An Exploration of the Experiences and Understandings of Stakeholders in a Newly

Reconfigured Community National School in Ireland: A Case Study

Jacinta Regan

B.Ed, M.Ed

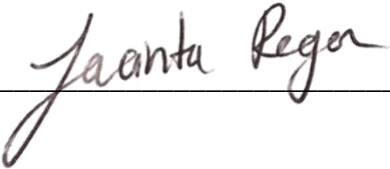Submitted for the award of EdD

Institute of Education, Dublin City University

Supervisors: Associate Professors Jones Irwin and Zita Lysaght

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Declaration

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Abbreviations

BOM	Board of Management
CLR	Comprehensive literature review
CNS	Community National School
CPD	Continuous professional development
CPSMA	Catholic Primary School Management Association
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DE/ DES	Department of Education or Department of Education and Skills
DITE	Diversity in Initial Teacher Education
ERBE	Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards of Ireland
ETNS	Educate Together National School
EVS	European Values Study
GMGY	Goodness Me, Goodness You!
GoI	Government of Ireland
ISSP	International Social Survey Programme
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, plus
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
RE	Religious Education
RoI	Republic of Ireland
RSE	Relationships and Sexuality Education
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
SRFDP	Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity Process

Abstract

Name: Jacinta Regan

Thesis title: An Exploration of the Experiences and Understandings of Stakeholders in a Newly Reconfigured Community National School in Ireland: A Case Study

With the establishment of a formal primary education system in Ireland in 1831, came the gradual establishment of the 'patronage system'. By 1900, Ireland's primary education system was largely managed by denominational patrons, the majority of whom were Catholic (Walsh, 2016). In the decades that followed, the denominational nature of the patronage system remained largely unchallenged and unproblematic for the majority of the population who identified as Roman Catholic. However, since the Educate Together movement of the 1970s, there have been calls for change to the denominational *status quo* of primary education. Ireland is increasingly religiously diverse, with an increasing percentage of the population identifying as being non-religious. This has put pressure on the primary education system to respond to the needs of a more diverse society and provide choice for families who do not want their children to attend denominational schools. The response to this challenge, which was proposed during the 'Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector' in 2011 and which has been supported by successive governments since then, has been school reconfiguration, previously known as 'school divestment'. This Department of Education policy supports schools who are denominational to transfer patronage to a multi-denominational model, thereby increasing the level of school choice available to parents. Successive governments have aimed to have 400 multi-denominational schools reconfigured by 2030, but progress in this area has been very slow and divisive. Taking a qualitative case study approach, this study explored the lived experience of stakeholders in one newly reconfigured school, which changed from a Catholic primary school to a multi-denominational Community National School. The findings offer insight into the concepts of ethos, school choice and identity, which were identified as central to the processes of reconfiguration being explored in this research. The findings will be of import for all those involved in the process of school reconfiguration at system level.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the study

This thesis focuses on the relatively undocumented phenomenon of 'school reconfiguration'[1] in the Republic of Ireland (RoI). At the time of writing, this topic was of significant interest and import in Ireland. Using a qualitative design, exploratory case study research was undertaken in one school which had recently reconfigured from a Catholic primary school to a multi-denominational[2] Community National School (CNS). The research aimed to investigate the lived experience of stakeholders[3] involved in the reconfiguration process. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants, the concepts of 'ethos', 'school choice' and 'identity' were identified as central to the reconfiguration process in the case study school.

1.2 Organisation of the Chapter

By way of context, an account is offered of the rationale for this study and the emergence of school reconfiguration is described. Consideration then turns to the historical, social and political context from which the phenomenon of school reconfiguration developed. An introduction to the Researcher is offered, and the aims and initial guiding research questions are presented. Finally, an overview of the chapters of this thesis is offered.

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[1] Schools Reconfiguration involves existing schools changing their patron. This is called a transfer of patronage. Transfers of patronage may also involve a change of ethos (for example, a change from a denominational (religious) ethos to a multi-denominational ethos). When a school transfers from the patronage of one patron to another, the school remains open, in the same property, with its staff and pupils. (DE, 2022c)

[2] While the definition of a multi-denominational school is contested, for the purpose of this study, a multi-denominational school is understood to be a school founded on the principle of equality that strives to ensure that every child is equally respected and has equal rights of access to the school regardless of social, cultural or religious background. Multi-denominational schools do not provide RE as formation during the school day, but rather a pluralist approach to RE is provided, whereby children learn 'about' and 'from' a diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews.

[3] Stakeholders in this research refers to patron representatives from relevant ETB and ETBI, patron representatives from the Catholic Church, the school's principal, teacher and parents.

1.3 Rationale for the study

The introduction of the 'Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity[4] Process' (SRFDP) was announced by the Irish Government in January 2017 to provide more multi-denominational schools across the RoI. As proposed, this process involved the transfer of live schools from a denominational patron[5] to a multi-denominational patron. In Ireland, 88% of primary schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church. As a relatively new phenomenon at the time of writing, there is no existing research on the topic. Despite a commitment by the GoI since 2012 to implement a policy of school reconfiguration to increase the number of multi-denominational schools in Ireland to 400 by 2030, at the time of writing only 14 schools had been reconfigured (Foley, 2023). While there have been many calls for change to the system, this change has been slow. When undertaking this research, apart from 27 CNSs, there was virtually no state education provision at primary level in Ireland. According to Rougier and Honohan (2014, p. 73), the Irish school system can be described as a "hybrid model" rather than purely public or private. Instead, they classify Irish primary schools based on the categorisation proposed by Maussen and Bader (2012) as 'non-governmental'. This means that these schools are owned and operated by religious organisations or associations, whether they receive partial or full public funding. Therefore, in governance, the State is seen as an aide to the 'non-state'[6] education system (O' Buachalla, 1985). This means that primary schools in Ireland are managed locally by boards of management (BOM) according to a curriculum, funding, and policy set out by the Department of Education (DE) (UNESCO, 2022). Against a backdrop of increasing demographic diversity, the current system of

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[4] Diversity in this instance refers to diversity of school choice.
[5] The patron is the body that establishes the school, appoints the Board of Management and determines the ethos of the school. These responsibilities are set out in law under the 1998 Education Act (DE, 2021).
[6] The education system is Ireland mainly 'non-state', in the sense that all primary schools are owned and operated by religious denominations and recognised organisations. The state funds the majority of these schools (99% at primary level), with only a small percentage classified as independent, fee-paying schools (UNESCO, 2022).

patronage raises a number of challenging questions for education policymakers: how can we ensure that children and families who do not identify as religious are catered for in an inclusive and equal way in our primary schools? Is the 'SRFDP' a sufficient policy response to creating greater diversity of school choice at primary level?

In response to this problem, this thesis examined the experiences of stakeholders in one school that had recently reconfigured from a Catholic primary school to a CNS. Scoil na Carraige[7] was a rural Stand Alone School that had opted to change patronage as part of the early-mover's provision within the 'SRFDP'. It was one of the first Catholic primary schools in the State's history to undergo a live[8] reconfiguration from a Catholic primary school to a CNS. As such, analysis of the process of school reconfiguration in this school offered a unique insight into the process of reconfiguration and how such change is negotiated and navigated. The denominational nature of the education system in Ireland has been a feature of the system since its inception. The reconfiguration of schools is a seminal moment of change in the history of education in Ireland. In undertaking this study, the expectation was that it would provide a valuable understanding of the experience of school reconfiguration, through the first-hand accounts of those directly involved in the process, and would, in turn, help to inform future debate around school patronage and reconfiguration.

1.4 The emergence of school reconfiguration

The denominational patronage system worked successfully in Ireland for many years (Coughlan, 2014). However, over recent decades, Irish society has undergone significant "political, social, economic, cultural, demographic and educational change" (Irwin, 2018, p. 4). This has resulted in many changes in how the Irish see themselves and their society

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[7] For the purpose of this thesis the pseudonym Scoil na Carraige will be used as the name for the case study school. The name translates to School of the Rock in English.

[8] A live reconfiguration means that the school remained open during the reconfiguration process. In some instances, prior to 2019, a denominational school closed down due to falling enrolments and was re-opened with a new staff and pupils as a multi-denominational school. A live reconfiguration involves a transfer of existing staff and pupils.

(McNamara and Norman, 2010) and has become evident in specific values questions that have emerged (Irwin, 2018). Kissane (2010, p. 73) cites "referenda on moral issues" as an example of these values questions. In recent years the liberal argument has strongly prevailed, with a significant proportion of the electorate voting in favour of same-sex marriage in the 'Marriage Equality Referendum' (2015) and in favour of legalising abortion in the 'Abortion Referendum' (2018). The results of these referenda bear witness to the fact that the majority of the voting population's values are no longer in harmony with the values of the Catholic Church, which campaigned in favour of a 'no' vote in both cases. In the context of significant societal change, the fact that the primary school system, as currently configured, offers little choice to parents seeking an alternative to Catholic education, is problematic. The proposed solution to this problem is school reconfiguration, initially referred to as 'school divestment', which emerged in a 2012 report from the 'Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector' (the Forum).

The Forum was established to make recommendations on what steps could be taken to ensure that the education system at primary level could provide a sufficiently diverse number and range of primary schools to cater for children of all religions and none (DE, 2021). The Minister appointed an Advisory Group to oversee the work of the Forum. The Chairperson of the Advisory Group was Professor John Coolahan. The Advisory Group sought written submissions from key stakeholders and other interested parties on three key themes: "establishing parental and community demand for diversity", "managing the transfer/divesting of patronage" and "diversity within a school or a small number of schools" (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 4). In total, 215 submissions were received. In addition, the Forum held a three-day open session, which involved dialogue, based on the written submissions, between the Advisory Group, stakeholders, the DE and a limited number of the general public (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). Eight months after it

began, and as the Forum was drawing to a close, the Advisory Group made an oral presentation about the range of its reflections for final consideration by interested parties. Participants were invited to make final written submissions by the end of the year. In total, 32 additional submissions were received. Eighty-one children from primary schools and Junior Cycle of post-primary schools were also consulted as part of the Forum (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). A particular focus of the Forum was on investigating how demand for different types of patronage could be met in some regions with stable populations by 'divesting' patronage of certain existing schools where there was evidence of parental demand (Quinn, 2012a, 2012b). School divestment became a regular feature of every plan for the GOI from this point onwards, with a commitment to increase the number of multi-denominational schools to "400 by 2030" (Government of Ireland, 2022, p. 96). However, to date, progress has been very slow.

One of the key recommendations of the Forum was for some existing schools under the patronage of Church bodies to 'divest' their patronage to become multi-denominational, where there was parental demand for change (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). Although this recommendation was broadly welcomed by some advocacy groups who had been vocal in calling for change to the patronage system (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2012), some secularists argued that this recommendation was too conservative and that a more radical change of the patronage system was needed (O'Toole, 2015; Fischer, 2016a, 2016b). O'Toole (2015) argued that the Forum's recommendations missed a critical opportunity to bring about changes to school patronage required to address the needs of modern Ireland. She contended that relying on parental demand to bring about change was based on the liberal principle of 'individual choice' rather than the republican ideal of the 'common good'. On the other hand, some voices from the Catholic sector questioned the need or desire for 'divestment'. Griffin (2019, p. 58) questioned parents' desire for change

and argued that in reality "parents who have children in a local Catholic school do not want to change what they know and what they value". Taking a different approach, Conway (2017, p. 354) contended that faith schools should also matter to the State because of the "unique and distinctive contribution" they make to the "educational landscape that is proper to an authentically pluralist society". For Conway (2017) and Griffin (2019), the intentions and positive actions of the Catholic Church in response to a policy of divestment have been misconstrued in public debates about 'divestment'. As Conway (2017, pp. 354–360) states, the Catholic Church is "not trying to hold on to something just for the sake of holding on", but rather that the State should accept the "profound and very real role religious faith and practice plays in the lives of hundreds of thousands of its citizens". He states that:

> A truly liberal, secular and democratic society will welcome and accommodate everything that contributes to human flourishing, and this includes the religious dimension of human life for those who wish it. (Conway, 2017, p. 354)

The strong responses to the proposals from secularists and those working in the Catholic sector demonstrate the value placed on education and stress its status as a social and political matter. As such, changes to the educational system elicit strong responses from all concerned.

The process of 'divestment' that was originally proposed by the Advisory Committee of the Forum was a three-staged process whereby the Department of Education (DE) would gather information on the demand for divestment through parental surveys. This would be followed by a report on the options for patronage, and finally, patrons would be required to respond within a definite timeframe (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). This approach saw little success. While commentary by the national media often laid the blame at the door of the Catholic Church, citing reluctant Bishops (McNamee, 2016; McGarry, 2017), the issues with the divestment process were much more complex, as explained here by the DE:

> The patronage of schools involves ownership of schools and school property and in the consultation process, it became clear that divestment is seen as taking away property from the patron or trustees as landowners. The landowner has misgivings and there is no way forward without meeting these concerns. The common

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misconception, that the State could simply withdraw funding from denominational primary schools and use it to establish new multi-denominational and non-denominational schools in the same building instead, is exactly that – a misconception. The ownership and control of school property is a complex issue, both constitutionally and in terms of property law and rights. Typically, it can involve religious trusts, trustees, religious orders, the Bishops both as landowners and school patrons and the State. […] In some cases where church authorities have been amenable to transferring property, local parish communities have resisted divestment on the basis that they have contributed to these valuable community assets over the years. (DE, 2018b)

The divestment process was rebranded as 'The Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity Process' in 2017. The then Minister for Education, Richard Bruton, stated that the new process would "draw on the lessons from the previous model" (DE, 2018a). Ultimately, this meant that rather than focusing on the transfer of land ownership through closing or amalgamating schools, the DE would focus on facilitating 'live' transfers of patronage, "whereby a school continues to exist, with staff, pupils and the majority of the board of management remaining in place (if they wish)" (DE, 2018). To achieve this "a lease arrangement from the current landowner to the new patron" would be negotiated, removing the need for complicated property transfer (DE, 2018). Similar to divestment, the new process aimed to provide more multi-denominational schools across the country, in line with the choices of families and school communities and the 'Programme for Government' commitment for 400 multi-denominational schools by 2030.

There were two phases to the process of reconfiguration: the 'Identification Phase' and the 'Implementation Phase'. The 'Identification Phase' took place in 16 initial areas nationwide. Local Education and Training Boards (ETBs) were tasked with identifying an area where there was likely to be unmet oncoming demand for a multi-denominational school and surveying preschool parents to assess the level of oncoming demand (DES, 2018). ETBs were then supposed to meet with the local majority patron to outline the results of the survey and discuss options for a reconfiguration of existing schools to meet this oncoming demand.

A report on the progress of this phase was due to be published in 2022. However, at the time of writing, such a report was yet to be published.

An 'Early Movers' provision was also included in the process and allowed for any school community to directly engage their current patron, outside of the main process, and to seek a transfer of patronage to a multi-denominational patron, fast-tracking the patronage reassignment. Until the publication of comprehensive guidance about reconfiguration March 2022, little information beyond what was already mentioned above was available from the DE about what reconfiguration looked like in practice. In the 'Programme for Government' (2020), CNSs were identified as the only school model that would be considered in the reconfiguration process. Between 2011 and 2019 seven Catholic schools, three Steiner schools and one Church of Ireland school reconfigured their patronage, ten of which became CNSs (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). Since 2022, three large urban schools have also opted to reconfigure (Foley, 2023).

In 2022, the DE released comprehensive guidance for schools to guide them through the process of reconfiguration (DE, 2022b). This guidance includes essential information about governance, staffing, the transfer of monies and resources, and information packs for parents. It is important to note that this guidance was published after this research was conducted. The 'SRFDP' developed in response to a particular social, historical and policy context, an understanding of which provides a necessary backdrop for the case study described in this thesis.

1.5 A changing Ireland

The introduction of the 'SRFDP' coincided with the shifting demographics and values of the Irish population. Ireland has seen dramatic changes in its population and has moved from a uniform population to a diverse society (Del Aguila and Cantillon, 2012). The significant change to the cultural makeup of the country's population began during the Celtic Tiger era

(between 1995 and 2007) when economic growth attracted "large and sustained inflows" of immigrants (Fahey, Russell and Whelan, 2007, p. 217). While this influx of immigration slowed after the Celtic Tiger, Smyth *et al.* (2007) argued that diversity was here to stay, and demographic data, available from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) confirmed their argument. "The shifting nature of cultural diversity in Ireland" (Parker-Jenkins and Masterson, 2013, p. 478) is evidenced in the 2022 census, where the "number of people who usually lived in Ireland but were born elsewhere stood at 20% of the population" (CSO, 2023b). This represented an increase of 207,031 people from six years previously. This increase in cultural diversity has had a direct impact on the diversity of religions present in Ireland. However, it would be too simplistic to say that immigration is the only reason for a change in religious identity. Coughlan (2014) suggests that another reason for the change in religious identity in Ireland is the Catholic Church losing significant support from the Irish population after revelations regarding child abuse in the Murphy and Ryan reports in 2009.

Interestingly, in the 2022 census, the number of people identifying as Roman Catholic "fell from 3,696,644 (79%) in 2016 to 3,515,861 (69%) in 2022" (CSO, 2023b). The figure for people with no religion increased by 284,269 in 2022 and stood at 736,210 (approximately 14% of the population) (CSO, 2023b). In 2016, 77% of the people who identified as having 'no religion' also stated their nationality as Irish (CSO, 2016), which shows that increasing cultural diversity is not the only reason for religious change. A review of the profile of census survey respondents likely to parent children in the coming decades is noteworthy. In Ireland, the average age of a mother giving birth to her first child is 28 (CSO, 2019). In 2016, 18.5% of 26-year-olds identified as having 'no religion'. Also relevant to this study is that there was a higher percentage of Catholics in rural areas (85.9%) than in urban areas (73.8%). Those with no religion were concentrated in urban areas, with just over three

out of four in this group located in cities, towns or settlements of 1,500 or more persons (CSO, 2016b).

The picture that emerges from the census data further affirms the image of a society described by McNamara and Norman (2010, p. 535) "in which a variety of religious and philosophical beliefs coexist and in which other social and cultural boundaries have been pushed back or even dissolved". How, then, does this coincide with school patronage? In a system where approximately 95% of schools have a religious ethos that promotes religious values, questions emerge about how sustainable the patronage system is. The denominational education system's connection to Irish people's sense of identity runs deep. It results from a long-standing relationship between the Catholic Church and the State in education. Catholicism is a key "defining feature in the history of Ireland and is imprinted in Irish culture" (Kenny, 2000, p. 17). Therefore, attempts to disentangle the Catholic Church and education have and will continue to raise significant challenges. To fully comprehend the complexities of patronage, it is essential to understand the historical context it was borne out of and the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the State in education.

1.6 The emergence of the denominational patronage system and the Church-State relationship that sustained it

The national school system was established in 1831 in response to political, social, economic and religious factors unique to the Irish context (Walsh, 2016). As Walsh (2016, p. 8) states:

> It was primarily a political response to the difficulties of the British Empire in controlling its closest colony and was envisaged as a means to socialise the Irish populace and strengthen Ireland's link with the Empire. It was also a social and economic response to the widespread poverty and the quest for education evident in Ireland, with the intention that basic literacy and numeracy would improve the position of Ireland's citizens in future generations. It was also a product of the endeavours of the various religious denominations within Ireland to use schools to imbue the upcoming generations with their particular religious beliefs and ensure the survival of their faith.

The backdrop to its establishment was one of "intense denominational animosity and political division" (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 9). The native Irish population was predominantly Catholic and had faced decades of persecution through a series of Penal Laws[9] at the hands of their Protestant colonisers (McGrath and Ivar, 1996). After the repeal of these laws in the 1800s, the appetite for education for Catholic children grew. Due to a lack of middle-class patrons and religious personnel, education was provided mainly by fee-paying Hedge schools and Catholic teaching orders (Walsh, 2016). However, the standard and nature of education provided in Hedge Schools was varied and largely dependent on the teacher, who was "often perceived to be morally dissolute and politically subversive" by the Catholic Church and the State. Because of this, "both institutions wished to exercise control […] over the teachers and learners" (Walsh, 2016, p. 8).

