto . . . the objective of these sessions is peer preparation to help them integrate as a class rather having groups. We tell them "this is a new start, this is your class and we would like you to involve everyone as a class"' (ML).

St Anne's describes itself as a community which welcomes students in the tradition of Nano Nagle, foundress of the Presentation Order.⁵ IL situates the culture of inclusion squarely in this ethos. She sees Nano as an inspirational figure, who 'transcends all religions', from whom everyone can learn:

I know that there may be a perception that, how can you be a Catholic school, if you have a growing percentage of Muslim students? I don't feel that conflict because I think we are doing the greatest work that could be done - we're helping students who are extremely disadvantaged within society.

In faithfulness to Nano's vision 'we look outside ourselves to the needs that we have here in the school and look to cater for them' (IL). IT explains that 'the school as a Catholic school is very inclusive . . . the ethos of the school is all about community. This really encourages and supports students to integrate.' This was the experience of IP, who says that being Hindu was 'never an issue'. In fact, it was helpful that the school was clear about its ethos. She experienced a culture of inclusion embedded in 'the ethos of the school, the way they do things, their commitment to all students.' For this parent, it is all about shared human values and that is very important. That is what her daughter experienced:

the basic meaning is the same . . . Hinduism [teaches] us to be kind, be helpful to others. Here, the values are the same. The values of every religion are the same, it's just [that] the way of teaching and preaching is different.

However, in both schools, the reality of translating aspiration into action provides challenges, especially in the area of religious practice. Both schools, for instance, struggle to provide adequate prayer spaces for Muslim students, an issue which emerged in St Anne's through the Student Council. Integrating the practice needs of students of other faiths in schools with a denominational ethos presents a learning curve for both communities.

(1) *Sense of community*

Section two above describes how in Catholic social teaching, a

culture of inclusion is intrinsically linked with a community of care. This was observed by MP, who feels that St John's has a sense of commitment for all students: 'the school is aware of our situation and always willing to support us'. At St John's, the chaplaincy organises a number of team building sessions for each class group to help them grow as a community and 'to remind them of the school ethos, that we accept everyone and that we all work together' (ML). A similar commitment was visible in St Anne's: 'The ethos of the school is very strong on community. The school works hard to build a sense of family and community' (IT). For instance, over the years, St Anne' has developed various initiatives to draw parents of NAMS into the school community and make them feel welcome. IL described how the school devises and delivers evening classes such as art and craft classes to function as social gatherings:

[Some of the mothers are] fantastically artistic. . . . They don't have a word of English, in some cases, but they will come [to the classes] and they will be so proud of the work that they produce. We can then put [their work] on display in the school.

IP was clearly appreciative of this. She talked of the opportunity to meet other mothers that such classes and activities provide, and the 'real sense of welcome'. Evening classes and events such as grandparents' day and intercultural festivals are intended to draw in all families, not simple those of NAMS.

St John's also supports families of NAMS financially by sponsoring books, uniforms and outings in a discrete way. 'We allow them [NAMS] to attend the sports afternoon programme free of charge or we buy them the suitable running shoes . . . we never charge them' (MT). ML describes how:

Most of the refugees have financial problems . . . We try to help them in such a way that they do not feel that they are being given money. . . . if I am collecting the money for an activity, they still give me an envelope. . . there would be the form but not the money (ML).

With a very tight budget, this type of largesse was not an option for St Anne's (IL), although IP describes how the school helped her with exam fees.

This sense of community may be a contributory factor in student attendance: in both St. John's and St Anne's, attendance of NAMS is regular and dependable.

(1) *Whole school approach*

Both schools are clear that an inclusive community of care is possible only with a whole school approach. School leaders and teachers situate their personal roles and responsibilities to integrate NAMS in the collective effort as a school - this is what makes successful integration possible. However, despite their efforts and openness to integrate NAMS, participants at St Anne's reported how these efforts can meet with mixed success. IL was frank in this regard: 'We are always looking for ways to improve, always open to initiatives. We are always on the lookout for CPD [Continuous Professional Development].' St Anne's twenty-year history of reflective practice was evident here: over time it has developed a wide, varied extracurricular programme as a means of integration. With little discretionary spend, this relies to a great extent on the good will and volunteerism of staff. IT ties the success of this strategy with the school ethos:

Migrant students are represented at all levels and in all aspects of school life. Just look at the End of Year book! They are so visible on social media. We have a multicultural student council. They are involved in every after school activity and we couldn't be more proud of them. It's the culture of the school, the Catholic ethos, the way they are looked out for and looked after. No particular encouragement is needed: the ethos is there, it is visible, it is our strength.