As a result of the colonial relationship with Ireland:

> The British authorities wished the education system to act as an agent of civilisation, socialisation, assimilation, politicisation and the reproduction of colonial values with a view to making Ireland more governable. (Walsh, 2016, p. 9)

Publication of the 'Fourteenth Report of the Board of Education' by the Commissioners of the Board of Education in 1813 sought to establish a schooling system that would be inclusive of all children, irrespective of their religious identity. The report set forth a fundamental principle that should underpin the education system:

> That no attempt shall be made to influence or disturb the peculiar religious tenets of any sector or description of Christians. (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 9)

Despite a dominant climate of proselytism, this stance was adopted by Lord Stanley in 1831 when, in his role as the Chief Secretary, he proposed a non-denominational national school

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[9] The Penal Laws were a series of laws established in Ireland in 1695 by the English and the Protestant Ascendancy to control and oppress Irish Catholics throughout the 18th century. They aimed to lessen Irish Catholic power, dismantle Irish culture, and anglicize or 'civilize' Ireland. Most of the laws were repealed by 1793. (Burns, 2018)

model (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 9). However, Stanley's vision of non-denominational education was fleeting. As noted by Walsh (2016, p. 10):

> The churches etched away at the mixed denominational principle of the national system, and in reality, most schools were vested in diocesan trustees, had the local Bishop as their patron, were clerically managed and the managers, teachers and pupils were of the same faith. As the majority of the Protestant schools remained outside the national system and within the Church Education Society from 1839 to 1869, this meant that the majority of schools were managed by and vested in the Catholic Church.

Religious denominations in Ireland saw the emergent education system as a vehicle to pass on religious beliefs and ensure the future of their faith (Coolahan, 1981; Walsh, 2016). The churches opposed a non-denominational system, and a prolonged struggle ensued to reshape the education system into a denominational one (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 10). So, "while the system remained de jure a mixed system, it became de facto a denominational one" (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 10).

The established position of the Catholic Church in education was further strengthened after Irish Independence in 1921 (Walsh, 2016). The central role of the Catholic Church in education was acknowledged by the State and was enshrined in the Irish Constitution, Bunreacht na hÉireann (1937) (Walsh, 2016). Given the social and political climate within which the Irish Constitution was created, it has been argued that it is religious in character (Rougier and Honohan, 2014). However, it has also been argued that, despite this, "its existing devices and institutions can be reconceptualised in a republican light" (Daly, 2016, p. 45). It laid the foundation for "a system of schools that are religiously diverse, privately established, and state-supported" (Rougier and Honohan, 2014b, p. 73). The Irish Constitution describes the family as "the primary and natural educator of the child" (1937, p. Art 42.1). Parents are explicitly given the right to provide for their child's religious education (RE). Additionally, the Constitution states that:

> The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State. (1937, Art 42.3)

It also states that every religious denomination has the right "to manage its own affairs, own, acquire and administer property […] and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes" (1937, 44.2.5). Minority religious communities have relied on this provision to ensure they have the right to their own schools (Rougier and Honohan, 2014b, p. 73). Until recently, this provision also enabled denominational schools to implement admission policies that gave preference to pupils based on the pupil's religious beliefs (Rougier and Honohan, 2014b, p. 73). This was known as the 'baptism barrier' and was removed in 2018[10]. The then Minister for Education, Richard Bruton, enacted legal reforms to make the school admissions process fairer. Following much petition and debate, the Education (Admission to Schools) Act, was enacted in 2018. The Act forbade almost all schools from discriminating in relation to religious denomination, the exception being schools designated as those of a 'minority religion' (defined as membership of less than 10% of the total population of the State) (Wilkinson, 2019, p. 74).

Article 44.2.4 of the Irish Constitution decrees that the State will not discriminate between schools under the management of different religions in terms of the provision of State aid and that it also protects the right of any child to attend a school receiving public money without attending religious instruction in that school. Glendenning (1999) notes that this article has been interpreted as offering protection for the denominational nature of the primary school system rather than being interpreted liberally, whereby it would suggest that

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[10] In some Catholic schools that were oversubscribed (approximately 20% of schools) the school could deny admission to children from minority religions or those without a baptismal certificate. Anecdotally, some non-religious parents, in order to ensure their child's enrolment in a nearby school, felt compelled to have their children baptised.

the State should equally fund non-religious schools (Mulcahy and McKenna, 2006). Rougier and Honohan (2014b, p. 74) identify certain aspects of the denominational education system that have become controversial and sparked public debate, namely: "the structure of the educational system, [...] the role of religion in the curriculum, and the treatment of children and teachers of other beliefs in religious schools".

Concerning the role of the State, the Constitution sets forth that:

> The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation. (1937, Art. 42.4)

Rougier and Honohan (2014b, pp. 73–74) highlight that the use of the language 'provide for' replaced the 'right to free primary education', which was stated in the previous Free State Constitution. In doing so, the State diminishes its role in primary education and allows itself to become "supplementary" (Rougier and Honohan, 2014b, p. 73). According to Rougier and Honohan (2014b, p. 73) this diminution of its role "represented a concern to limit the potential economic implications for the State, as well as deference to the Catholic Church". This legislation led to the formation of a symbiotic relationship, whereby the recently formed State could delegate responsibility for the public service of education to the Catholic Church and, in doing so, could reduce the need for investment in public infrastructures significantly. As Griffin (2019) reminds us:

> The partnership of the state and the Catholic Church was regarded as mutually beneficial. Religious congregations and dioceses provided sites for school buildings, provided money for the buildings themselves and then taught in many schools free of charge or used their state teaching salaries to support local school projects. Many schools and thousands of students in modern Ireland still benefit from this sense of mission and its largesse. (Griffin, 2019, p. 56)

Therefore, a point about school reconfiguration that is not always fully understood or appreciated is that:

> While the state has provided total funding for school buildings in the past twenty years, most Catholic schools are still on church or congregational lands in buildings that are at least partially funded by Catholic resources. For this reason, Catholic schools are private establishments, in receipt of state funding because of a need for school places and because of their contribution to society in educating its young people. (Griffin, 2019, p. 56)

While it is essential to recognise the altruistic actions of the Catholic Church in aiding the State in developing public services, it is also important to recognise that this action helped the Catholic Church to aspire to achieve a fundamental goal, that of ensuring the perpetuity of the Catholic faith in Ireland.

1.7 Moving towards greater school choice: the emergence of the multi-denominational sector

Hyland (2020, p. 10) describes the 1960s in Ireland as a decade of "growth, development and relative liberalism". Immigration slowed as employment grew, and, for the first time since Ireland had gained independence, the country experienced inward migration where many of its earlier immigrants returned home (Hyland, 2020). For Hyland (2020, p. 10), those returning immigrants had "a broader vision of what was possible, […] were more vocal and outspoken and were more likely to challenge the *status quo* than their peers who had never lived outside the country". In the decade that followed, more democratic structures were introduced in developing education policy to allow for a greater partnership approach (Walsh, 2016). Reforms introduced by Vatican II sought a more significant role for parents and the laity in education (Connolly, 1979). In addition, Hyland (2020, p. 17) argues that parents were taking a greater interest in education and were becoming more "vocal and active". She cites the formation of Parent Teacher Associations and the introduction of BOMs, "introduced in 1975 to replace largely individual clerical managers", as evidence.

However, while change was afoot, a more conservative move in the realm of curriculum policy strengthened the place of religion in primary schools. 1971 saw the introduction of a new Primary School Curriculum, which "encouraged the integration of

subjects, both religious and secular" (Hyland, 2020, p. 16). For Hyland (2020, p. 16), the publication of an integrated curriculum, alongside the introduction of rule 68 to the 1965 Rules for National Schools, meant that the State "formally recognised the denominational character of the primary school system" and "made no provision for children whose parents did not wish them to attend exclusively denominational schools not to attend religious instruction within such schools". As a result, even though parents had the option to opt their their children out of religious instruction, this choice became practically ineffective, as religion could now "permeate the whole school day" (Hyland, 2020, p. 17).

In response to these issues and a preference for multi-denominational education, the Dalkey School Project, a parental movement, was established in the 1970s. Multi-denominational schools were founded on the principle of equality and endeavoured to ensure that every child was equally respected and had equal rights, regardless of social, cultural or religious background. The group campaigned for multi-denominational provision from 1974, and the first multi-denominational school (also called the Dalkey School Project) was established in 1978 in Glenageary, Co. Dublin. The group would later form what is now known as Educate Together. Multi-denominational schools had no presence in legislation, nor were they referenced in government publications until the 'Programme for Action in Education 1984'. By that time, a further two schools had been established under the patronage of Educate Together (Curry, 2003, p. 85). Hyland (2020) documents the opposition the group faced from the Department of Education and the Catholic Church in their attempts to develop a multi-denominational model. An example of this opposition offered by Hyland (2020) is an excerpt from a public speech by the then Minister for Education, Richard Burke, stating his strong opposition to multi-denominational education:

> There is at present a campaign for what its promoters call multi-denominational,
> education in primary schools, based on the suggestion that education in schools
> under the control of persons of their own religious faith and by teachers of their own
> religious faith promotes disharmony and dissension in the community. To my mind,

that is completely false. Indeed, I regard it as a libel on teachers to suggest that in educating children in accordance with the particular teaching and beliefs of the religion of their homes, the teachers implant the seeds of intolerance and encourage attitudes of bigotry. It is also arrant nonsense. (Burke, 1975 cited in Hyland, 2020, p. 90)

Despite this opposition, the movement was successful in establishing nearly 100 schools in the decades that followed (Department of Education and Skills, 2020). The multi-denominational schools established under Educate Together were argued to be a distinctive response to a justifiable preference for schools where children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds could be educated together in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect (Educate Together, 1999). However, while the Educate Together movement is to be commended for developing greater levels of choice and an equality-based model, one might argue that it does not serve as an answer to the problem of a state-supported education system, as the governance and management of these schools, once again, fall outside the State itself.

1.8 The State's response: the establishment of Community National Schools

While the last 35 years have seen the accommodation of new religious and non-religious groups in the primary sector, Rougier and Honohan (2014b) argued that the solution to this diversity put forth by the State is the pluralisation of state-supported education rather than the secularisation of education (Rougier and Honohan, 2014b). The creation of 'state education' or what is sometimes referred to as the 'common school'[11] was absent until 2007, when the CNS model was introduced. Multi-denominational schools, called Community National Schools, were formally established in 2008 and initially opened in communities with diverse populations. The model emerged as an emergency response to a lack of school places, as is explained here:

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[11] Internationally, schools that are non-denominational are known as 'common schools'. The common school is defined as "a school that is open to, and intended for, all students in a liberal, democratic society regardless of religious, ethnic, class or cultural background" (Alexander and McLaughlin, 2003, p. 364).

In March 2007, it emerged that in St. Mochta's parish in West Dublin, there were no school places available for approximately 80 children. The two local schools were denominational. The children left without a school place mainly identified as belonging to religions other than Catholicism and were also from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, there was a need to establish an emergency school which would effectively become the first Community National School in time. (NCCA, 2018c, p. 6)

The initial development of this model was not without its challenges. Between 2015 and 2018, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)[12] reviewed the original patron's programme for CNSs, entitled 'Goodness Me, Goodness You!' (GMGY). The review highlighted the significant levels of input that Catholic school management bodies had in developing the CNS model when it was first established in 2008 (NCCA, 2018c). The NCCA noted that the initially piloted model offered specific religious instruction and sacramental preparation for Catholic pupils within the school day (NCCA, 2018c). Over time, the inclusion of this provision led to significant difficulties and it was found that the practice discriminated in favour of Catholic pupils (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018a). After a review of the 'Goodness Me, Goodness You!' programme by the NCCA (2018c) and an internal review process by the Education and Training Board of Ireland (ETBI), the practice was abandoned, and what was considered to be a more suitable and pluralist approach to RE was adopted. A revised version of the GMGY curriculum was developed from 2015-2018 and is currently used in all of the CNSs. The content and approaches of the revised GMGY curriculum is explored in further detail in Chapter Three.

Notably, the model is the first state multi-denominational primary school in Ireland. The Patrons of these schools are the local ETB (formerly known as the Vocational Education Committee), although when first established it was the Minister for Education[13]. Today, CNSs are "state-operated, multi-denominational, inclusive schools that welcome all children

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[12] The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment advise the Minister for Education on matters relating to curriculum and assessment for early childhood, primary and post-primary education.
[13] Until 2016 the Community National Schools were under the patronage of the Minister for Education and Skills with the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) of Ireland as patrons designate. The formal transfer of patronage of these schools to the local ETBs took place in September 2016.

from the local communities they serve" (DDLETB, 2020). There are currently 27 Community National Schools, although it is expected that this number will continue to grow in the coming years through school reconfiguration. In the current 'Programme for Government' (Government of Ireland, 2022) CNSs were named as the model to which denominational schools would be reconfigured. According to the GoI (2022, p. 96), their objective is to increase the diversity of schools in order to better represent the "full breadth of society". They plan to expand and give priority to transferring schools with sustainable enrolments to Community National Schools.

1.9 Public opinion and the political response

In recent years, questions are being asked publicly about the denominational nature of education and whether it is fit for purpose in the Ireland of today. Despite this questioning, and a policy of school reconfiguration being implemented by consecutive Governments, very little progress has been made (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). The denominational nature of schools is the *status quo*, and a large proportion of the population appears to be content with Catholic education provision (Griffin, 2019). As stated earlier, census data shows that the majority of the population still identifies as Roman Catholic. However, a European Social Survey of 18 countries, conducted in 2016, found that only 36% of Irish adults attended a religious service at least once weekly (McGarry, 2018).

In addition to the introduction of a policy of school reconfiguration, since 2011, the Department of Education has undertaken a series of reforms to create a more equitable experience for children, families and teachers who are not Catholic:

> The amendment of section 37 (1) of the Employment Equality Act 1998, constraining the sanctions that can be taken against an employee who undermines a school's ethos; the abolition of Rule 68[14] […]; the proposal in regard to Education

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[14] Rule 68 states that "Of all parts of the school curriculum, religious instruction is by far the most important, as its subject matter, God's honor and service, includes the proper use of all men's faculties, and affords the most powerful inducements to their proper use. Religious instruction is, therefore, a fundamental part of the school

about Religions and Beliefs, and Ethics; recommendations on inclusion, […] and more recently the proposed amendment or repeal of Section 7 (3) (c) of the Equal Status Act 2000. (Conway, 2017, p. 354)

However, despite these reforms, unlike other public services such as health and social care, which have gradually been brought back under the State's remit, education remains an outlier. In 2017 and again in 2021, there was public outrage when it was proposed that the ownership of the new National Maternity Hospital, which the GoI funded, would be handed over to Sisters of Charity, a religious organisation (Cullen, 2017; Molloy, 2017). Similar to the situation with schools, the land the hospital was built on was owned by a religious organisation, but the hospital was publicly funded. This same level of outrage has not been displayed in the educational sphere, perhaps because investment has not been undertaken on a similar scale.

Simultaneously, an urgent demand arises for public scrutiny to consider the efficacy of the school reconfiguration policy in achieving systemic reform. The current situation begs a number of questions. For example, in a country where the population's values are gradually becoming more secularised, how does school reconfiguration address issues of equality within an overwhelmingly denominational education system? Furthermore, why, when the public welcomes the secularisation of other public goods, is there such a lack of progress, and often hostility, towards the proposal of a similar change in education? While this research cannot address all of these questions, these societal, historical and policy contexts and the problems that emerged from them have shaped the researcher's experience and the aim and research questions for this study.

1.10 The researcher

The investigator in this research has a strong commitment to diversity, equality and inclusion in education. During a teaching career that spanned 8 years, she worked in both

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course and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school" (Department of Education, 1965).

denominational and multi-denominational primary schools. During her years as a teacher in a CNS, she developed a particular interest in multi-denominational education. From 2015 to 2018, the researcher worked on the review and redevelopment of the GMGY curriculum. This experience deepened her commitment to providing education that offers equal respect and recognition to all children. The researcher is, therefore, an insider in the research. The challenges and advantages of this positionality are acknowledged here and discussed at length in Chapter Four. Currently, the researcher works as a curriculum developer in her role as a Director for Curriculum and Assessment in the NCCA. This work has made her keenly aware of the challenging relationship between policy creation and policy implementation.

1.11 The research aims and questions

This chapter introduced several key points that frame the research aim and questions. The phenomenon of school reconfiguration is under-documented, and Ireland's demographics reveal a mismatch between the religious or non-religious identities of the population and the largely denominational education system. At the time this research was conducted, little information was available from the DE regarding the 'SRFDP'. Comprehensive guidance about how the process was to be enacted was not released until March 2022 (DE, 2022a), nearly two years after Scoil na Carraige had reconfigured. In the absence of such guidance, it was considered essential to undertake an exploration of the key policy documents concerning reconfiguration. This exploration aimed to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the policy itself, its historical underpinnings, and its pre-2021 implementation. Consequently, the researcher adopted a policy analysis approach, which sought to address the contextual question:

- *What are the unique socio/historical factors that gave rise to the reconfiguration process in the Republic of Ireland as evident in key policy documents?*

This analysis served as the foundation for the conceptual literature review and the guiding

research questions for this study:

1. *How can the concepts of 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion' and 'identity' aid understanding of the opportunities and challenges that emerged from the reconfiguration of the case study school?*

2. *What can be learned about reconfiguring ethos from the experiences of key stakeholders' in the case study school?*

To answer these questions, the study entailed conducting a detailed case study of a single school that had undergone the reconfiguration process. As stated earlier, the GoI has proposed school reconfiguration as a solution, but progress has been slow, and few schools have reconfigured. The denominational education system is the *status quo* in primary education, and as such, it remains largely unquestioned by society. In certain regions, attempts to implement the policy of reconfiguration have met with significant resistance and opposition (O'Kelly, 2023). In response, this study aimed to capture the understanding and lived experience of school reconfiguration in one case study location, examine the learnings and implications of this case, and apply them to the broader policy landscape. The researcher's motivation to explore the policy of reconfiguration was influenced by her deep interest and extensive engagement with the literature on multi-denominational education in Ireland, as well as the concepts of 'diversity, equality, and inclusion' within the educational context. Additionally, her prior experience as a policy developer and a teacher in a CNS further inspired her exploration of this topic. The initial guiding questions that directed this research were derived from an iterative process that involved exploring the socio-historical policy literature and identifying central concepts related to the reconfiguration process, such as 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion', and 'rural identity'. Through these

research questions, the researcher aimed to capture the lived experience of 'ethos change' and investigate how this change was negotiated during the reconfiguration process[15].

1.12 Overview of chapters

This introductory chapter presented the rationale for this research and introduced the emergent problem of 'school choice', or lack thereof, in the Republic of Ireland. The policy of school reconfiguration was identified as the Irish Government's primary response to addressing this problem, and a brief overview of the emergence of the policy was presented. Following this, the Chapter outlined the social, historical and policy context within which this study was located and concluded by introducing the researcher and presenting the research aims and questions upon which this thesis is founded.

Chapter Two provides a comprehensive analysis of the socio-historical policy literature that underpins the present study. Adopting Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' (WPR) policy analysis framework, the researcher critically examines the socio-historical policy context from which the concept of school reconfiguration in Ireland emerged. This rigorous analysis establishes the foundations upon which the subsequent sections of this study are constructed.

Chapter Three examines a number of key concepts that emerged from a review of the sociohistorical policy literature. The concepts of 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion' and 'rural identity' are explored in the context of school reconfiguration. The conceptual framework for the study that emerges from the review of the literature is also presented.

Chapter Four outlines the paradigmatic considerations and the methodology employed for this research. It locates the study within the constructivist paradigm, explains why a

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[15] It should be noted that children's voices are absent from this study because they were not consulted as part of the DE's 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'. Therefore, the captured voices come from patron representatives, the school principal, a teacher and a parent from the case study school.

qualitative case study approach was taken in respect of questions two and three, and locates the research questions within the paradigm. The chapter then focuses its attention on the research instruments employed, the sample population under study, and the sequential stages entailed in the process of data analysis. The Chapter concludes with the ethical considerations addressed and the ethical framework adopted.

In Chapter Five, an in-depth exploration of the research findings takes place, highlighting three core themes: 'Ethos', 'School choice', and 'Identity'. To provide contextual background for the reader, this section begins by describing the case study school and introducing the participants, along with their various connections to the case under investigation. The key findings from the research are presented and discussed through the lens of the conceptual framework employed.

In Chapter Six, the researcher offers a number of recommendations based on the findings of the research. The contribution to knowledge made by this study is thoroughly discussed, providing a response to the research questions and exploring the implications for policy. The chapter also addresses the limitations of the study, provides recommendations for further research and concludes with final remarks.

Chapter Two: A critical analysis of the sociohistorical policy literature

2.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a critical review of relevant social and historical policy literature related to the research questions. As highlighted in Chapter One, there was a noticeable dearth of documentation surrounding the process of reconfiguration. Typically, the development of a national policy is accompanied by an implementation or action plan, as well as regular implementation reviews. However, in the case of reconfiguration, no such paper trail existed. In addition, at the time of writing, there was a dearth of empirical literature regarding the enactment and lived experience of the phenomenon of school reconfiguration in Ireland. Therefore, it was deemed essential to initiate this research by reviewing the socio-historical policy literature, guided by the following contextual question:

- *What are the unique socio-historical factors that gave rise to the reconfiguration process in the Republic of Ireland as evident in key policy documents?*

The policy analysis conducted in this chapter assumes a crucial role in establishing a foundational and comprehensive understanding of the policy being investigated. Moreover, it serves as the first comprehensive compilation of all published documentation related to school reconfiguration policy in the RoI. Through the synthesis and analysis of policy literature, prominent theories and concepts emerge, providing valuable insights and perspectives.

2.2 Organisation of the chapter

The chapter begins by introducing the 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' (WPR) policy analysis framework, created by Bacchi and Goodwin (2016). This framework serves as a tool for carefully evaluating and critiquing the policy under investigation. The focus of the chapter then shifts to providing a comprehensive and critical review of the socio-historical policy context. This entails delving into the historical policy documentation and

societal factors that have shaped the policy landscape. An extensive review of relevant literature published between 2012[16] and 2023[17] was conducted and the analysis is presented. The chapter concludes by summarising the main insights derived from the analysis and presents a number of emerging concepts that warrant further exploration because of their potential to contribute to the broader understanding of school reconfiguration.

2.3 The 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' Policy Analysis Framework

The WPR framework, developed by Bacchi and Goodwin (2016), is a post-structural analysis tool designed to facilitate critical examination of public policies. Embracing this approach to policy analysis entails adopting a mode of thinking that recognises policy as a constructive act that shapes political and contingent problems (Beasley and Bletsas, 2012). To effectively analyse the policy literature related to school reconfiguration, the researcher employed the WPR framework as a conceptual lens through which to explore the literature.

Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the WPR framework, outlining the key questions and their respective goals. While the questions are presented sequentially in the table, it is important to note that they can be approached iteratively (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) emphasise the framework's flexibility, allowing researchers to selectively employ different forms of questioning and analysis based on their specific research objectives and contextual requirements. In the present study, the researcher focused on questions 1 to 4 of the WPR framework, as questions 5 and 6, which delve into the 'lived effects' and 'production' of the policy, respectively, are more applicable to policies that have undergone rigorous evaluation. This tailored approach ensured that the analysis maintained a focused alignment with the study's specific context and objectives.

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[16] 2012 was selected as a starting date for the literature review, as the concept of reconfiguration (formerly known as divestment) first emerges in the 'Report on the Forum of Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector' (2012).

[17] Examples of search terms used are 'school reconfiguration', 'school divestment', 'school ethos' and 'school choice'. A full list of search engines accessed and the search terms employed can be found in Appendix A: List of databases used and search term examples.

Tawell and McCluskey (2021) highlight that the questions within the WPR framework guide researchers in analysing proposed solutions or changes by investigating their underlying rationales, presuppositions, gaps in understanding, and anticipated effects on problem representation. Each question within the framework serves a distinct purpose, as indicated in the goal column of Table 1. This policy analysis approach operates on the premise that the proposed actions to address an issue reveal what is considered problematic and in need of change (Beasley and Bletsas, 2012). As Tawell and McCluskey (2021) explain, the WPR framework starts by examining the change or solution proposals within a given policy and then traces how the underlying problem is constructed. Accordingly, the subsequent section of this chapter initiates with a description of the relevant policy before proceeding to critique the problem representation within it.

Table 1. WPR approach to policy analysis (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016, p. 20)

Question	Goal
1. What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies?	Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, p. 20) state that the goal of this question is to "identify a place to begin the analysis".
2. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions (conceptual logics) underlie this representation of the 'problem' (problem representation)?	Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, p. 21) state that there are several goals underpinning question 2. First, it enables us to consider how this particular problem representation was possible, by identifying "the meanings […] that needed to be in place for it to make sense or be intelligible". Secondly, this question enables us to "identify how the problem representation is constructed – which concepts and binaries […] does it rely upon" (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016, p. 21). Finally, this question seeks to "identify and reflect upon possible patterns in problematizations that might signal the operation of a particular political or governmental rationality" (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016, p. 21).
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?	Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, p. 22) explain that the intention of this question is "to disrupt any assumption that what *is* reflects *what has to be*".
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be conceptualised differently?	Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, p. 22) advise that the goal of this question is to "encourage a critical practice of thinking otherwise" and to "destabilize an existing problem representation by drawing attention to silences, or unproblematized elements, within it" (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016, p. 22). Finally, question 4 "opens up the opportunity to be inventive" (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016, p. 22).

2.4 The policy: 'Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'[18]

As introduced in Chapter One, the 'SRFDP' was a policy initiative announced by the GoI of

Ireland in January 2017 to provide more multi-denominational schools across the country;

this was in line with the choices of families and school communities and the 'Programme for

Government' commitment for 400 multi-denominational schools by 2030. This process

involved the transfer of live schools, as opposed to the amalgamation and closure model of

the patronage divestment process (DE, 2018a). It aimed to significantly increase patron

diversity (DES, 2018b; McHugh and Government of Ireland, 2019). There were two Phases

to the process of reconfiguration: the 'Identification Phase' and the 'Implementation Phase'.

The 'Identification Phase' took place in 16 initial areas nationwide. Local ETBs were tasked

with identifying locations where demand for multi-denominational schools was likely. This

was to be achieved by surveying preschool parents/ guardians (DE, 2018a). It was anticipated

that ETBs would engage with the local patron who represented the majority of schools in the

area to outline the results of the survey and discuss options for a reconfiguration of existing

schools to meet this oncoming demand. A report on the progress of this phase was due to be

published in 2022 by the DE. However, at the time of writing, no report had been published.

An 'Early Movers' provision was also run in parallel with the process outlined above.

This process allowed for any school community to directly engage their current patron,

outside of the main process, and to seek a transfer of patronage to a multi-denominational

patron, fast-tracking the patronage reassignment. It was under this provision that Scoil na

Carraige was reconfigured. Until March 2022, little policy guidance, beyond what was

already mentioned, was available from the DE about what reconfiguration entailed for

schools in practice. In guidance materials published in March 2022, additional information

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[18] No formal policy document for school reconfiguration or school divestment existed until March 2022. Therefore, at the time of the research design and data gathering, the Researcher employed Dye's (1972, p. 2) definition of public policy as "anything a government chooses to do or not to do".

about the reconfiguration process was provided by the DE (DE, 2022b). The new guidance outlines the DE's guiding principles for reconfiguration and sets forth information and guidance about the process for parents, guardians, pupils, the school community, Patrons and BOMs.

It is important to note that this information was not available to the case study school during their reconfiguration or to the researcher at the time the research instruments were designed or the interviews were conducted. Therefore, when originally reviewing the literature, the author reviewed literature from multi-denominational Patrons (ETBI, 2018a; Educate Together, 2019) to understand the practical changes that reconfiguration would likely entail for schools. While useful, the documents offered significantly less detail about the formal process of reconfiguration than the 2022 guidance from the DE. Table 2 provides a synopsis of the practical changes to the school as part of the reconfiguration process as identified in the policy guidance by the DE (2022a) and by ETBI (2022a) in updated guidance surrounding reconfiguration.

Table 2. Expected changes for schools in the school reconfiguration process

Values and Curriculum	The school will align itself with the core values of the new patron and introduce a new patron's curriculum.
School Name/ Logo/ Crest	The school will change its name, logo and crest.
Landownership	The landownership of the school property will be negotiated as a long-term lease with the existing patron body and the DE.
Staff	Existing staff may seek redeployment through the panel and should be given the option of committing to the new ethos or redeployment. If the latter is chosen, training will be provided.
Sacramental Preparation	Sacramental preparation will take place outside of the school day at a cost to the parent.
Governance	A new Board of Management will be appointed with representation from the new patron.
School Policies	Admission policies will be amended to reflect the changed status of the school.
Co-educational	Single-sex schools will become co-educational if it changes patronage to a CNS.
School Finance	The guidance outlines a process for the transfer of money from one patron to the next and details the additional funding which will be made available to the school that reconfigures.

The subsequent sections apply the WPR framework to the 'SRFDP' policy.

2.5 What's the 'problem' represented to be in the 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'?

As shown in Table 1, the first question that presents in the WPR analysis framework focuses on identifying what the 'problem' is and how it has been represented. Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, p. 20) state that the goal of this question is to "identify a place to begin the analysis". Although first named publicly by the DE as the 'SRFDP' in January 2017 via a press release (DE, 2018), the process outlined was a rebranding and reimagining of the older policy of 'divestment'. Therefore, following Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) advice, the researcher worked backwards to the 'Report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary

Sector', which was published in 2012. The Forum's report recommended a range of measures to increase diversity and choice in the patronage of primary schools, including the divestment of some existing Catholic primary schools to other patron bodies and the establishment of new multi-denominational schools. The report states that:

> The whole aim of the change in the school patronage process is to provide the appropriate form of education for pupils and their parents in line with their beliefs and value systems. (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 53)

While reimagined as school reconfiguration in 2018, the ultimate goal of this policy proposal remains the same from 2012: to create "more diversity […] to meet the changing needs of our population" (DE, 2018). As presented, the problem that the policy sought to address was a primary system of education that was unable to provide sufficient choice to parents who sought an alternative to denominational education. The 'SRFDP', and the school divestment process before it, therefore aimed to address this lack of diversity and increase choice for parents when selecting a primary school for their child in Ireland.

2.6 What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem' of lack of diversity and school choice in the patronage system?

As argued by Bacchi and Goodwin (2016), policy analysis requires consideration of the underlying assumptions (tacit and explicit) of the 'problem' representation. In response to Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) prompt questions (set out in Table 1), the researcher sought to identify the assumptions underlying the problem representation. In the context of the WPR framework, assumptions refer to the underlying beliefs, presuppositions, or conceptual logics that shape how a particular problem is understood and represented within a policy or discourse (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). These assumptions provide the foundation for constructing the problem and guide the subsequent analysis and decision-making processes. Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) emphasise the importance of examining these assumptions because they influence the way in which the problem is framed, the solutions proposed, and

the potential outcomes envisioned. By identifying and interrogating these assumptions, the researcher was able to gain insight into the underlying ideologies and values that shaped the reconfiguration policy landscape. Through considered exploration of the 'Report of the Forum of Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector' and the published responses to the report three dominant assumptions emerge and discussion now turns to these.

In conceptual journal articles, a number of authors (Conway, 2012, 2017; Van Nieuwenhove, 2012; Griffin, 2019; Meehan and O'Connell, 2012) argue that the Forum's report incorrectly assumed that a greater diversity of patronage at primary school level was desirable to parents and that parents from a minority faith or non-religious backgrounds should be able to choose an alternative to denominational education if they so wished. The report refers to a "significant minority of non-believers, as well as more parents who wish to choose multi-denominational education" (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 31) and a general assumption by Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather (2012) that this minority would grow is evident, with terms such as 'growing diversity' and 'growing pluralism' used throughout the report.

The earliest criticism of this assumption can be found in an opinion piece by the Catholic commentator Conway (2012), where he questions the extent to which a diversity of patronage is warranted. Writing five years later he was unwavering in his stance, and in another opinion piece, argued that the "level of demand among parents for greater diversity of patronage" had still not been "reliably demonstrated" (Conway, 2017, p. 352). Griffin (2019), Chief Executive Officer of Catholic Education an Irish School Trust (CEIST) at the time of writing, also argued that the assumption within the policy proposal of divestment that change of patronage was desired by parents was misplaced. She argued that "the reality" was "that parents who have children in a local Catholic school do not want to change what they

know and what they value" (Griffin, 2019, p. 58). This, she attests, was the real reason for the

lack of progress, explaining that:

> Until parents are given assurances about new patronage models and what they offer,
> divestment will remain rare. Local Bishops, no more than the Department of
> Education and Skills, will not ignore and defy local parental wishes. (Griffin, 2019,
> p. 58)

Griffin (2019) does not provide any empirical evidence to support her argument. Instead, her

opinion appears to be based on the slow rate of progress the policies of reconfiguration and

divestment have achieved and her experience of working within the Catholic education

sector.

Meehan and O'Connell (2012, p. 286) acknowledge the need for "a multiplicity of

school types" in Ireland. However, they take issue with many of the Forum's

recommendations in relation to Stand Alone Schools, particularly the understanding and

image of God presented in the report as "an outside agent who can be confined to the visible

and empirical, such as formal Religious Education, religious artifacts and celebrations"

(Meehan and O'Connell, 2012, p. 291). They accuse the Forum of privileging one form of

characteristic spirit over another. They also argued that the problem of a lack of diversity of

school type had been overstated by the Forum. They claimed that lack of school choice or

diversity of school type was an issue for a very small minority of parents in Ireland. They

challenged the Forum's recommendations of privileging the rights of the minority over the

rights of the majority:

> The majority too has rights and denominational education is clearly treasured by
> many. (Meehan and O'Connell, 2012, p. 293)

They were critical of the Forum for not producing evidence that demonstrated that ethos

negatively impacts the lives of pupils from minority belief backgrounds. They state that

Catholic education "is clearly treasured by many" and base this assumption on the fact that

over "17,000 volunteers sit on Boards of Management of Catholic primary schools without pay or recompense" (Meehan and O'Connell, 2012, p. 6).

Writing in 2008, Kieran acknowledged the scarcity of research in Ireland on diversity and inclusivity in Catholic schools. However, in the years since, there have been a number of studies which suggest that non-Catholic children who attend Catholic primary schools in Ireland may experience some form of discrimination or marginalisation based on their identity as a non-Catholic (Smyth *et al.*, 2009; Del Aguila and Cantillon, 2012; Jameson and Carthy, 2012; Faas, Foster and Smith, 2020). Other studies have suggested that Catholic schools may struggle to accommodate the needs of non-Catholic children, particularly when it comes to providing an 'opt-out' of RE or religious practices (Smyth and Darmody, 2011; Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska, 2016a; Donoghue, 2021). However, it is important to note that there is no consensus on this issue, and other studies have found evidence that principals and teachers in Catholic schools are committed to promoting the inclusion of non-Catholic children (Mahon, 2017; Campbell, 2020). The issue is complex and multifaceted, and in the examples above, depended on a range of factors such as the specific school and the attitudes of individual teachers and school leaders.

The second assumption that was evident in the Forum's report was that multi-denominational schools could provide a valuable alternative to the traditional model of denominational education in Ireland, and could help to promote greater diversity and inclusivity in the primary education system. However, the positioning of multi-denominational schools in this way has been perceived by some commentators from the Catholic sector as the privileging of multi-denominational education and a move towards a more secular model of education. For example, in his response to the Forum's report, Van Nieuwenhove (2012) accused the State of showing a clear preference for multi-denominational education. An alternative position was put forward by Rougier and Honohan

(2014, p. 71) who argued that the policy of divestment displayed a preference for "a more varied pluralism, or greater 'diversity of schools', rather than towards either a secular system or privileged recognition of religious schools".

Conway (2012, p. 2017) identified the Forum's report as a "cultural marker" which highlighted a shift in Irish cultural norms. He viewed divestment as creating a binary between an old and new Ireland: a religious past and a secular future. He referenced the commitment of the GoI to building new multi-denominational schools, which will "provide for greater diversity of school type" (Conway, 2012, p. 271). To Conway, this signals a death knell for denominational education in Ireland and indicates that denominational schooling "is considered to have no place in a modern society". He states that:

> The operative principle seems to be that enlightened Catholic parents will want their children educated in a multi-denominational setting and increasingly, future citizens will belong to the 'no religion' category. (Conway, 2012, p. 271)

Conway provided an analysis of the State's preference for multi-denominational schools and offered insights into the reasons behind it. According to Conway (2012), he believes that the State, being secular in nature, perceives RE as a means to address the potentially negative impacts of religion in modern societies. From this perspective, RE should primarily focus on fostering tolerance, dialogue, mutual understanding, and reconciliation, while also promoting responsible citizenship and the functioning of democracy. Conway argued that within this discourse, there is a lack of recognition regarding the significant role religions can play in promoting responsible citizenship and social cohesion (Conway, 2012, p. 272). Conway implied that the State assumes that multi-denominational schools, through their approach to religious and/or values education, can contribute to building a more tolerant society. Consequently, the State considers such schools more desirable. However, Conway expressed his disagreement with this assumption, suggesting that the State's report from the Forum views denominational RE as a problem to

be overcome rather than recognising it as a valuable resource in shaping responsible citizens (Conway, 2012, p. 273). Furthermore, Conway challenged the prevalent caricature of Catholic education and Catholic schools often portrayed in media debates. He contended that Catholic schools are, in fact, the most inclusive educational institutions in the State (Conway, 2017).

The assumption that multi-denominational schools are more inclusive than denominational schools is also challenged by commentators like Van Nieuwenhove (2012), who argued that the policy of divestment made an incorrect assumption that a multi-denominational approach is values neutral and does not have a formative aspect in their philosophy (Van Nieuwenhove, 2012). He argues that the values promoted in multi-denominational schools are often Western values that can also be exclusionary. In his book 'Denominational Education and Politics', Tuohy (2013, p. 265) also criticises the Forum for not considering the difficulties faced in "other types of schools" and warns that there is an assumption within the policy of divestment that moving a school to a 'secular' model will be unproblematic. For Tuohy (2013), this perspective is ignorant of the "complexity of the range of expectations a large number of diverse groups might bring to the 'secular' school" (Tuohy, 2013, p. 265). He is doubtful that "a choice between a religious (denominational) school and a secular (non-denominational or multi-denominational) school will satisfy all parents" (Tuohy, 2016, p. 273).

The final assumption that was evident in Forum's report was that the policy of divestment would be fully supported by the Catholic Church. A collaborative relationship between the DE and the Catholic Church was evident in the Forum's report and Conway (2017, p. 352) attests that the Catholic Church has been "a willing partner in the divestment process". According to Conway (2017), a significant driving force behind this collaboration is the Church's long-standing belief in the primacy of parents as the primary educators of

their children. Conway (2017) argues that the Church holds the view that parents' desires

regarding their children's education should be of utmost importance:

> The Church has always held that parents are the primary educators of their children
> and that their wishes in regard to the education of their children are paramount.
> (Conway, 2017, p. 352)

He also states that the Catholic Church advocates "not only freedom for religious belief,

practice, and proclamation but also freedom from religious coercion" (Conway, 2017, p.

352). Commentators like Dineen (2021) and Rougier and Honohan (2014, p. 83) cite another

reason for the Catholic Church's support for divestment. They identify divestment as an

opportunity for the Catholic Church to renew itself and reconsider its place and role in

education, "with a smaller and stronger Catholic school system" (Rougier and Honohan,

2014, p. 83).

However, challenges have come to light regarding this collaborative relationship, and

there has been anecdotal evidence of disagreement regarding the policy within the Catholic

Church and between the Bishops and the DE (McNamee, 2016; Burns, 2017; McGuire,

2021). McGraw and Tiernan (2022, p. 304) point to the "lack of a unified voice" within the

Catholic Church as a particular challenge. It is important to remember "there are 26 Catholic

patrons as each local bishop has authority of the schools in his diocese" (McGraw and

Tiernan, 2022, p. 304). Tuohy (2013, p. 260) points to a number of problematic assumptions

within the policy that have likely challenged the collaborative relationship. Firstly, he argues

that an assumption that "the desired diversity could be achieved within the current system of

patronage by simply finding different patron bodies" is problematic. Such an assumption

ultimately places Catholic schools and multi-denominational models in competition with

each other (Tuohy, 2013). Secondly, he argues that there was an assumption by the DE that

this "large-scale change process could be carried out on a 'cost-neutral' basis" (Tuohy, 2013,

p. 260), which posed challenges with regard to the transfer of land ownership.

The final assumption that emerged was the expectation that the Catholic patron would assume a leadership role in the reconfiguration process and even advocate for the divestment of their own schools (Tuohy, 2013, p. 263). Tuohy (2013, p. 263) suggests that this posed a significant dilemma, because while it may be relatively straightforward to support the general idea of divesting schools and promoting diversity across all educational institutions, the practical implementation of divesting a specific school within a particular parish, involving specific parishioners, presents a complex and sensitive situation:

> It is one thing to believe in divesting schools and promoting diversity in all schools; it is another to divest a particular school in a particular parish with particular parishioners. (Tuohy, 2013, p. 263)

Tuohy (2013, p. 263) highlights the tension between the broader goal of fostering diversity and the challenge of divesting a specific school deeply connected to a local community.