Similarly, at St. John, participants speak of the drive to engage migrant students in all aspects of school life, and the academic care for NAMS. MT explains that teachers at St John's are encouraged to be

⁵ St Anne's Secondary School Mission Statement

vigilant for NAMS who can struggle in the bilingual environment, and to switch between languages in a way that helps them to access the curriculum.

Migrant parents in both countries were pleased by the welcoming and helpful attitude of most teachers: 'Most of the teachers seem to understand our situation and communicate with me regularly' (MP). IP explains how 'there are two EAL teachers but lots of other teachers are interested and help out. On the other hand, 'buy-in' is not always immediate or universal. IL explains that 'it can be challenging for teachers to take on other work outside of their own specific subject areas or interests.

A sub-theme of whole school approach is that the sense of responsibility for NAMS is not confined to school activities. Both IP and MP reported the willingness of some school personnel – individually and collectively – to 'go the extra mile' - particularly for families of NAMS, who might be less familiar with organisational and administrative set-ups beyond the school system. These parents talked of situations where leaders and teachers provide guidance on cultural mediation and bureaucratic procedures beyond the education system, and give their time voluntarily to support migrant students. Paradoxically, parental involvement emerged as an area for improvement amongst teacher and leader participants. For instance, despite the extracurricular programme, intercultural events, and 'trying to draw immigrant parents into the Parents' Association through small group meetings' (IL), parental involvement in formal bodies such as parental councils and school governing bodies is low.

The objective of this paper is not to compare and contrast the practices of the two units of study, but to explore and reflect on how the ethos of the schools underpins their practices, within their different contexts. This research illustrates that notwithstanding their differences including education systems, proportion of migrant students, founding religious orders, and social dynamics, these two denominational schools adopt similar approaches to integrating NAMS - approaches inspired by the principles of Catholic social teaching.

5. Conclusions

The results of this exploratory study contribute to the literature in the fields of migrants' integration and education practice and policy. The novelty of the study relies not only on the influence of school ethos in this regard, but on how that influence is expressed in different contexts. With a specific case study analysis of two denominational schools, it is not possible to generalise or draw conclusions regarding the practices of other schools (faith or state). This may be an area for further research, as indicated below.

Ethos is a strong theme in the findings and all participants reference the ethos of the school as a reason for/experience of fostering a culture of inclusion and a caring community. However, how this effected NAMS and their families differed greatly between the two schools, because of their different contexts. With a large migrant population which has grown over two decades, St Anne's has developed practices such as evening classes for parents, some of which are non-language dependant so that language ability is not a condition of participation. The themes of human dignity, culture of encounter and the call to serve are resonant in this approach, and for instance in the school's strategically developed extracurricular programme. St Anne's encourages all pupils to take part, and celebrates all types of achievements and events, for instance on social media. In this way, students have opportunities not only to develop their interests and talents, but to mix and make friends within a safe environment.

The commitment to building inclusive community at St John's College takes a different form. With a history of oversubscription, it has adopted a policy of admitting NAMS, albeit initially incurring dissent from the local population. These students – mostly refugees from difficult social backgrounds - are supported not just academically, but by close monitoring of their integration and positive reinforcement of the

benefits for all. Although still at only 2–4%, this is a radical step, with demand for places in Catholic schools double those available. Francis' notion of culture of encounter as a source of transformation is clearly at work in the rationale and implications of this policy.