Through reviewing the literature, it becomes evident that the assumptions underlying the policy of divestment were shaped by a perceived need and desire for an alternative to the denominational educational model that prioritised values like inclusivity, diversity, and respect for individual beliefs and backgrounds. These assumptions, however, were contested and built on a number of complex and interrelated factors. Applying the WPR framework, it is apparent that the meaning and conceptual logics that needed to be in place for the aforementioned assumptions to be intelligible were based on the belief that multi-denominational schools are more inclusive of children who are not-Catholic when compared to Catholic schools. However, such a dichotomy oversimplifies the issue and responses to the policy proposal demonstrate the contested nature of this notion. As discussed, many have argued that issues of inclusion are not exclusive to one type of school but are common across all school types (Van Nieuwenhove, 2012; Tuohy, 2013; Conway, 2017). By framing denominational and multi-denominational education as opposing forces, the policy fails to recognise the complexities inherent in both forms of education.

A significant gap in the policy discourse is the absence of a specific definition of inclusion or a clear understanding of what constitutes an inclusive school. The lack of a precise definition has opened the door for contestation and ongoing debate surrounding the notion of inclusion within the context of divestment and reconfiguration. This gap further highlights the need to critically examine how this particular representation of the 'problem' has emerged and how it has been shaped by various stakeholders and their perspectives. By delving into question three of the WPR framework, the focus now shifts towards understanding the origins and influences that have contributed to the formulation of this problem representation. Exploring the historical, social, and political factors that have shaped the policy discourse can provide valuable insights into the underlying motivations and assumptions that have guided the development of the divestment policy.

2.7 How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?

Question three of the WPR framework asks us to consider how this representation of the 'problem' has come about. Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, p. 22) explain that the intention of this question is "to disrupt any assumption that what is reflects what has to be". To best address this question the researcher focused on the Forum's report, the supporting literature of the Forum's report, the empirical research undertaken by the DE on foot of the policy proposals and literature that offers commentary on the progress of divestment and/or reconfiguration since its inception. This particular body of literature enabled the researcher to explore the chronological evolution of the policy of divestment, and later reconfiguration, from conceptualisation to implementation and to reflect on the logic and rationale that underpin the assumptions explored earlier.

Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather (2012, p. 1) argued that there were three reasons why, in their view, change was required. Firstly, they observed that Irish society has experienced significant transformations in various aspects, including politics, social

dynamics, economics, culture, demography, and education. Secondly, the authors acknowledged the existence of parents with denominational beliefs who prefer a multi-denominational education for their children. Thirdly, the report made reference to international conventions that Ireland has ratified. The authors argued that there was a mismatch between the traditional pattern of denominational school patronage and the rights of citizens in the contemporary Irish society, which is characterised by cultural and religious diversity. The report explicitly acknowledged that it was a minority of the population who expressed dissatisfaction with the existing arrangements for school patronage. However, the authors recognised their concerns as legitimate, as they believed that these individuals' human rights and rights as citizens were being infringed upon by the current system (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012).

The authors of the Forum's report presented a compelling case for change and reform in the Irish education system by drawing on various sources, including the most recent census data available to them and relevant research studies. Regarding the census data, Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather (2012) referred to the 2006 national census, which highlighted the increasing number of individuals who identified themselves as having 'no religion' and the growing preference for civil marriage ceremonies at that time. In addition to the census data, the authors cited the work of Cassidy (2002), who conducted a desk-based study utilising data from the 'International Social Survey Programme' conducted in 1998 and the 'European Values Study' surveys conducted in 1999.

Cassidy's study revealed that over 9% of Irish people did not belong to any religious denomination, and among those surveyed, 59% reported attending mass once a week or more. However, the percentage decreased to 23% among individuals aged 18-26. This research provided further evidence of the evolving religious landscape and varying levels of religious practice among different age groups in Ireland. The authors also referenced research

conducted by ESRI (2007/08) and reported on by Mac Gréil and Rhatigan (2009), which

indicated a decline in religious practice, with weekly religious worship falling to 42%. A Red

C poll conducted by the Iona Institute (2009) revealed a decline in weekly church attendance

rates among 18-24-year-olds to 46%. These sources contributed to the Coolahan, Hussey and

Kilfeather's argument for the need to provide for more diversity of school type at primary

level.

In 2012, the Forum acknowledged the scarcity of empirical research on parents'

perspectives regarding the role of religion in Irish primary schools, although this would

subsequently be undertaken by the DE. To address this gap, they turned to secondary data

analysis from seven empirical studies (IPPN, 2008, 2011; Murray, 2008; O'Mahony, 2008;

Lodge and Tuohy, 2011) to strengthen their argument for greater diversity in school types.

Although they recognised that these findings were not definitive, they deemed them as

indicative of the changing patterns of religious observance and attitudes in Ireland (Coolahan,

Hussey, and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 45). In retrospect, the Forum's choice to rely solely on

secondary data analysis may be seen as an oversight. Although they acknowledged the

limitations of generalising from such studies, they also highlighted the significance of these

scientifically conducted studies, which included representative samples of parents. The

Forum considered these studies to provide valuable indications of parental attitudes in Ireland

at the time (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather, 2012). Ultimately, the Forum relied on this

data to construct their representation of the 'problem' of inadequate school choice, leading

them to conclude that:

> While religious education continues to be of importance to the majority of parents,
> there are significant minority preferences which need to be accommodated in
> primary school provision into the future. (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012,
> p. 44)

In response to the recommendations of the Forum, the DE announced that "surveys of

parental preferences" in 44 areas identified by the Forum would be undertaken, beginning

with five pilot areas in the autumn of 2012[19]. The DE reported that the aim of the surveys was "to establish the level of parental demand for a wider choice in the patronage of primary schools within these areas" (DE, 2013, p. 3). The surveys were primarily conducted using a dedicated online platform designed specifically for the research. To ensure broader participation, paper survey forms were also made accessible at local libraries for parents in the relevant areas (DE, 2013). Additionally, a toll-free helpline was established for individuals who preferred to request and complete paper surveys. The total number of responses received amounted to 12,813[20], which was criticised by Kitching (2013) as being a low response rate, however, the sample size or details regarding the sampling frame are not provided by the DE in their report.

The DE concluded that the survey data analysis indicated a significant parental demand for immediate changes in school patronage in 28 out of the 44 areas (DE, 2012, 2013). In the remaining 15 areas, although there were groups of parents who expressed a desire for some form of change, the level of support was not considered sufficient to establish a viable school at that time (DE, 2013). The specific criteria used to determine sufficient demand in each area were not explicitly mentioned in the report. Based on this research, a proposal was made for the Catholic patron in the identified areas with sufficient demand. They were requested to explore reconfiguration options that would create space for at least one complete stream (class-level) to be provided by an alternative patron, which was the preferred choice of parents (Department of Education and Skills, 2013, p. 9).

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[19] All of the areas to be surveyed under this process fit the following criteria:
- Population of between 5,000 and 20,000 inhabitants according to the 2011 census
- Population has increased by less than 20% during the intercensal period 2006 to 2011.

The following areas were included: Arklow, Ballina, Ballinasloe, Bandon, Birr, Buncrana, Castlebar, Carrick-on-Suir, Carrigaline, Celbridge, Clonmel, Cobh, Dublin 6 (Harolds Cross / Rathmines), Dungarvan, Edenderry, Enniscorthy, Fermoy, Kells, Killarney, Leixlip, Longford, Loughrea, Malahide, Monaghan, Nenagh, New Ross, Palmerstown, Passage West, Portmarnock, Roscommon, Roscrea, Rush, Shannon, Skerries, Thurles, Tipperary, Tramore, Trim, Tuam, Westport, Whitehall, Wicklow and Youghal (DE, 2013)

[20] 12,433 submissions were received online and the remaining 380 were submitted on paper forms. A total of 2,098 survey responses were deemed invalid because no PPSN or names were supplied and also some were duplicates (DE, 2013).

In July 2014, the DE published a report entitled 'Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector Progress to Date and Future Directions'. The report stated that following consideration of the results of the survey research and discussion with the existing Catholic patrons, three new schools would open in September 2014 in Tramore, Co. Waterford, Trim, Co. Meath and Malahide/Portmarnock, Co. Dublin (DES, 2014). In addition, a primary school building in Basin Lane, Dublin 8 would be used from September 2014 by an Educate Together school and in Ballina, Co. Mayo, the transfer of a Church of Ireland school to Educate Together patronage was also under discussion (DES, 2014, p. 14). Discussions with the Catholic patrons were reported to have been positive, however, it was noted that divestment had not "proceeded at the pace originally envisaged" (DES, 2014).

The report also included findings from a public consultation with parents which asked them to submit their views and thoughts on how primary schools can make all children feel included and involved. The consultation received 377 written responses from parents, and although not directly asked about the issue of divestment, the responses demonstrated a diverse range of opinions that ranged from "people who are strongly of the view that religious education should have no role at all in primary education to others who believe that primary schools in Ireland are already very inclusive and who oppose any change in the current system" (DES, 2014, p. 17). It was reported that:

> A sizeable number of respondents were of the view that if the State wants to provide plurality and diversity of patronage in the system that it should move to establish new schools (under the New Schools Establishment Group) itself and leave the existing denominational schools as they are. (DES, 2014, p. 18)

In the years following the 2014 report, no additional reports were issued by the DE in relation to school divestment. To determine what transpired between 2014 and 2019 with regard to

divestment, the researcher reviewed literature, published after 2014, which offers

commentary on the progress of divestments and/or reconfiguration[21].

In chapter ten of their book, entitled 'The Politics of Irish Primary Education: reform

in an era of secularisation', McGraw and Tiernan (2022) track the progress of the policy of

divestment and later reconfiguration. While initially commenting that "The goal seemed

simple and straightforward", they surmise that the "policy solution, although broadly

supported, has led to minimal actual change" (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022, pp. 293–294).

They highlight the small number of schools divested between 2011 and 2019 and attribute this

lack of progress to the lack of a "clear path" for school divestment (McGraw and Tiernan,

2022, p. 294). In particular, they problematise the part of the process which places the onus

on "local schools and communities to change their patronage" (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022,

p. 294). They comment that the "intense opposition" to change at local level has left

"individual educational, Church and political leaders with little incentive to force

communities to embrace divestment" (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022, p. 294). The dilution of

the policy is discussed by the authors, and they attest that rather than "forcing the issue and

coping with strong local opposition in communities", policymakers have decided to "proceed

cautiously, only responding to local communities where there has been sufficient demand for

change" (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022, p. 294). They state that even in these situations, change

has been driven by a desire to save "failing and closing schools" rather than arising from a

genuine desire for a greater diversity of school types in the area (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022,

p. 294).

McGraw and Tiernan (2022, p. 294) hypothesise that there is an "implicit acceptance"

by those desiring a greater diversity of school types that current the situation will slowly

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[21] The following search string was used to identify the relevant literature "Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector" AND "divest*" OR "reconfig*". The search returned 37 results. The researcher read the title and abstract of all 37 texts and eliminated 29 articles that were not relevant.

change in the coming years as a result of greater consensus and willingness on the need to transfer school patronage. They conclude that "in the short term, the State has focused on establishing new non- or multi-denominational schools where there is a clear need, but the State either lacks or is unwilling to commit resources to do this on a large scale" and that "Reformers believe that the two currents will eventually converge and the demand for change will outweigh the local opposition that currently exists" (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022, p. 294).

Similar to McGraw and Tiernan (2022), Kitching (2020) presents a critical perspective on the process of divestment. He raises concerns about the consultation process, highlighting that public meetings on the transfer of patronage were intentionally avoided. According to Kitching (2020), this approach perpetuated the dominance of Catholic trusteeship and the competitive dynamics among the thirteen different patrons seeking control over schools. He argues that by January 2017, only a few unused primary school buildings had been divested of Catholic patronage, indicating minimal progress (Kitching, 2020). Kitching (2020) goes further in his critique, suggesting that the policy has not effectively addressed the broader national question regarding predominantly Catholic schools. He asserts that it has instead deepened divisions between patron bodies and focused primarily on catering to actively choosing parents while neglecting to challenge the colonial development and underfunded, quasi-public nature of the current patronage system. In essence, Kitching (2020) advocates for a comprehensive overhaul of the existing system, rather than incremental changes.

The literature cited in this section highlights a significant dichotomy between the national policy of divestment and reconfiguration and its local implementation within the context of the Irish education system. At national level, there is a clear recognition of the need for change and a commitment to fostering diversity and inclusivity by diversifying school patronage. This understanding is supported by the findings of the DE survey

conducted in 2012 and 2013, which revealed a widespread desire for a greater diversity of school types in most areas. However, when it comes to translating these national policies into local action, numerous challenges and obstacles emerged. Local communities often exhibited resistance to divestment and displayed a strong preference for maintaining the existing *status quo.* This raises important questions about the most effective approach to navigate this dichotomy. McGraw and Tiernan (2022) propose a cautious and incremental approach to divestment, which seeks to navigate local opposition by making gradual changes to the existing system. This approach aims to strike a delicate balance between addressing the need for change and respecting the concerns of local communities. In contrast, Kitching (2020) advocates for a more transformative approach that calls for a complete overhaul of the current patronage system. Attention now turns to this reconceptualisation of the problem through an exploration of the relevant literature.

2.8 What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Can the "problem" be conceptualised differently?

Question 4 of Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) WPR framework asks us to consider what is left unproblematic by the manner in which the problem is represented. Where are the silences? And can the "problem" be conceptualised differently? In reviewing the literature outlined earlier, it is clear that something that remained unquestioned by the Forum was the central role given to parental choice in the process of diversification of schools and the acceptance that a patronage system was the most suitable means of providing for primary education.

O'Toole (2015), in a conceptual paper, reimagines the problem of lack of school choice and proposes the 'common school' model as the solution to the issue of lack of diversity of school type. It is important to note that O'Toole (2015a) is the only author to offer a detailed description of a reconceptualisation of the problem in an Irish educational context. O'Toole (2015b) challenges us to reconceptualise the problem as a lack of State-

education. She calls for a move away from prioritising parental choice towards prioritising the 'common good'. She argues that if the problem of 'lack of school choice' was thought about in this way, then what would be presented as the solution would be a state system of 'common schools' where all children are treated equally. But this reconceptualisation requires a reimagining of educational provision at primary level in Ireland and the extent to which this overhaul is desired by parents, or affordable to the State, is undetermined.

O'Toole (2015b, p. 97) asks the reader to weigh "the republican ideal of the 'common good' against the liberal principle of individual choice" when we are considering school reconfiguration. For O'Toole, the policy should not be one of reconfiguration, and instead, she calls for a systemic change and the introduction of State education. For O'Toole (2015, p. 97), a fundamental question that emerges is to what extent Ireland negotiates the tension between the perceived parental right to choose the type of school they want for their child against the need to uphold the 'common good'. She argues that the rights of parents to have their children educated in a school of their choosing must be measured against the commitment of society to provide for "the good of everyone in that society" (O'Toole, p. 97). O'Toole (2015, p. 97) identifies the central issue with the school reconfiguration process as the conflict between the "liberal emphasis on individual liberty", which prioritises parental choice, "and the ideal of the common good, which would encompass civic values, community and polity". For O'Toole (2015, p. 98), the problem with the emphasis on parental preference is that it "reflects the agenda of liberal individualism and therefore has the potential to cause fragmentation and to erode the common good". As O'Toole (2015, p. 98) points out, the problem with choosing individualism over the 'common good' in the case of school reconfiguration is that it will "enable the maintenance of the *status quo* of denominational education in some areas", especially where there is a Stand Alone School. For O'Toole (2015) there is only one solution:

> To have all the children in the state educated alongside each other in common schools, where all can enjoy full and equal status, and where faith formation takes place outside school hours. (O'Toole, 2015b, p. 98)

For the researcher, O'Toole's (2015) reconceptualisation of the problem is idealistic; it fails to consider that "policy formulation and implementation cannot be removed from the context in which it takes place" (Mthethwa, 2012, p. 41). This is something that Kitching (2020) draws to our attention. While praising the "sincere and efficient manner" in which the Advisory Group worked, Kitching (2020) is overt in stating that from the outset, the Forum was tasked with 'problem-solving' with little to no resources available to them to impact change on a grand scale:

> But in a context of radical budgetary austerity, the Forum's remit was to be 'cost-neutral'. This meant the radical revisioning of the primary-school system, for example, dismantling state-funded school patronage from the outset, was disavowed. (Kitching, 2020, p. 57)

Therefore, while O'Toole demonstrates that the problem of lack of school choice can be approached differently, doing so would require significant investment by the State.

2.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, this review of the socio-historical policy literature, conducted using questions 1-4 of the WPR framework, has provided valuable insights into the policy of school reconfiguration in the RoI. Upon reflection, several key points emerge. Firstly, it is crucial to adopt a more nuanced perspective regarding the assertion that parental demand for patronage change was overstated by the Forum. While parents, in general, expressed support for the concept of reconfiguration, as evidenced by the DE surveys (2012, 2013), it is important to acknowledge the significant distinction between their favourable disposition towards a national policy of reconfiguration and their specific stance on the reconfiguration of their local school. This discrepancy underscores the need to recognise and navigate the practical challenges and diverse attitudes that arise when implementing change within distinct communities.

Furthermore, it is imperative to question the assumption that multi-denominational education inherently resolves issues of inclusion. Despite the professed commitment to inclusivity in multi-denominational schools, the literature gives voice to those who argue that challenges related to inclusion can still arise within these educational settings. It is vital to recognise that fostering an inclusive environment requires ongoing efforts and considerations that go beyond the chosen educational model. The analysis also brings to light a significant gap in the policy discourse, namely the absence of a clear definition of inclusion and a shared understanding of what constitutes an inclusive school. This lack of clarity has resulted in ongoing debates and contestations surrounding the concept of inclusion within the context of divestment and reconfiguration. It underscores the necessity for critical examination of how the representation of the problem has emerged and been influenced by various stakeholders, as well as the historical, social, and political factors that shape the policy discourse.

Lastly, it is crucial to approach the assumption of support for divestment and reconfiguration from the Catholic Church with consideration and empathy. The examination of the collaborative relationship between the DE and the Catholic Church reveals challenges and disagreements that must be acknowledged. However, it is the researcher's assessment that the policy of reconfiguration and divestment has been built upon problematic assumptions regarding the role of the Catholic patron and cost-neutrality. The policy proposal that the Catholic patron would readily support the divestment of their own schools is inherently complex and sensitive. Divesting a school deeply rooted in a local community raises significant challenges for the Catholic patron, including the potential disruption to established local traditions and practices. The assumption by the DE of cost-neutrality in the process of reconfiguration and divestment presents another challenge. Implementing such a policy requires careful consideration of resource allocation, funding mechanisms, and the potential costs associated with transitioning schools from one patron to another. It is essential

to recognise that ensuring an equitable and inclusive educational system may require additional financial support and resources, which may not align with the concept of cost-neutrality.

Through an exploration of the socio-historical policy literature, a number of key concepts and theories emerge as central to the phenomenon of reconfiguration. As evidenced in the guidance documents pertaining to reconfiguration, the process is predominantly concerned with 'ethos change'. Therefore, a central concept underpinning this study is that of 'ethos'. It is also evident that the concepts of 'diversity, equality and inclusion' are woven throughout the policy literature surrounding the phenomenon under investigation. The assumption that multi-denominational education can provide a more inclusive and equitable educational experience for all children was strongly contested by Catholic commentators. Other concepts also emerge, for example, Griffin's (2019) observations regarding parental preference for what is known and familiar and the resistance to change cited by Conway (2017) suggest the presence of a Catholic 'hegemony' and a lingering attachment to people's Catholic identity. In addition, McGraw and Tiernan's (2022) testimony of strong local opposition and Tuohy's (2013, p. 263) warning that "all politics is said to be local" speaks to the importance of place and locality in Ireland and are reminders of the complexity of the reconfiguration process at local level. Essentially, it is a process that is dependent on a local desire to change a familiar entity, with a particular history and meaning that is connected to people's sense of identity. The next chapter explores these concepts in more depth.

Chapter Three: A review of the theoretical and conceptual literature

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we delve into the theoretical and conceptual framework that forms the basis of this study. In the main, these concepts and associated theories emerged during the analysis of socio-historical policy literature, which was explored in Chapter Two. However, it should be noted that 'ethos' was identified as a dominant concept from the outset, as school reconfiguration is a policy built around 'ethos-change'. As a live and previously unexplored phenomenon, the researcher was constantly aware that the phenomenon was developing and evolving as it was implemented. Hence, the development of the conceptual framework for this study was an iterative and fluid process that was drafted and revised multiple times to best understand the phenomenon under investigation. Emerging from the review of the socio-historical literature, the key concepts that underpin this study are 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion', and 'rural identity'. The first step in reviewing the literature related to these concepts was to pinpoint the key theories/conceptualisations and their associated theorists/researchers. Subsequently, secondary texts that discussed these concepts were researched, and where available, empirical literature detailing the application of these theories in an Irish educational context is reviewed and discussed.

3.2 Organisation of the chapter

The focus of this study revolves around the phenomenon of school reconfiguration, which is constructed around the concept of 'ethos change'. Consequently, theories of 'ethos' served as the starting place for this review. Understandings of 'ethos' are explored, and a definition specific to this study's context is provided. Donnelly's (2000) framework on the dimensions of ethos is suggested as a valuable tool for examining the concept in the context of schools. Empirical studies investigating the process of ethos transformation in integrated schools in Northern Ireland, which serves as the only comparable international phenomenon to school

reconfiguration, are presented. This exploration of 'ethos' reveals the multifaceted nature of 'school culture' in relation to society. In the Irish context, the examination of 'ethos' brings forth significant issues of power and contestation. Within the theories of power, Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony is noted as a seminal framework for understanding such contestation and this concept of hegemony was explored to strengthen the critical framework in the thesis for an understanding of the complexity of school ethos in Ireland.

One commonly cited rationale for reconfiguration is the need to address existing educational inequalities faced by children and families who do not align with the current denominational models of education available to them (Coolahan, Hussey, & Kilfeather, 2012). Therefore, theories of inclusion, equality, and diversity hold particular relevance in this study. Three conceptualisations of equality, outlined by Baker *et al.* (2006) are examined: basic equality, liberal egalitarianism, and equality of condition. While equality is a useful concept, the concept of inclusion is also prevalent in the discourse surrounding denominational education in Ireland. Therefore, the conceptualisation of inclusive schools by Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) is considered in conjunction with theories of equality.

Given that the study focuses on a rural case study school, the rural context is a significant variable from the outset. The analysis of socio-historical policy literature and theoretical literature indicates that rurality will be relevant in relation to emerging issues surrounding ethos, inclusion, and hegemony. As the review progresses, the framework of identity theory as applied specifically to rural contexts emerges as the most suitable theoretical lens to explore issues of identity and equality in rural schools. This framework becomes particularly evident in the emergent data from respondent interviews, where tensions arise between the broader discourse of power and equality and more specific manifestations of this dynamic within rural schools. To understand the concept of rural identity, Cohen's (1982) work on rural identity, belonging, and boundaries is considered in

this review. Finally, this chapter presents the conceptual framework that underpins the study, and the conclusion reflects on how the insights gained from this review shaped the research questions.

3.3 Ethos

The concept of 'ethos' is central to this study, as, at its heart, school reconfiguration is about changing from one 'ethos' to another. On paper, this sounds simple and unambiguous, but in reality, 'ethos' is an "intangible, obscure and impenetrable" (Furlong and Monahan, 2000, p. 59) concept that is both "elusive" and "abstract" (Lambkin, 2000, p. 91). 'Ethos' is a multi-layered term (Lodge and Tuohy, 2016, p. 3) which is often contested, due to the challenges involved in defining it (Mc Laughlin, 2005; Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018a). One rationale for this is that the term 'ethos' is often used interchangeably with terms such as 'ambience', 'atmosphere', 'culture' and 'climate' (Mc Laughlin, 2005). This interchangeable use of terminology has resulted in a lack of a specific definition. A second rationale is that 'ethos' traverses many aspects of school life and that it is, therefore, difficult to be clear about its influences (Mc Laughlin, 2005). The terms 'school culture' and 'school ethos' are commonly used in Irish academic discourse on denominational schools (Norman, 2003). However, to confound matters further, "the Education Act (1998) used the term 'characteristic spirit' as opposed to 'ethos' (O'Flaherty *et al.*, 2018, p. 317). The Act states that:

> a school's characteristic spirit is determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school. (Government of Ireland, 1998)

The definition of 'characteristic spirit' presented in the Education Act (1998) confirms the multi-layered dimensions of 'ethos'. In practice in Ireland, "the words 'ethos' and 'characteristic spirit' are used interchangeably" (Mahon, McNamara and Williams, (2017, p. 39). For this thesis, they are understood to have the same meaning.

3.3.1 Defining ethos

Although recognised as an "elusive entity" (Norman, 2003, p. 2), "various educationalists have endeavoured to uncover the nature of ethos" (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018a, p. 604) seeing it as forming dispositions, values and attitudes in a field where tradition plays an important role (McLaughlin, 2005). The word 'ethos' comes from the Greek word meaning habit and has associations with the development of a person's character and an atmosphere where a person's values are formed (Norman, 2003, pp. 1–2). For Aristotle, 'ethos' had connections to the development of goodness of character and in an Aristotelian interpretation of 'ethos', character is not created by nature, but by habits formed through our relation to our environment (Robb, 1943, p. 207). 'Ethos' is described by Smith (2003, p. 466) as "a special case of *habitus*". The term '*habitus*' means "an ingrained disposition to act, think and feel in a particular way, and is shaped by the process of socialisation" (Glover and Coleman, 2005, p. 258). Within this understanding, staff and pupils joining a school community become socialised into the organisational and personal relationships that determine the unique 'ethos' (Glover and Coleman, 2005). Norman (2003, p. 3) notes that:

> 'ethos', in the Aristotelian sense, inheres in an institution in the same way that air fills a room, naturally and without direction or imposition.

This means that the 'ethos' of a school "has to do with its tone and character", the intangible spirit "that permeates its endeavours giving a certain moral shape to all of its activities" and that it "emerges from the interaction of a number of aspects of school life" (Norman, 2003, p. 2). Donnelly (2000, p. 134) defines 'ethos' as "the distinctive range of values and beliefs, which define the philosophy or atmosphere of an organisation". In education, "a school's 'ethos' wields a certain amount of power to condition people to think and act in an 'acceptable' manner" (Donnelly, 2000, p. 136). However, Donnelly (2000, p. 135) suggests that there are two viewpoints from which 'ethos' is understood; positivist and anti-positivist.

3.3.2 A positivist or anti-positivist view of ethos?

From a positivist perspective, 'ethos' is viewed as "something which prescribes social reality" (Donnelly, 2000, p. 135). In this understanding, 'ethos' is seen as an "objective phenomenon" which exists "independently of the people and social events in an organisation" and "can be changed at will to make the organisation more successful" (Donnelly, 2000, p. 135). 'Ethos' is therefore seen as the formal articulation of the school's aims and objectives (Donnelly, 2000), often referred to as the school's vision or mission statement. Hogan (1984) echoes this perspective when he defines 'ethos' as custodial:

> The authorities of the school or educational system view themselves largely as custodians of a set of standards, which are to be preserved, defended and transmitted through the agency of schools and colleges. (Hogan, 1984, p. 695)

An alternative anti-positivist understanding, which corresponds with Norman's and Aristotle's conception of 'ethos', is put forth by theorists who see ethos as "something which is more informal, emerging from social interaction and process" (Donnelly, 2000, p. 136). In this understanding of 'ethos', it is a social process of interaction that is not independent of the organisation but "inherently bound up within it". It is not seen as something that is set in stone, but rather something more fluid that "will be produced and reproduced over time" (Donnelly, 2000, p. 136). Allder (1993, p. 69) endorses this understanding of 'ethos' when she describes it as the "unique pervasive atmosphere or mood" of the school, that is largely created by the social interaction of people within the school and to a lesser extent the environment.

For Donnelly (2000, p. 136), if 'ethos' is understood in this way, then "any exploration or examination of it must take account of the views and interactions of individual, organisational members". The lived experiences of 'ethos' were central to this study. Donnelly's definition of 'ethos' emphasises the need for a commitment on the part of all

those involved in a school to support the 'ethos' of the school in their everyday actions. In this anti-positivist understanding of 'ethos', Norman (2003, p. 5) proposes that it would be necessary for the 'ethos' to be "nourished by a healthy dialogue to inform and give vision to the life of the institution". For Norman (2003, pp.5-6) this can be achieved through ongoing staff training and by all those involved in the school engaging in the process of critical reflection concerned with the fundamental issues affecting the 'ethos' of the school:

> This requires school management be willing to allow a free dialogue and reflection on these issues and that they do not seek to direct or impose their own concerns onto the staff, students and parents. (Norman, 2003, p. 6)

For Hogan and O'Grady (1997), this form of dialogue involves a willingness to put one's own truth claims aside to achieve more inclusive understandings. Commitment to a school's ethos will be fostered if each person has been allowed to personally "encounter and make new the tradition out of which the school has come" (Norman, 2003, p. 6). However, in some cases, the issue of 'school ethos' is understood "primarily in terms of the compliance of all employed in the school with the officially sanctioned standards and requirements of the school authorities" (Hogan, 1984, pp. 694-695). Hogan (1984, pp. 694-695) asserts that this view of 'school ethos' has perhaps been "the most common one in Ireland where it has traditionally been associated with the outlooks of religious or other school authorities". In investigating understandings of 'ethos' in the case study site, the researcher examined the extent to which the school aligns with a positivist or anti-positivist understanding of 'ethos'. In a systematic review of international literature pertaining to 'school ethos', 'culture' and 'climate', Glover and Coleman (2005, p. 265) note that there is a significant difference when examining the concept of 'ethos' from the viewpoint of a denominational education system. In this context, the 'ethos' is assumed to be that of the religious group that has responsibility for the school (Glover and Coleman, 2005).

3.3.3 Denominational and multi-denominational ethoi; understanding the different approaches to RE

In Ireland, the ethos of the school is often described as per the approach to RE employed in the school. Denominational RE remains significantly the dominant form of RE in Ireland, however, multi-denominational RE is a growing approach in the last two decades. The expectation in the 'SRFDP' is that a reconfigured school will change from denominational RE to the multi-belief and values education approach of the CNS or the equality-based approach of the ETNS or some Gaelscoileanna. While other countries have been grappling with overt questions pertaining to values education for many years (Halstead and Taylor, 1996; Zajda, 2020) the topic of values education is a relatively new area of debate in Irish education and is complicated by the system of patronage (Irwin, 2018). Traditionally, the accepted practice in Irish primary schools is that the values taught come from the denominational ethos and are taught through the patron's RE programme/ curriculum. Therefore, in primary schools in Ireland, the practice of discussing values outside of RE is lacking (Mulcahy and McKenna, 2006).

Values are apparent and taught through many aspects of school life. Some examples include the curriculum, the code of behaviour and the relationships between all members of the school community (Halstead and Taylor, 1996). However, given the particular context of the Irish patronage system, schools in Ireland use their patron's curriculum to place a particular focus on the values they wish to teach their pupils (Irwin, 2018). The patron's curriculum or programme is the curricular expression of the values and ethos of the school (NCCA, 2015b). The Rules for National Schools (1965) require that all schools provide a programme of religious instruction, however, the Department of Education does not prescribe the RE curriculum (Hyland and Bocking, 2015). The Education Act (1998) recognises the

legal right for patrons to design, supervise, implement and teach their programmes (NCCA, 2015a).

3.3.3.1 Approaches to values education in the Catholic primary school

The case study site was originally under the patronage of the Catholic Church. This meant that the ethos of the school was informed by the teachings, traditions, and values of the Catholic faith. 'Share the Good News: The National Directory for Catechesis' was launched in 2010 and provides "a vision and framework for the restructuring of Religious Education in Catholic schools" (Lane, 2013, p. 43). Following the publication of the directory, the 'Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland' was published in 2015. It was the first formal RE curriculum for primary schools in Ireland (Dineen, 2018) and it provides "a structured outline of what Religious Education as an academic discipline in Catholic schools contributes to the Catholic education and formation of young children at pre-school and primary level" (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2015, p. 9).

Both Dineen (2018) and Byrne (2018) commend the document for positively addressing inter-religious literacy and enabling children to learn about beliefs other than their own. This curriculum has provided the foundation for the development of the new national programme called 'Grow in Love' (Dineen, 2018). The curriculum and programme employ a 'Christian moral perspective' that is based on Christian values, virtues and attitudes (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2015). As Donoghue (2021, p. 24) describes:

> Religious teachings in Irish Catholic schools are described as having two dimensions; education and faith formation (IEC, 2015). Religious education focuses on the teachings and values of the Catholic Church, while faith formation "forms children's characters in the virtues and values of Jesus; supports their faith development, and helps them to experience what it means to be a member of the Church community called to witness to Jesus in service of others" (IEC, 2015, p. 13).

However, Whittle (2018, p. 232) reminds us of the "overt reluctance" to refer to RE in Catholic schools as being "confessional or catechetical". He asserts that this is because those

outside of Catholic education often equate confessional RE with indoctrination or have concerns that it is "educationally suspect" (Whittle, 2018, p. 232). This, he argues, has led to an effort by those in Catholic education to distinguish between RE and catechesis in Catholic schools. However, he concludes that "both the aims and the content of RE are currently couched in fundamentally catechetical terms" (Whittle, 2018, p. 253).

In Catholic schools, children receive preparation for the sacraments as part of the school day (INTO, 2003; Cullen and Byrne, 2013; Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska, 2015). The celebration of Catholic religious festivals, prayer and the use and display of religious symbols is also a common feature in Catholic schools (Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska, 2015). In a review of patron's Programmes conducted by the NCCA, denominational patron's Programmes were found to provide teachings of morality and values through a faith lens (NCCA, 2015a). The NCCA noted that the values education provided was founded upon religious beliefs and as such were often not appropriate for children from other belief systems or those who identified as having no religious belief (NCCA, 2015a).

3.3.3.2 Approaches to values education in a Community National School

Goodness Me! Goodness You! (GMGY) is the patron's curriculum in Community National Schools and, as such, underpins the core values and ethos of these schools. GMGY is described as a multi-belief and values education curriculum that has been developed by the NCCA in conjunction with ETBs, ETBI and the DE. The curriculum has four strands or areas of learning; 'My Stories', 'We Are a Community National School', 'Thinking Time' and 'Beliefs and Religions'. The strands explore identity education, values education, philosophy for children and multi-denominational RE. Across the curriculum, a pluralist epistemology and pedagogy is employed which seeks to develop different aspects of children's potential and foster a culture of respect. Similar to Educate Together National Schools, sacramental preparation for Catholic pupils takes place outside of the school day and is organised by the

local Catholic parish. The approach to RE in a CNS is described as dialogical rather than confessional:

> Multi-denominational religious education enables children to develop an awareness of religions and beliefs but does not advocate for children's acceptance of any of them. It promotes study about religions and beliefs but does not engage in the practice of any religion. It may expose children to a diversity of religious and non-religious views, but does not impose any particular view or seek to conform or convert students to any specific religion or belief. (NCCA, 2018a).

The approach to religious and values education forms one significant part of the ethos of a school, however, as Donnelly (2000) reminds us, ethos traverses more than just the curriculum.

3.3.4 Dimensions of 'Ethos'

Donnelly (2000, pp. 151–152) proposes three dimensions of 'ethos' for consideration. She states that none of the dimensions are more important for shaping the school than the other, "each is of equal value". Each dimension is outlined in Table 3 and offers a lens for examining the operations of the school and "through each lens it is possible to construct an image of the variations within and across schools" (Donnelly, 2000, p. 152). The 'aspirational ethos' and 'ethos of outward attachment' of a school are evident in its policies, mission, vision and ethos statements and the physical environment. However, Donnelly (2000) cautions that the "ethos of inward attachment is more difficult to interpret":

> It is comprised of the genuine priorities, attitudes and visions which individuals hold in their personal lives and in relation to the aspirational ethos of the school. (Donnelly, 2000, p. 152)

Table 3. Three Dimensions of Ethos (Donnelly, 2000)

Description of Ethos	Dimension of Ethos	Manifested in…	Method of research
Superficial	Aspirational Ethos	Documents/ statements from school authorities	Document reviews; semi-structured interviews with school authorities
	Ethos of outward attachment	School organisational structures; physical environment of the school; behaviour of individuals	Document reviews and semi-structured interviews with school members
Deep	Ethos of inward attachment	Individuals' deep-seated thoughts, feelings and perceptions	In-depth interviews and informal conversations with school members and long-term observation of organisational interactions

The 'ethos of inward attachment' "can be informed and shaped by religious and cultural factors, personality and the contemporary social climate" and are important in "the negotiation and reconstruction of school ethos" (Donnelly, 2000, p. 152). Donnelly (2000, p. 152) warns that the process of ethos is not static and operates on a number of levels. Each level or dimension does not, of necessity, work in tandem with the other, leading to contradictions and inconsistencies.

Such contradictions and inconsistencies within the operation and the understanding of ethos also demonstrate how 'ethos' is often a contested space of interpretation which raises issues of power. How might we understand the relation between such contestation of 'ethos' and power? As we will see later, the theory of hegemony allows us to identify some of the key variables when it comes to power dynamics at work in 'school ethos' and 'culture'. This conceptual framework of hegemony also allows for a relationship to emerge between how we understand 'school ethos' and its interdependence with wider social and political dimensions.

This is especially important in the context of the 'SRFDP', which is both inherently educational and socio-political (as discussed in Chapter Two).

3.3.5 Empirical studies on the Island of Ireland that examine 'ethos' change

There is a lack of empirical studies directly addressing ethos change in the Republic of Ireland. However, when considering Northern Ireland (NI), the concept of transformation emerges as a relevant comparison. Although NI and the Republic share the same island, their education systems have different histories and operate in distinct contexts. Nevertheless, similarities exist in the processes of ethos change in both jurisdictions.

In NI, transformation refers to the change of status from an existing denominational school to an integrated school. An integrated school is similar to a multi-denominational school in the Republic; it is "based on the pluralist premise that traditional antagonisms will be broken down and a more tolerant society will emerge if children are educated together" (Donnelly, 1998, p. 22). The transformation process involves organisational, operational, and management changes over time, affecting aspects such as ethos, culture, curriculum, governance, pupil intake, and staffing (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2017, p. 8). Available literature on transformation is limited but highlights key findings[22].

Topping and Cavanagh (2016) conducted a qualitative study in NI and found that transformation can be a slow and complex process. Challenges identified include a limited number of schools choosing to transform, resource constraints in terms of personnel and finance, and a timeframe of up to ten or more years for successful transformation. Transformation is primarily attractive for schools at risk of closure due to sustainability concerns, which mirrors the situation in the Republic.

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[22] Example of search string used: "Transformation" AND "integrated schools" AND "Northern Ireland" AND "ethos" identified 273 results. Titles and abstracts were read by the researcher and 4 studies were identified as useful in considering the concept of ethos change.

A research project coordinated by Prof Alan Smith and Prof Tony Gallagher explored integrated education in NI between 1999 and 2001. Their findings emphasise the complexity of the transformation process and stress the importance of parental support. Successful transformation requires a shared understanding of the rationale and process of change, as misunderstandings and lack of clarity can hinder progress (McGonigle, Smith and Gallagher, 2003). A factor deemed essential for the successful 'transformation' of a school is the support of the parent body. The report noted that this was successfully achieved in the case study schools as parents were given a "dynamic role" in the process (McGonigle, Smith and Gallagher, 2003, p. 21). The research found that:

> There was a general belief among both parents and teachers as to the importance of integrated education and therefore a willingness to support transformation for positive reasons. (McGonigle, Smith and Gallagher, 2003, p. 21)

McGuinness and Abbott (2020) interviewed head teachers in transformed schools and found varied reasons for transformation. Parental receptiveness to change was generally positive but required information and reassurance. Teachers' attitudes varied, with some initially indifferent but eventually committed to the transformation. Staff composition was noted as a potential factor influencing integration. Overall, transformation was seen as an ongoing journey rather than a one-time change.

Further research by Abbott and McGuinness (2022b, 2022a) explored pupils' experiences of school transformation through interviews with 20 children from ten transformed schools. The children were able to discern differences between their previous segregated settings and the current integrated ones. They understood the purpose of visible changes and welcomed curriculum adjustments. Pupils also recognised the value of learning about and respecting others' viewpoints.

The experiences of transformation in NI provide valuable insights for the Republic of Ireland's school reconfiguration efforts. It is evident from empirical research that changing a

school's ethos is a gradual process accompanied by numerous challenges. A shared understanding of the rationale and process of change, along with clear roles for stakeholders, is crucial for successful ethos change. Parental resistance has been a significant issue in the Republic's context. Considering Gramsci's theory of hegemony can help shed light on the challenges encountered in the policy of school reconfiguration.