However, in both cases, it is the connection with the founding religious order rather than a general sense of Catholic ethos, that is the articulated primary inspiration. St Anne's intentionally tells the story of Nano Nagle: it is her work, her vision, and the work and vision of the community she founded, that provides the primary source of encouragement for their integration of NAMS. IL is very clear that Nano's appeal is universal. She can be a source of inspiration for everyone, teacher, parent, pupil, regardless of faith tradition or country of origin. It is the figure of Nano, and her outreach to the poor and vulnerable, rather than for instance recourse to the call to serve in Catholic social teaching, that provides the primary inspiration for the school's attitudes and practices towards the integration of NAMS.

This resonance with founding religious order is also clear at St John's, although it is the contemporary mission and outreach of this order which provides the primary inspiration. The order's outreach ministry to the recent influx of migrants has spurred St John's to look for ways to foster a culture of inclusion. Although traditionally catering for a largely middle class population, St John's has introduced a quota of places for NAMS. This decision had to be explained to native parents and was justified on the grounds of ethos: the importance of compassion, care and inclusion in the ethos of the school.

In short, although both schools are clearly committed to the work of integrating NAMS, it is recourse to their founding religious order rather than Church universal that provides the inspiration. The articulated connection between this commitment and social teaching in the tradition of the Catholic Church is tenuous. The biblical imperatives used by Pope Francis, and indeed the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, is missing from the language and conceptual frameworks used by the participants. This resonates with the insights of [Manchester & Bragg \(2013\)](#) that the distinctive ethos of a school is often influenced by the founding intention developing over time; this identity makes that school unique. The tracing of roots in this regard, rather than in the Catholic tradition, especially the Gospels, may be of interest to Catholic patrons. An interesting exception was IP, who is neither Irish nor Catholic. Her description of the school feeling like a family, that in finding St Anne's she had found a family, and of the connections the school gave her with her host country and other parents, echoes the hope of 'a single human family' so prevalent in [Fratelli Tutti \(Francis, 2020\)](#).

On the other hand, it is evident that first principles of Catholic social teaching such as a welcoming the stranger, building community, and care for the vulnerable are intentionally applied and given expression in both schools. Whereas both communities articulate this through the particularities of their own circumstances and traditions, the challenge of Catholic social teaching is being addressed with courage and compassion. This is particularly true of the Irish school leader, who is very conscious and articulate about the Presentation tradition she has inherited, very confident about its universality and relevance for today, very clear about how it can and must be applied. Moreover, she has won the crowd. She has the backing of the school staff, most of whom, like her, are prepared to 'go the extra mile.' While both schools struggle with aspects such as accommodating various faith practices and parental involvement, and see room for improvement in their outreach to families of NAMS, both see social inclusion as a priority and are committed to inclusive practices. This defies [Johnson's \(2003\)](#) proposal that schools which follow a "pluralistic ethos" are more equitable, purposeful and culturally responsive.

The primary aim of this exploratory study was to identify where further research might be focused. A next step might include similar studies on a broader scale, to increase validity. Broader scale studies might involve (a) increasing the sample size to allow for internal variations amongst Catholic schools in both Malta and Ireland; (b) including student insights and experiences. It is interesting that the issue of

adequate prayer spaces in St Anne's came from the Student Council; (c) increasing international validity by conducting the study in other countries with a denominational school sector.

This study focusses on the influence of one type of school ethos in the integration of NAMS. Findings suggest that denominational education contributes to universal human values and therefore to a democratic society. This may be of interest to an international readership, particularly those concerned in the debate of publically funded denominational schools. The influence of other types of ethos is also worthy of investigation. For instance, our findings point towards more detailed study on the theme of universal human values, which emerged from the data. IP's recognition of the similar basic values shared between practising Hindus and Catholics, indeed between all world religions, allowed her to feel at home in St Anne's and understand its approach to welcoming her and her family. She sees these universal human values as essential not only in the successful integration of NAMS, but the motivation to welcome NAMS in the first place. This insight points towards the usefulness of a study on the inspiration behind the practices in multi-faith, multi-denominational, non-denominational and secular schools.

A final theme which lends itself to further research is the contribution of school ethos to schools and their communities beyond the integration of NAMS. How school ethos influences practices relating to for instance teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment, and community and wellbeing is worthy of further investigation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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