3.4 Hegemony

The concept of hegemony lacks a conclusive definition (Lears, 1985), but Gramsci's influential work, 'Selections from the Prison Notebooks' (1971), offers valuable insights into his understanding of the theory. Hegemony posits that power over others cannot be reduced to "physical coercion" or "economic resources" (Haugaard and Lentner, 2006, p. 46). Instead, Gramsci defines ideological hegemony as the retention of power through the manipulation of popular opinion rather than the use of state force (Gramsci, 1971). He argues that 'ideological hegemony' is most effectively sustained through the skilful exploitation of religion, education, or popular national cultures (Kearney, 1994). The theory explores how the dominant group achieves control over others by securing their consent (Ryan, 2014). This control is achieved by influencing ideas and making the values and beliefs of the ruling group appear normal and accepted by society (Ryan, 2014).

According to Simon (2015), Gramsci believed the greatest form of power lied in controlling people's ideas. Power is exerted by persuading others to believe in a particular ideology and maintaining a *status quo* that upholds the dominant group's worldview (Stapleton, 2019). In the context of Ireland, Fulton (1987, p. 199) emphasises that "religion can wield significant hegemonic force" and it is argued that Catholicism in Ireland is normalised as the universal worldview through various institutions (Stapleton, 2019, p. 459). However, hegemony also signifies that the perception of Catholicism itself is a contested space within Irish education, subject to conflicting perspectives and power dynamics. While

some individuals and groups may embrace and promote Catholic values and teachings as an integral part of their cultural identity and heritage, others challenge the dominant position of Catholicism within Irish education. The contested nature of Catholicism within Irish education reflects broader societal debates about the role of religion in public life, the balance between individual rights and collective values, and the influence of institutional power structures. In essence, the contested space of Catholicism within Irish education highlights the complexities and tensions inherent in the exercise of hegemony. It demonstrates that power is not fixed or unidirectional but is subject to negotiation and resistance.

Therefore, a central concept within hegemony theory is the recognition that there will be a 'counter-hegemony' (Kearney, 1994). The 'counter-hegemony' challenges the misrecognition of the subordinate groups in society and proposes the transformation of the dominant ideology (Kearney, 1994). Change requires both the "negation of authoritarian ideology" and the "creation of liberating alternatives" (Kearney, 1994, p. 175). An explicit 'counter-hegemony', relevant to this research, is the establishment of the Forum and the introduction of the 'SRFDP'. Gramsci (1971) recognised change would likely be gradual, based on moral and intellectual reform, and the approach would require dialogue and compromise (Kearney, 1994; Ryan, 2014).

Hegemony is an ongoing process of power struggles that is never complete and open to negotiation and renegotiation and education is seen as "central to these processes" (Karlidag-Dennis, McGrath and Stevenson, 2019, p. 1142). 'Ethos' in schools is thus a reality which is traversed by significant power dynamics and the process of the contestation of power or hegemony is complex. In such school contexts, conceptions and understandings of 'equality, diversity and inclusion' and/or their absence is often at the heart of disagreements. But what do we mean by such varying visions of 'equality, diversity and inclusion'? The theoretical literature on 'equality' and 'inclusion' is varied, but in the following section we

will focus on the Irish theoretical literature on equality which also relates to the conceptual issues; to issues of practice in schools and wider society.

3.5 Diversity, equality and inclusion

Issues of 'diversity, equality and inclusion' are often cited as a rationale for the diversification of the patronage system in Ireland (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). A number of empirical studies have been conducted over the past decade in Ireland which explored the experiences of children and teachers who are part of the denominational education system, but who experience exclusion due to their identity. Much of the research points to tensions that arise in such scenarios. An assumption discussed in Chapter Two, proposed by Tuohy (2013), was that multi-denominational education eradicates issues of inclusion when it comes to diversity. This assumption was challenged by Tuohy (2013) and by Van Nieuwenhove (2012), and they argued that issues of inclusion and equality are just as likely to arise in multi-denominational schools. Therefore, it was important to include theories/ conceptualisations of inclusion and equality in the review of the theoretical literature.

3.5.1 Conceptualisations of equality

Baker *et al.* (2006, pp. 416–417) propose three conceptions of equality: basic equality, liberal egalitarianism, and equality of condition. Basic equality is the idea that all humans deserve a minimum level of concern and respect, "placing at least some limits on what it is to treat someone as a human being" (Baker *et al.*, 2006, p. 216). Liberal egalitarianism "typically assumes that there will always be major inequalities" in our world and focuses on managing inequalities fairly and protecting civil and political rights (Baker *et al.*, 2006, p. 216). Equality of condition aims to eliminate major inequalities altogether or greatly reduce them. Baker *et al.* (2006) criticise basic equality as inadequate and focus on liberal egalitarianism and equality of condition

The Community National School (CNS) model views equality as a core value (ETBI, 2022b). It involves treating all members of the school community equally and celebrating their diversity. The CNS targets resources to those who have a need and prioritises inclusion. This commitment to equality has practical implications for school policies and procedures, equitable treatment of all members, children's learning experiences, and the school environment. The CNS aims to promote a culture of equality and inclusion that affirms diversity within the school community.

3.5.2 Conceptualisations of inclusive education

In recent decades, the concept of inclusive education has undergone a significant shift, moving beyond a narrow focus on serving children with special educational needs or disabilities to encompass a broader principle of welcoming diversity among all learners (Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018; Ainscow, 2020). This new conception recognises that social exclusion can be a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and ability, and seeks to eliminate these forms of exclusion in pursuit of a more just society (Ainscow, 2020, p. 9). Key aspects of inclusive schools, as identified by Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018), include a clear vision supported by school personnel, valuing all children as members of the classroom, comprehensive support for both children and teachers, a collaborative team approach, flexible curricula, supportive leadership, and quality professional development. In their 'Dimensions of Inclusion' framework, Qvortrup and Qvortrup's (2018) proposes that inclusion in education should be defined and put into action using three different dimensions.

The first dimension is about the different levels of inclusion, which means that inclusion is not just about being formally enrolled in a school, but also being an active part of the social community and feeling like a recognised member. The second dimension is about the different types of social communities that a student can be a part of or excluded from.

This includes not just the classroom, but also the school-yard, relationships with other students and teachers, and more. The third dimension is about the different degrees of inclusion or exclusion, meaning that a person can be partially included or excluded from different social contexts to varying degrees (Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018). Despite advances in understanding how to teach and support diverse learners in general education classrooms, inclusive education remains a contested field, where efforts and limits are in constant tension (Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018a). To explore issues of inclusion and equality in Catholic and CNS primary schools, we now turn to the empirical literature.

3.5.3 Empirical research exploring issues of inclusion and equality as they relate to ethos in Community National Schools and Catholic primary schools

3.5.3.1 Community National Schools

A small body of research literature surrounding the CNS model demonstrates the challenges of providing inclusive education in a multi-denominational context[23]. In her doctoral research, Mullally (2018) explored the challenges being faced by CNSs due to religious diversity. Through interviews with seven principals and five teachers and questionnaires for parents, the study highlighted the tension between the public values of the school and the private values of parents. In addition, it brought to light the significant challenges being faced by stakeholders in the implementation of the previous iteration of the GMGY programme, whereby children were being separated along religious lines for religious instruction.

A mixed methods study by Faas, Smith and Darmody (2018b, 2018a), draws on data collected from 11 CNSs and focused on the perspectives of principals, teachers and pupils. The findings highlighted that attempts by the schools to support religious instruction or rites of passage for every child overlooked the fact that many minority-faith families take a more

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[23] Through a search of the term "Community National School" 10 texts were identified of which 5 were empirical studies.

proactive approach to their child's faith formation through after-school lessons and participating in their faith community and ultimately privileged Catholic pupils.

Using questionnaires and interviews, Liddy, O'Flaherty, and McCormack (2018) explored the moral, religious and spiritual values and traditions of staff and students in publicly managed schools. In their recommendations, they describe the "urgent need" for the articulation and evaluation of values and values education in Community National Schools given that the concept of values in diverse school contexts is highly contentious (McLaughlin, 1994, 2008; Alexander and McLaughlin, 2003; Noddings and Slote, 2003; Pring, 2007b).

At the time of writing, only one peer-reviewed paper existed about the experience of values education in a Community National School through the updated GMGY curriculum. A mixed-methods study by Malone, O'Toole and Mullally (2021) explored students' perspectives on how they feel about sharing religious or secular beliefs with peers and about learning from peers. The study used questionnaires and focus groups with children in 5th class. Findings showed that although many children enjoyed "listening to their peers, most felt uncomfortable and embarrassed sharing their own beliefs". In addition, "students with no religious affiliation felt a sense of exclusion and marginalisation during the Family Project" (Malone, 2019, p. 93). Although small in number, collectively the literature demonstrates that issues of inclusion do arise in CNSs.

3.5.3.2 Catholic primary schools

This section critically examines the issue of incorporating minority religious and non-religious identities within the context of Catholic primary schools in Ireland[24]. The review encompasses two categories of literature. The first category explores the challenges related to

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[24] Example of search string used: "Catholic" AND "primary school" and "Ireland" reveals 132 peer reviewed articles. A review of the titles and abstracts resulted in the identification of 13 articles for full review. 8 of these articles specifically dealt with issues of inclusion as they relate to the ethos of the school.

inclusion and equality faced by teachers within a denominational education system, while the second category focuses on the inclusion of children who do not identify as Catholic.

Fahie (2016) conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) primary school teachers in Ireland, shedding light on the tensions that arise from the conflicting rights of denominational bodies and the rights of LGB teachers to work in an environment that respects their health, safety, and dignity. Fahie (2016, p. 393) critically examines Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Acts 1998–2011, which permits organisations with an explicit denominational ethos to take "reasonable action" to protect that ethos from being undermined. The study reveals that LGB teachers expressed frustration and fear due to the existence of this provision in Irish equality legislation, as it poses potential repercussions if their sexual orientation were to be disclosed at work.

Based on the same cohort of LGB teachers, in another paper Fahie (2017a) highlights the sensitivities and tensions arising from the Roman Catholic Church's stance on homosexuality, which can have negative consequences for LGB teachers' professional careers if their sexual orientation becomes publicly known. While some teachers in the study adopted a pragmatic approach, arguing that teaching was simply their job and that their trade union would protect them, others expressed unease in reconciling their role in promoting a faith that they believed actively discriminated against them as teachers in Roman Catholic schools.

Neary (2013) conducted qualitative research involving interviews with eight self-identified lesbian and gay teachers in primary and second-level schools in Ireland. The findings indicate that all the teachers described overt elements of their school culture that affected their experiences of disclosure. The teachers in the study were cognisant of the powerful position of the Catholic Church in education in Ireland and its stance on alternatives to heterosexuality. Furthermore, they were acutely aware of the influence religious bodies

wielded through Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act. The teaching of religion in schools emerged as a concern for some teachers.

Heinz and Keane (2018b) present findings from the 'Diversity in Initial Teacher Education' (DITE) national project, examining socio-demographic backgrounds of undergraduate primary ITE entrants through application and survey data analysis. The study reveals an overrepresentation of Roman Catholics in the cohort compared to postgraduate post-primary ITE cohorts and the general Irish population. The researchers hypothesise that this discrepancy may be attributed to the predominantly denominational Irish primary school system, which acts as a deterrent for individuals who do not align with the religious beliefs and values upheld by the majority of primary schools. According to Heinz and Keane (2018b), the barrier to inclusion can be summarised as a dual consideration: potential primary teachers not only need to ask themselves if they are prepared to study and work in an environment characterised by a religious (and most likely Catholic) ethos, but they also need to consider whether they are willing to align themselves with that ethos in a way that is consistent with their personal beliefs and values.

Another study, conducted over a two-year period in two third-level colleges in Ireland, utilised a mixed-methods approach to examine pre-service teachers' perceptions of the "religiously unaffiliated" (Kieran and Mullally, 2021, p. 426). The findings highlight participants' concerns regarding the lack of recognition given to children with no religious beliefs in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. While acknowledging that diversity and inclusion are core principles in Catholic schools, the study also identifies ambiguous and insufficient 'opt-out' procedures, with a lack of school resources and staffing to provide alternative educational supervision, despite it being a constitutional right for parents to withdraw their child from RE (Kiernan and Mullally, 2021).

In a cross-sectoral study comparing Catholic denominational and multi-denominational (Educate Together and CNS) schools in Ireland, Faas, Foster, and Smith (2020) conducted nine semi-structured interviews across three schools, involving one principal/deputy principal and two classroom teachers responsible for teaching all curriculum subjects, including RE. The study found that in Catholic schools, considerable effort was devoted to preparing children for sacraments. However, the inclusion of sacramental preparation within the school day raised questions among teachers, as it excluded non-Catholic children in the class and posed challenges for both students and teachers (Faas, Foster, and Smith, 2020, pp. 609–610). The study suggests that the practice of separating non-Catholic students during sacramental preparation may contribute to a perceived sense of difference between Catholic and non-Catholic students, emphasising the need for more inclusive practices in Catholic primary schools.

Kitching (2014) conducted qualitative research involving 22 seven- and eight-year-old boys, along with their parents and school staff associated with them. Among the class group, four boys were not Catholic or participating in Communion. The study found that children who were not Catholic experienced a strong sense of otherness during sacramental preparation. They were not officially included in the Communion rehearsal, performance, and related timetabling activities, leading to a normalisation of their exclusion. Additionally, discussions with the children revealed that Catholic prayers and seasonal occasions permeated their overall school experience, further reinforcing their "in-between" status regarding Communion (Kitching, 2014, p. 98). The introduction of a fictitious character who was not making her Communion during focus groups resulted in immediate assumptions by the children that she was not Irish (Kitching, 2014).

The collective findings from the reviewed literature highlight the ongoing challenges faced by Catholic primary schools in Ireland in accommodating minority religious and non-

religious identities. While these schools acknowledge the importance of inclusivity and diversity, various obstacles persist. The studies illustrate that disclosure issues and the Catholic Church's position on homosexuality are sensitive and complex subjects, leading to frustration, fear, and anger among teachers. The dominant presence of Catholicism within the Irish primary education system may hinder the attraction and retention of teachers from diverse backgrounds. The literature underscores the need for more transparent and consistent 'opt-out' procedures, inclusive practices during sacramental preparation, and better integration of non-Catholic children within the school community. Furthermore, the studies suggest that further research is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of non-Catholic students in Catholic primary schools and to develop more effective strategies for their accommodation. As evidenced in the empirical studies outlined, the concept of 'identity' is closely linked to inclusion and equality. Therefore, the final concept that will be discussed is 'identity and belonging in rural areas'.

3.6 Identity and belonging in rural areas

The selected school for this case study is situated in rural Ireland. In her work, Starr (2022) highlights the scarcity of studies investigating education in rural contexts, yet emphasises the significant role of the community in the decision-making process for families selecting schools for their children. Schafft and Jackson (2010, p. 2) assert that historically, rural schools have served as crucial centres of "social activity and cultural meaning", preserving "local traditions" and "particular identities" within rural communities. These schools are "sites of civic interaction and shared intergenerational identity and experience" (Schafft and Jackson, 2010). Woods (2005, p. 587) also emphasises the importance of local schools in rural settings, stating that they have the capacity to "reinforce identification with a community" and that friendships that are formed in the rural classroom can shape the social networks of a community for decades.

Cohen (1982) emerges as a central theorist in this study's conceptualisation of identity and belonging in rural areas. Cohen (1982, p. 21) asserts that belonging to a place implies more than just having been born there. He understands belonging as the experience of culture. For Cohen, belonging means that a person is:

> an integral piece of the marvelously 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. (Cohen, 1982, p. 21)

However, Cohen (1982, p. 4) argues that we are "not aware of the distinctiveness and the circumscription of our own behaviour until we meet its normative boundaries in the shape of alternative forms". Boundaries are a significant concept in Cohen's work. Cohen (1982, p. 4) describes boundaries as moments or events that make us "become aware of another culture, of behaviour which deviates from the norms of our own". For Cohen (1982), it is only when we stand at these boundaries that people become aware of their own culture. Of particular relevance to the school reconfiguration process, is Cohen's (1982, p. 5) argument that when we stand on our culture's boundaries, "we attribute value to it, positively or negatively, and accordingly attribute value to the culture which confronts our own". Depending on the nature of these judgements, a person's culture is either "strengthened and sustained, or is deserted" (Cohen, 1982, p. 5).

When Cohen's work is considered alongside school reconfiguration, the policy could be viewed as asking school communities to become aware of alternative ways of existence and to contemplate their own Catholic identity when confronted with a multi-denominational model of education. In the case study school, questions arise regarding the abandonment of the traditional Catholic culture. What were the advantages of changing the school's ethos? Were decisions influenced by the school's peripheral location? Cohen (1982, p. 5) argues that people do not necessarily value their culture simply because it is traditional, but because it suits them. It developed to meet their requirements and conditions, and if these requirements

and conditions remain, theirs is the most practical way of doing what is required, until they can be convinced that it is not so. Should the school reconfiguration process be viewed as just this? An attempt to convince communities that there is another way? For the researcher, this is problematic. In many rural communities, the majority of people identify as Catholic and multi-denominational education will not be viewed as an attractive alternative. Cohen (1982, p. 7) warns that:

> When peripherality as a self-image is complemented by a positive commitment to the culture, one often finds something like a widespread 'politicisation' of social life in which almost any event can assume portions of a social crisis, and any crisis can be depicted as threatening the very survival of the culture.

In such circumstances, Cohen (1982, p. 7) notes that "a fierce desire for self-determination, bolstered by the community's certain knowledge that it is more expert in resolving its own affairs than are the politicians" arises. This has the potential to make "interference from outside appear an insufferable and presumptuous intrusion" (Cohen, 1982, p. 7). Cohen's analysis of rural culture and the protection of rural identity by the local community offers significant insights into the challenges that reconfiguration has faced and may suggest why the 'early-movers' provision has been the most successful avenue of reconfiguration to date. It is the provision in the reconfiguration process that has given schools and local communities the most power in choosing the fate of their school. Cohen (1982, p. 9) also notes that in "communities rendered precarious by their marginality to the politico-economic centre", you "find a further feature of cultural experience":

> These milieux are tightly structured, with each organisational nexus attached in some way to every other, each process having implications for every other. (Cohen, 1982, p. 9)

In the case of rural Ireland, the local school and the local Church are often evidence of this entanglement. Their close relationship raised questions about what effect change to one will have on the other during interviews with participants. Having presented and discussed

relevant literature that informs this study, the focus now shifts towards elucidating the development process of the conceptual framework.

3.7 The conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study illustrates how the research aims and questions arose through the interplay of the literature and the experiences and interests of the researcher. During the study, the framework was employed as a "structure for organising and supporting ideas" (Weaver-Hart, 1988, p. 11) and a tool for arranging concepts. As is the case in many studies, the conceptual framework was viewed as something that was continuously evolving (Leshem and Trafford, 2007). Figure 1 provides a pictorial representation of the conceptual framework.

The first section of the conceptual framework, titled '1. Sources of the conceptual framework', outlines the stimuli that informed the research. Crawford (2020, p. 43) identifies three sources for creating a conceptual framework: experience, literature, and theory. The researcher's experience as a curriculum developer and teacher in a CNS highlighted the challenges of moving into the multi-denominational sector and raised questions about ethos and values in a pluralist space. However, the literature suggests that experience alone should not form the basis for a conceptual framework (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017; Crawford, 2020). The research questions were developed by exploring a range of literature, including historical literature on the primary patronage system in Ireland, socio-historical policy literature, relevant empirical literature and grey literature on school reconfiguration and divestment. The researcher proposed that the concepts of 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion', and 'identity' were useful in understanding the opportunities and challenges of the reconfiguration process.

The second section of the framework, titled '2. Aim of the conceptual framework' outlines the areas of interest that emerged from the sources. The lack of empirical research on

school reconfiguration in the RoI was evident, and it was deemed essential to explore the lived experience of school reconfiguration at the micro-level of the school. Additionally, formal guidance about the reconfiguration process had not been published by the DE until 2022, so the perspectives of macro-level policy actors involved in the case study school's reconfiguration were also deemed to be worthy of investigation.

The final section of the framework, titled '3. Purposes of the conceptual framework', outlines the argumentation, explanation, and generation for this study[25]. The argument for the study's importance is that, at the time of writing, there was a lack of empirical research on the lived experience of school reconfiguration in the Republic of Ireland, making this study the first of its kind. The explanation outlines the relationships of interest worth investigating, including reconfiguration and the concepts of 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion', and 'identity'. Finally, the generation highlights the use of the conceptual framework to generate research questions and methodology, which are described in the following chapter.

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[25] Crawford (2020) proposes three purposes of conceptual frameworks: argumentation, explanation, and generation. Argumentation focuses on the importance of studying the topic, the appropriateness of the design, and the rigor of the methods. Explanation emphasises the relationships among the variables that will be studied. Generation gives rise to the research questions and methods of a study. Crawford recommends incorporating all three purposes when constructing a conceptual framework.

Figure 1. The conceptual framework for the study

Towards a conceptual framework for an exploration of the experiences of stakeholders in the 'Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'
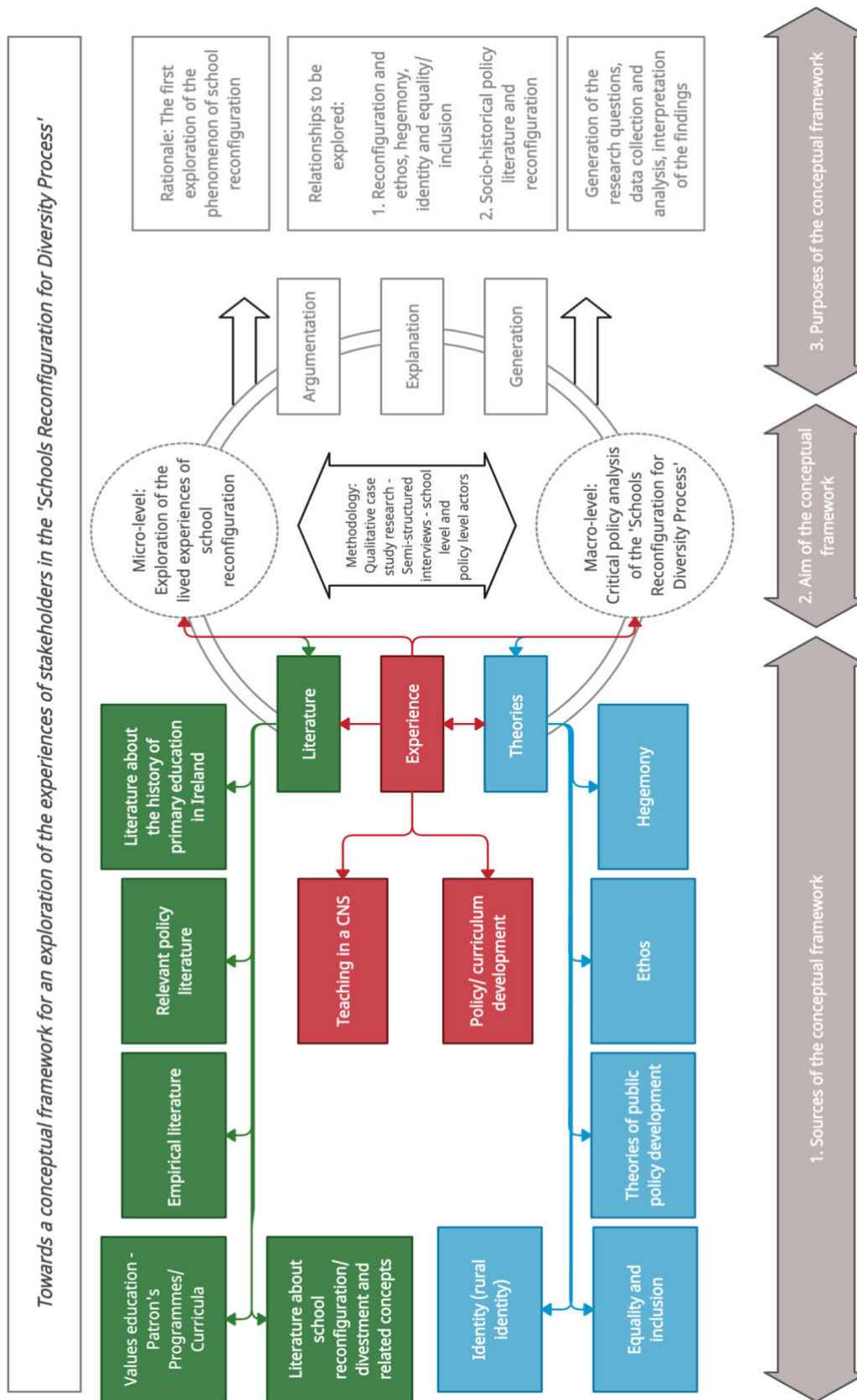
3.8 Conclusion and iteration of the research questions

The purpose of this chapter was to review and discuss the conceptual literature that is most relevant for an exploration of the research questions. Their theories/ frameworks were introduced and their relevance to the study was discussed. 'Ethos' was identified as a key concept upon which school reconfiguration policy is built. Therefore, understandings of 'ethos' were considered and Donnelly's (2000) 'Dimensions of Ethos Framework' was identified as a useful lens through which to explore ethos change in a reconfigured school. The small body of empirical research which explores ethos change in Northern Ireland was discussed. Although arising from a different context, it provides the only international comparison of a similar phenomenon.

The policy of school reconfiguration has met with significant resistance from school communities where it has been proposed. The researcher explored Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony as a useful lens through which the resistance to the 'SRFDP' can be understood. The conceptualisation of the policy of reconfiguration as a counter-hegemony to Catholic education is useful in attempting to understand the deeply held opposition to change that reconfiguration is often met with. The denominational education system in Ireland has been widely criticised, both nationally (Rougier and Honohan, 2014; O'Toole, 2015a) and internationally (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). Criticisms largely focus on the implications that the system has on individual and group rights, particularly of those from minority religious and non-religious backgrounds (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). Questions of human rights arise (Mawhinney, 2007; IHRC, 2010, 2011; Graham, 2023) and at the heart of this debate are the concepts of 'equality' and 'inclusion'.

This chapter set forth an exploration of the range of conceptualisations of equality that exist (Baker *et al.*, 2006), with a particular focus on how the CNS model defines equality and inclusion in practice. It proposes Qvortrup and Qvortrup's (2018) description of inclusive

schools as a useful framework to explore the key aspects of inclusive schools. To consider the lived challenges of creating inclusive schools, the empirical literature exploring issues of inclusion and equality as they relate to ethos in CNS and Catholic schools were presented. What was evident was that each model presented challenges. Finally, this chapter explored Cohen's (1982) theory of identity and belonging in rural areas, as this shaped how this study understood identity creation in the case study location. This literature review was used to support the development and refinement of the research questions, the refinement of the conceptual framework, research design and methodology, the interpretation of the findings and the recommendations arising from this study.

Arising from the policy analysis presented in Chapter Two and conceptual literature review presented in this chapter, the following overarching research questions were identified as worthy of investigation:

1. *How can the concepts of 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion' and 'identity' aid understanding of the opportunities and challenges that emerged from the reconfiguration of the case study school?*

2. *What can be learned about reconfiguring ethos from the experiences of key stakeholders' in the case study school?*

The first research question highlights the dominant concepts of 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion' and 'identity' that emerged from a review of the socio-historical and policy literature on reconfiguration. It suggests that an understanding of these concepts can aid in the development of a more nuanced understanding of the reconfiguration process. The second research question investigates the lived experiences of stakeholders in the reconfiguration of ethos and explores the lessons that can be learned from those who have implemented the school reconfiguration policy. The intention of this study was to contribute to national conversations surrounding school reconfiguration, specifically with regard to

whether the policy has the capacity to elicit system-wide change and achieve the targets set out by the GoI of Ireland of establishing 400 additional multi-denominational schools by 2030.

Chapter Four – The research methodology

4.1 Introduction

It is argued that researchers frequently provide insufficient detail regarding the methodological choices they make, hence, a common criticism of qualitative research is that a study can lack rigour (Holliday, 2014, p. 53). To mitigate this issue, this chapter presents an extensive account of the research design implemented, the research methods utilised, and elucidates the ethical procedures followed during data collection and analysis for the case study component of this study.

4.2 Organisation of the chapter

The chapter begins by reminding the reader of the research problem, aim and questions. In an effort to contextualise the study, a brief introduction to the case study school is provided. The chapter then locates the research within a constructivist paradigm. The positionality of the researcher as an insider is considered and the implications of this positionality are discussed. Attention then turns to the research logic, the selection of the research design and a description of the case study methodology. Following this, the participant sample is described and the data collection and analytical tools are presented. Case study research in the social sciences presents a number of ethical challenges that must be addressed, hence, the ethical considerations that were central to this study are outlined. Invariably, research studies of this kind also have limitations. Those pertaining to this study are acknowledged in the concluding paragraphs.

4.3 The research problem, aim and questions

As discussed in Chapter One, the 'SRFDP' was introduced in 2019 in an effort to reinvigorate and reimagine the former policy of school divestment. Despite a growing level of religious diversity within Ireland (CSO, 2023b, 2023a), at the time of writing, 89% of schools were managed and owned by the Catholic Church (Kennedy, 2023). The process of

school reconfiguration was introduced to enable schools to transfer patronage from a denominational model to a multi-denominational model, with the intention of creating more 'choice' within the system. However, when this study was conceived, less than a dozen schools had reconfigured patronage and no empirical research had been undertaken exploring the experiences of these schools. Hence, this study focused on the experience of one 'early-mover' school within the process which self-selected to reconfigure patronage from a Catholic patron to a Community National School under the patronage of the local ETB. In doing so, this study aimed to capture the understanding and lived experience of school reconfiguration in one case study location, examine the learnings and implications of this case, and apply them to the broader policy landscape. The research was guided by following research questions:

- *How can the concepts of 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion' and 'identity' aid understanding of the opportunities and challenges that emerged from the reconfiguration of the case study school?*

- *What can be learned about reconfiguring ethos from the experiences of key stakeholders' in the case study school?*

As will be discussed in detail later, the case study approach was selected for its effectiveness and benefits in educational research (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2010). The case examined for the purpose of this research was a purposively selected small school in rural Ireland that was one of the first Catholic schools to undergo a live reconfiguration to a Community National School in 2019. According to the DE (DES, 2019, p. 3), small schools are considered "a distinctive feature" of the Irish education system and are defined as having 60 pupils or fewer. Despite comprising 23.1% of all schools, these schools only represent 4.4% of total enrolments as of the commencement of the school reconfiguration process in 2019 (DES, 2019). More recent data from the DE, where small schools were defined as those

with four or fewer mainstream class teachers, shows that from 2011 to 2021, there has been a 16% reduction in the number of small primary schools and a 24% decrease in the number of students attending these schools (DE, 2022b). This indicates a significant and gradual decline over the past decade. Traditionally, the challenge for small schools in rural areas has been to ensure sufficient enrolments to remain viable. One reason for falling enrolments in small rural schools is the issue of population decline in rural areas (Echazarra and Radinger, 2019). The case study school found itself facing possible closure in the face of falling enrolments. It self-selected to transfer patronage to the local ETB and become a Community National School in an effort to remain viable.

4.4 The research paradigm and the positionality of the researcher

This study is situated within the framework of social constructivism, which was selected based on the researcher's assumptions regarding ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), axiology (the nature of value and how the researcher's values can influence what is studied), and methodology (techniques for inquiry and examining practice) (Frey, 2018, p. 1287). Within the social constructivist paradigm, individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work, and "develop subjective meanings of their experiences" (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 24). These subjective meanings are "multiple" and "varied", which leads the researcher to seek the "complexity of views" rather than narrow meanings into "a few categories or ideas" (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 24). The researcher's goal is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation. The subjective meanings are often "negotiated socially and historically", and are formed through interactions with others and through "historical" and "cultural norms" that operate in individuals' lives (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 24).

The researcher recognises that their own background shapes their interpretation of the research findings within this paradigm (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Therefore, while the

participants' interpretations and reflections were central to the construction of knowledge about the school reconfiguration process, the researcher believes that her personal experiences, opinions, values, and judgments also played a role in the construction of new knowledge. This aligns with how the researcher perceives the world and views knowledge as socially constructed. Within a social constructivist paradigm, participants in the research are considered actors in the creation of meaning and knowledge within their world. The researcher acknowledges that research of this kind is value-laden, and it is essential for the researcher to make their values known (Sefotho, 2015) and recognise their biases and judgments (Creswell, 2014).

McDermid, Peters, Jackson and Daly (2014) contend that researchers are never fully insiders or outsiders but rather should be placed on a continuum. This understanding was appropriate in the context of this research. The researcher worked in a CNS from 2012 to 2018. In 2015, the researcher was seconded to the NCCA as a part-time Project Officer, with responsibility for the review and redevelopment of the 'Goodness Me, Goodness You!' curriculum for CNSs. Given her role, the researcher is well known within the CNS sector and had a working relationship with some of the study participants for a number of years. This created opportunities as well as challenges when conducting the research.

The recognised advantages of insider research are that the researcher displays a passion about the topic and hence, remains committed to the research even when faced with obstacles or challenges. In addition, the researcher's familiarity with the political and cultural structure of an organisation will help to save time in trying to understand the issues being studied as she already has significant knowledge about the issues (Saidin and Yaacob, 2016, p. 850). Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) recognise that being an insider can create a level of trust and openness among the participants and this in turn can lead to the collection of more in-depth data.

For over a decade, the researcher has been engaging with literature on multi-denominational education in Ireland, which is closely related to her work in education and policy development. This engagement has enabled her to examine her own positionality in relation to the research. As a newly qualified teacher in 2011, she held an unquestioning view of the denominational patronage system. Her perspective reflected the hegemonic narratives that she had been exposed to throughout her life. Having been raised in a Catholic home, attended Catholic schools, and trained at a Catholic college to become a primary school teacher, her initial understanding of the education system was shaped by her Catholic identity.

When she began teaching in rural Ireland, she was largely unaware of her privileged position as a Catholic in a predominantly Catholic education system. Although she recognised the lack of provision for children who opted out of RE in Catholic schools, she had never encountered an alternative. It was not until she received a teaching position in a diverse, multi-denominational school in County Dublin that she began to question the *status quo* and realised that there was an alternative approach that could enable all children to participate equally in aspects of school life relating to ethos.

In 2012, she began teaching in a CNS. At the time, the model was being publicly criticised for the RE approach employed in the first iteration of the GMGY programme. This approach was facing significant public scrutiny and criticism for segregating children on the basis of religion, and one CNS had withdrawn from teaching the programme entirely. In 2013, she became an assistant principal in her school with responsibility for the GMGY programme and joined the GMGY School Network, a group of principals and teachers led by the NCCA that aimed to develop the GMGY programme and overcome some of the issues. From this point onwards, she began to engage with literature on multi-denominational

education, focusing on equality-based and inclusive approaches to RE in pluralist education systems.

Issues with the GMGY programme worsened, and in 2015, she was seconded to the NCCA on a part-time basis to assist in the development of the senior curriculum for GMGY. The senior programme changed the approach used for RE and broadened the range of approaches to include identity education, values education, and philosophy for children. In 2018, she joined the NCCA on a full-time basis and worked on the review and redevelopment of the junior GMGY programme to align it with the senior curriculum. As a result of this work, she brings core values of 'equality' and 'inclusion' to this study.

It is important to note also that she lives and works in rural Ireland, where the Church plays an important role in the community, and she is an active member of her local Church community. She was recently married in the Catholic Church and has baptised her child. While she identifies as a Catholic, many of the Church's formal teachings do not align with the way she lives her life or the deep-seated beliefs she holds about equality. Her positionality is complex and, at times contradictory, due to the tensions between the narratives of her personal life, her introduction to more critical ways of viewing the world in her professional life and studies, and her commitment to the values of 'equality' and 'inclusion'. Although critical theories heavily inform the conceptual framework of this research, she cannot claim with the greatest level of authenticity that she is firmly located in the critical space. She grapples with the place of Catholic education in a pluralist Ireland and appreciates the good it does. However, she has also witnessed an alternative approach where all children are provided for equally. In choosing to employ critical theories, such as 'hegemony', she hoped to challenge my own way of thinking and ensure that her perspective is broadened.

One of the noted disadvantages of insider research is the lack of objectivity (Simmel, 1950), the possibility of being blindsided by issues that the researcher does not consider important as outsiders would, and the potential risk of overlooking confidentiality and sensitivity of information (Saidin and Yaacob, 2016). In this study, the researcher aimed to approach the research in a fair and objective manner by reflecting on her positionality to minimise bias. The researcher avoided using information that was not publicly available when crafting the interview schedule and undertaking and engaging in the semi-structured interviews in order to prevent any abuse of her position as an insider. It is important to note that the researcher is not entirely an insider as she no longer works with the schools and has never worked in any capacity with the case study site. The author's prior knowledge of the challenges facing newly reconfigured schools, gained through her work with reconfigured CNSs in the past, allowed her to "foreshadow" potential issues that might have arisen in the data (Simons, 2014, p. 33). Stake (1995) cautions that prior knowledge can influence the research questions and coding categories, but this is not a problem as long as it is acknowledged and clearly reflected in the presentation of the data.

4.5 Research logic considerations

Research logics, also referred to as inferences, are "tools of analysis which enable researchers to refine and redevelop social theory" (Meyer and Lunnay, 2013, p. 86). According to Rashid *et al.* (2019), induction and deduction are two commonly used research logics in social sciences research. Deductive research logic begins with a theoretical framework and aims to test an argument, while induction starts with a subjective account of lived experience and subsequently develops theory. Additionally, Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) have described abduction as a lesser known research logic that occupies the middle ground between induction and deduction. In Table 4, "an overview of different research phases and appropriate strategies for each phase" are presented (Rashid *et al.*, 2019, p.4).

Table 4. Research logics (Rashid et al., 2019, p. 4)

	Abduction	Deduction	Induction
Aim	To understand social phenomena in terms of social actors' motives and understanding	To test theories, to eliminate false ones, and to corroborate the survivor	To verify the theory by searching for facts and to establish description of the patterns
Start	Related theories, observations of everyday accounts	Deduce hypothesis from a tentative theory	Tested theory
Finish	Tentative theory/ framework	Hypothesis testing/ theory testing	Theory verification and generalisation/ universal law
Researcher stance	Inquiry from inside	Inquiry from outside	Inquiry from outside
Researcher account	Respondent view explained by the Researcher	Researcher's viewpoint	Researcher's viewpoint

The research logic employed in this study was abductive reasoning. Abduction involves a selective and creative process used by qualitative researchers to examine how the data supports existing theories or hypotheses, as well as how the data may call for modifications in existing understandings (Thornberg, 2012). This approach requires the researcher to go back and forth between the data and the literature. The literature generates ideas and helps to define the research purpose, while the researcher interprets the participants' responses and provides rich descriptions based on their views.

Abduction was chosen as the research methodology for several reasons. Firstly, the primary research objective was to understand the lived experience of stakeholders in the 'SRFDP'. Secondly, the phenomenon of school reconfiguration was a new one, with no existing empirical research to draw from. Thirdly, the researcher's positionality was predominately as an insider, as explained in the previous section. The use of abduction allowed the researcher to integrate her insider knowledge alongside existing literature to

explore and interpret the data in a way that captured the complex and nuanced perspectives of the participants. Data were collected and analysed alongside consultation of the literature.

4.6 Case study research

The case study is a research design that involves a comprehensive analysis of a single or a limited number of cases (Tight, 2020). This approach allows the researcher to examine a complex phenomenon where multiple variables are at play, making it particularly attractive for developing knowledge in a specific field (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2010; Queirós, Faria and Almeida, 2017). In this study, the researcher opted for a qualitative research approach to investigate a single case that provided valuable insights into the 'SRFDP'[26]. To capture the complexity of the reconfiguration process, the researcher employed both descriptive and exploratory case designs[27] (Yin, 2018), and used theories to frame the study and guide research questions. Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe (2013) note that different types of case studies may overlap in their objectives, including detailing the factual details of the case, portraying the situation without making judgments, and expanding on relevant concepts.

The researcher opted to employ qualitative case study research for several reasons. Firstly, the phenomenon of interest, namely stakeholders' lived experiences of the 'SRFDP' required an in-depth exploration. Qualitative case study research was the most appropriate approach as it facilitated an understanding of the meanings that individuals attributed to a social or human issue (Creswell, 2014). Secondly, the concepts of 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality, and inclusion' and 'identity' are contextual and determined by the participants involved in the study. To comprehend these concepts within the school reconfiguration process, it was necessary to elicit participants' own words and experiences.

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[26] A common rationale for choosing a single, rather than multiple cases, is when the single case represents an unusual or revelatory case (Yin, 2018), as is the case in this study.

[27] Exploratory case-studies focus on the collection of data and then look for patterns in the data. They investigate a phenomenon that is characterised by a lack of preliminary research and can be used to explore a relatively new phenomenon (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2013b).

This allowed for the development of a comprehensive understanding of the concepts. Yin (2018) cautions that a single case study design runs the risk of the case turning out to be different from what was initially anticipated and recommends that researchers undertake significant scoping exercises before selecting the case. However, given the researcher's extensive involvement with the CNS sector over a decade, the researcher had unique insight that negated the necessity for traditional scoping inquiries.

4.7 Research Participants

An important part of the research is ensuring that data are collected from the most knowledgeable people (Ahlin, 2019, p. 5). Participant selection in this study was mostly purposive (Creswell, 2014), whereby the researcher selected interviewees with knowledge and experience of the case study under focus, not just the most available or most easily reached participants (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The research included three groups of participants as outlined in Table 5. The principal of Scoil na Carraige was initially contacted via email to inquire about her interest in participating in the research (See Appendix Q). She served as the gatekeeper for inviting the teacher and parents to take part in the study.

Table 5. Participant profiles

Participant group 1 (4 participants)	Participant group 1 consisted of four people who were either current or former patrons of Scoil na Carraige. All participants held leadership roles in their respective organisations (2 representatives from the Education and Training Board sector and 2 representatives from the Catholic Church).
Participant group 2 (2 participants)	Participant group 2 consisted of the principal and teacher of Scoil na Carraige.
Participant group 3 (1 participant)	Participant group 3 consisted of a parent whose children were enrolled in the case study school at the time the research was conducted. At the time of data collection there were 16 children enrolled in the school (six families in total). An invitation to participate in the research was sent to all parents, however, only one responded positively to the invitation.

Participants in group 1 and 2 were purposively selected by the researcher. This allowed the researcher to focus on information rich participants that enabled the researcher to gather in-depth data on the phenomenon in question (Schoch, 2019). Participants in group 3 were selected through what could be likened to "chain-referral-sampling" (Heckathorn *et al.*, 2011, p. 356). There were six families in the school when the research was undertaken. With the assistance of the principal of the school, an invitation was sent to each of the six families to participate in the research. However, only one parent responded to the invitation.

Parental choice is a central concept that emerges from the literature surrounding school reconfiguration. The voices of the principal and teacher alone do not encapsulate the entirety of the experience of the people involved in the reconfiguration process. In order to seek a more holistic and balanced view of the lived experience of the school reconfiguration process and the opportunities and challenges it presented, the voice of parents was also deemed necessary.

In the context of the study, the decision to prioritise the voice of parents over that of children was rooted in the specific policy of the 'Schools Reconfiguration For Diversity Process'. Within this policy, parents or guardians are consulted on the reconfiguration of the school rather than children themselves. It is important to note that the decision to prioritise parental input does not imply a dismissal of children's voices. Rather, it reflects a recognition of the diverse stakeholders involved in reconfiguration process and the particular focus on parental choice in the 'SRFDP'.

As mentioned earlier, at the time of data collection, no policy guidelines from the DE had issued regarding school reconfiguration. In absence of this guidance, the Patrons had created their own guidelines for schools (ETBI, 2018a). Therefore, the decision to seek former and current patron representatives' experiences was made in the hopes that discussion with them would offer an insight into the practicalities of the reconfiguration process. It should be noted that the researcher also contacted the Forward Planning Section of the DE and invited them to participate in the research. No response was received.

4.8 The research instruments: semi-structured interviews

This research used semi-structured interviews as the research instrument. Semi-structured interviews are a qualitative approach to collecting data. They begin with a set of planned questions which are asked of multiple respondents and are guided by new information obtained as the discussion unfolds (Ahlin, 2019). This research method is used to develop an understanding of the viewpoints of key stakeholders, as it enables the respondent to share in the process and discuss their perspective in relation to the research questions (Ahlin, 2019). While the semi-structured interviews began with an initial set of questions, the researcher needed to be aware of the ongoing discussion and ask follow-up questions that encouraged the participant to elaborate on their responses (Ahlin, 2019). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to understand "why and how something occurs" by enabling him/her to dig deep into "topic areas generated by participants" (Ahlin, 2019, p. 2). A noted advantage of semi-structured interviews is that participants are less likely to hold back or alter information when interviewed alone (Beitin, 2012). However, researchers need to be aware that during individual interviews participants are more susceptible to "withholding certain descriptions or alternatively embellishing them if the truth is inconsistent with their preferred self-image or if they wish to impress the interviewer" (Fielding, 1994, cited in Beitin, 2012, p. 244).

As a result of the challenges posed by COVID-19, the semi-structured interviews were conducted online using Zoom. Zoom is a collaborative, cloud-based videoconferencing service and "offers the ability to communicate in real time with geographically dispersed individuals via computer, tablet, or mobile device" (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 2; Zoom Inc., 2020). This study used synchronous interviews, which mirrored a traditional interview in that they took place "in real time but in an online environment" (James and Busher, 2012, p. 179)

A challenge of this approach was that it required participants to have a certain level of "literacy in dealing with computers and online communication facilities" (James and Busher, 2012, p. 179). A key consideration of conducting interviews online was how the researcher would establish good and trusting relationship with participants, referred to by Archibald *et al.* (2019) as 'rapport'. The visual capabilities of Zoom allowed the researcher and the participant to see each other, and removed the "veil" that can be problematic in online interviewing (James and Busher, 2012, p. 181). Xie (2007) contends that offline interactions and relationships can shape online interactions. To achieve this, the researcher engaged in a number of informal phone conversations with participants prior to the interviews. During the phone calls, the researcher established a time and date for the interviews and ensured that the participants were comfortable with the technology. Carefully designed interview questions help to minimise "distortions, calculated omissions and exaggerations" in interviewee responses (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). In order to mitigate against such challenges a selection of the semi-structured interview questions were piloted prior to data collection. The focus of the pilot was to examine the wording of the questions to see if they contained anything potentially problematic for participants.

4.8.1 Piloting the semi-structured interview questions

The researcher sought input from three teachers, who were personally known to her, to review the semi-structured research questions meant for the principal and teacher participants. Their feedback aimed to assess the questions' accessibility. The teachers' feedback highlighted that the term 'reconfiguration' could be challenging and not easily understood. However, considering that the principal and teacher participants in this study had direct involvement in the reconfiguration of Scoil na Carraige, the researcher was confident that they would grasp the term's meaning. The feedback also suggested that providing examples to participants during the interviews, particularly for the question about 'values

conflicts', would be helpful in case they were unsure what was meant by the term. The

researcher also sought input from two parents of primary school children, who were

personally known to her, to review the semi-structured research questions meant for parents.

Feedback from this activity resulted in simplification of the language used in the semi-

structured interview questions and ensuring that double-barrelled questions (essentially two

questions in one) were avoided.

4.8.2 Developing and administering the semi-structured interview questions

The interview schedule developed for this study can be seen in Appendix B. Each participant

received an individually tailored set of semi-structured interview questions, at least two-

weeks prior to their scheduled interview. As each participant entered and departed from the

process of school reconfiguration at different parts of the journey, it was not appropriate to

develop one set of generic questions. The timeline for the administration of the semi-

structured interviews and details about how they were adapted and refined is outlined in

Figure 2.

Figure 2. Process for developing semi-structured interview questions

February 2021
- Reviewed available literature and created a draft timeline of reconfiguration
- Developed the semi-structured interview questions and piloted
- Sought and secured ethical approval
- Made initial informal contact with participants
- Undertook scoping phone calls and emails to potential participants in the study and confirmed the timeline

March 2021
- Semi-structured interview with P1 - Parish Priest and former Chairperson of the Board of Management of the case study school
- Interview transcribed and sent to participants for member-checking

May 2021
- Semi-structured interview with P2 - Parent
- Interview transcribed and sent to participant for member-checking

June 2021
- Semi-structured interview with P3 - Principal
- Interview transcribed and sent to participant for member-checking
- Semi-structured interview with P4 - Teacher
- Interview transcribed and sent to participant for member-checking

July 2021
- Semi-structured interview with P5 - local ETB patron representative
- Interview transcribed and sent to participant for member-checking

August 2021
- Semi-structured interview with P6 - patron representative from the office of the local bishop
- Interview transcribed and sent to participant for member-checking

September 2021
- Semi-structured interview with P7 - patron representative from ETBI
- Interview transcribed and sent to participant for member-checking

October 2021
- Clarification sought on any points of uncertainity or any points of conflict accross the interview transcripts

The research process began with the thorough examination of available documents about the school reconfiguration process to structure interview questions along a timeline from before to after the reconfiguration process, as presented in Figure 2. Draft semi-structured interview schedules were developed and piloted. Once ethical approval was obtained from the DCU Research Ethics Committee, the researcher contacted potential participants informally to ascertain their interest in participating in the study and to briefly confirm their role in the process. Taking account of feedback during the pilot, individualised interview schedules were developed for each participant, and continuous revisions were made throughout the interview process to refine the questions and focus on the specific aspect of the reconfiguration process in which each participant was directly involved.

This approach ensured that the questions addressed the unique perspectives and roles of each participant. Notably, the questions posed to the Parish Priest differed from those posed to the representative from the office of the local Bishop due to the insights gained from interviews with the Parish Priest and the principal, revealing that the member of the Bishop's office involvement in the reconfiguration process occurred only towards the final stages of deliberation. As a result, the interview schedules were adjusted to reflect the varying levels of involvement and knowledge among the participants, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the reconfiguration process from multiple perspectives. After each interview, the transcription and member-checking processes were carried out. Finally, all transcripts were carefully reviewed to ensure alignment, particularly with regard to the timeline of reconfiguration as reported by the participants, and any inconsistencies were addressed through follow-up communication with participants.

4.9 Data Analysis

Ryan (2006, p. 95) emphasises that data analysis entails a systematic organisation, continuous scrutiny, accurate description, theorization, interpretation, discussion, and presentation of data. To accomplish these objectives, the researcher employed elements of Braun and Clarke's (2022, p. 4) process of thematic analysis (TA), which they define as "a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes". The analysis proceeded through six phases, as outlined in Table 6. Additionally, to ensure a chronological arrangement of the data, the researcher simultaneously applied 'The Problem Solution Approach' outlined by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002). This approach involved 're-storying' the data into a coherent chronological sequence, creating a narrative that can be found in Appendix M.

Table 6. Data analysis of semi-structured interviews

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

During phase 1, the data were organised and prepared for analysis. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 35) state that this phase is an opportunity to "become deeply and intimately familiar with the content of your dataset, through a process of immersion". Practically, this involved listening to the audio-visual recording of the data, transcribing the semi-structured interviews and uploading them to a secure cloud storage platform. At this point, the transcripts were returned to the participants. They were encouraged to engage in member-checking to ensure accuracy and to enable them to remove any aspects of the data that they were not comfortable including in the study. Interestingly, no participant removed statements from their transcripts,

but rather, used the opportunity to add to their accounts. After this, the researcher read the data repeatedly until patterns of ideas began to emerge in the researcher's mind and initial codes were documented.

Coding is a process of organising the data by bracketing chunks and writing a word representing a category in the margins (Creswell, 2014). The researcher worked systemically through the dataset in "a fine-grained way" to "identify segments of data" that appeared "potentially interesting, relevant or meaningful" to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 35). As shown in Appendix C, the researcher applied "analytically-meaningful descriptions" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 35) in the margins. Codes were commonly based on the literature and the researcher's common sense (Creswell, 2014), but following Braun and Clarke (2022) they varied in level from very explicit, surface level descriptions, to more conceptual descriptions. Initial noting was exploratory and tended towards descriptive comments. However, as the researcher became more familiar with the transcripts, connections began to be made to the literature and the notes and codes became more interpretative in nature. For example, the initial code label 'rural life' later became the code 'rural identity' as can be seen in Appendix S.

Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 56) state that one "really important dimension in coding and theme development is the way you tackle the question of where and how meaning is noticed", ranging from inductive to deductive orientations. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 56) advise that your analysis can have "elements of both orientations" and this is the approach that the researcher took. While initially approaching the data in a more deductive style, for example looking for codes relating to 'ethos', the researcher remained open to the possibility of other meanings emerging. In addition, the researcher also needed to develop the chronology of events that took place to develop the 'story' of the reconfiguration. To do so, the researcher employed 'The Problem-Solution Approach', outlined by Ollerenshaw and

Creswell (2002) to 're-story' the data. While coding the data using TA, the researcher

simultaneously coded the data in search of the storyline, an example of which can be seen in

Appendix R.

Phase 3 began when all data had been coded and collated. This phase re-focused the

analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than codes, and involved an initial analysis of

the codes in an effort to combine some to form overarching themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 77) define a theme as "a pattern of shared meaning organised

around a central concept". Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 81) advise that it is "perfectly

reasonable to 'promote' a rich or complex code to a candidate theme". Therefore, in some

instances, the researcher promoted a code, for example, the code 'ethos' became the theme

'Ethos'. As can be seen in Appendix D, clusters of codes were compiled that seemed to share

a core idea or concept (Braun and Clarke, 2022). As recommended by Braun and Clarke

(2022), the researcher developed thematic maps, an example of which can be seen in

Appendix E. Thematic maps are visual representations that display the patterns or

connections of specific themes and sub themes. The thematic maps assisted the researcher in

identifying "shared patterned meaning across the dataset" (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Phase 4 of the research process encompassed a comprehensive review and refinement

of the identified themes, involving two distinct levels of analysis. At level one, the researcher

focused on the coded data extracts, carefully examining all the collated extracts associated

with each theme. The aim was to assess whether these extracts formed a coherent pattern.

Moving to level two, a similar process of review and refinement occurred, but at a broader

scale encompassing the entire data set. The researcher considered the validity of the themes

in relation to the entire data set. This holistic perspective allowed for the identification of

overarching patterns, connections, or discrepancies that emerged across the themes. By

considering the themes in the context of the entire data set, the researcher ensured that the

themes accurately represented the collective data and effectively captured the overall essence of the research findings. This involved evaluating whether the thematic map accurately reflected the meanings evident in the entire data set (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Phase 5 began once a satisfactory thematic map of the data had been created. A later iteration of the thematic map for the theme of 'Ethos' can be seen in Appendix E. At this point, the themes were defined and further refined. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 92) explain that "define and refine" means identifying the "essence" of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures. As part of the refinement stage, the researcher considered whether or not a theme contained any sub-themes, defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 92) as "themes-within-a-theme". As explained by Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 108) this stage "involves writing" and blends with the final phase of "writing up".

Phase 6 began when the themes had been fully established, and involved the final analysis and write-up of the report. Using the data coded as 'storyline', the researcher created the chronological narrative of the reconfiguration process (see Appendix M). The story was then used to assist the researcher to structure the report chronologically. An example of how this was achieved is provided in Appendix F. In this example, quotations from participants in relation to theme of 'Ethos' are organised chronologically (before, during and after reconfiguration), allowing the researcher to consider how the participant's understandings changed during the reconfiguration process. While Braun and Clarke's 6 steps of analysis appear linear, writing the report was an iterative process, that involved revisiting steps 4 and 5 a number of times.

4.10 The trustworthiness of the research

A primary consideration and concern for all qualitative researchers it that the data they collect, analyse and interpret are both trustworthy and credible (Ponelis, 2015). With reference to credibility, Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) explain that it refers to how well the researcher's interpretation of the findings matches the participant's understandings of what they were trying say. One way of enhancing credibility is by triangulation, defined by Tashakkori and Teddue (2003, p. 717) as "the combinations and comparisons of multiple data sources, data collection and analysis procedures, research methods, and/or inferences that occur at the end of a study". In the context of this study, the participants offered multiple perspectives from both the micro and macro levels of the case. The use of multiple sources of data led to what Yin (2018, p. 127) refers to as "converging lines of inquiry". The recognition of multiple realities within the school reconfiguration process meant that triangulation was necessary to position the participant's perspective accurately in relation to each other.

4.10.1 Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted the importance of ensuring that research findings are consistent and dependable with the data collected. In qualitative research the goal is not to eliminate inconsistencies but to ensure that the researcher understands when they occur. Hence the importance of documenting procedures and demonstrating that coding schemes and categories have been used consistently. Dependability rests on the quality of the data collection and analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and is shown by explaining that the research systematically studied what it claimed to study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The data analysis process and supporting documentation (transcripts excerpts, code list examples, thematic maps, sub-themes, etc.) are included as appendices in this study so that the data collection and analysis process is transparent.

4.10.2 Transferability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) transferability can be understood as the extent to which the researcher has made it possible for the reader to apply the findings of this study to other similar situations. To enable the reader to do this, Ponelis (2015) recommends that the researcher reports all the evidence. This enables the reader to determine if the findings "flow from the data and experiences rather than from the bias and subjectivity of the researcher" (Ponelis, 2015, p. 538). This research is very specific to a particular time, location and context, therefore the extent to which some of the findings are transferable to other contexts is variable. However, in an effort to increase transferability, excerpts from the transcripts have been included in appendices N-P.

4.10.3 Reflexivity

Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 14) place a strong emphasis on the reflexivity of the researcher during thematic analysis. As explained by the authors, reflexivity is a "process of reflection" that "aims to consider what the researcher's standpoint and choices might enable, exclude and close off" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 14). This means "having some awareness of the philosophical and theoretical assumptions that inform your research" and "working to ensure theory and research practice align" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 14). It also means "developing awareness of your personal positionings or standpoints" and" your values and assumptions about the world" (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The researcher engaged in reflection on her positionality, her values and assumptions at all stages of the data analysis through building in time during the data analysis process to reflect and through engaging in conversations with her supervisors about her positionality.

4.11 Ethical considerations

This study was undertaken subsequent to permission being granted by the DCU Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix G) in February 2021. As the research in question involved

adult participants, none of whom were considered vulnerable, the ethical approval process was classified as 'notification'. That said, it is also true that the very characteristics that make case study research valuable in terms of providing insights and in-depth information about a particular phenomenon are the same characteristics that create ethical challenges concerning anonymity and confidentiality (Mills, 2012). Further, the removal of certain identifying characteristics does not always remove the risk of identification nor reduce the risk related to the publication of confidential information. Therefore, it was made clear to participants that while every effort will be made to protect the identity, and while confidentiality is guaranteed, anonymity cannot be guaranteed[28]. Although anonymity could not be offered, certain safeguards were employed to protect the identity of the respondents. For example, the researcher used pseudonyms for the respondents and the case study school and the area that the school was located in was not named.

In keeping with the DCU Code of Good Research Practice and the regulations of the university, agreed protocols were followed with fidelity. For example, plain language statements were shared with participants in the first instance via post/ email to support their decision to take part in the study (see Appendix H). Having received signed consent of the participants (see Appendix I), semi-structured interviews were conducted. In addition to this, the researcher formally requested permission to conduct the study from the school's BOM (see Appendix J) and made herself available to answer any additional questions about the study that the participants had. The aims of the research were clearly stated before any interviews were arranged and conducted. All participants fully agreed and were comfortable during the recording of the interviews. No intimate or potentially discrediting information was sought and there was no risk of harm or exposure to any physical or mental stress.

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[28] Confidentiality in respect of this research was understood to mean that the participants' identity and the name of their school would not be disclosed to anyone outside of the research team unless otherwise agreed upon.

4.12 Limitations of the study

Like all studies involving a single case design, this research had its limitations. The timeframe was relatively short and the study was conducted during a global pandemic, when there were significant restrictions in place in Ireland which impacted data collection. For this reason, it was not possible for the researcher to visit the site of the case study to conduct the interviews, which is recommended in case study research (Yin, 2018). To overcome these limitations, the researcher ensured that the description of the case was rich in detail and depth and engaged in many informal conversations with participants to build rapport. The principal of the case study school kindly sent pictures of the school and the researcher followed the school's website and social media channels to familiarise herself with the case. The low response rate from parents to participate in this study was another limitation. Only one parent responded to participate in the interviews despite an invitation being sent to all parents via the principal. For the researcher, had the interviews been able to take place face-to-face, a higher response rate may have been more likely. However, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not possible. Another limitation was the lack of a participant from the DE. Despite inviting DE representatives involved in reconfiguration to participate in the research, no response was received.

While the research incorporated participant references to the altered experiences of children and their understanding of the shift in patronage, the study focused on the voices of parents, teachers and patron representatives. An important similarity emerging from these narratives was the heightened sense of inclusion among children from minority belief backgrounds post-reconfiguration. Nevertheless, the study lacked an in-depth examination of the children's direct perspectives, particularly those who identified as minorities within denominational schools. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of this experience, it is imperative to emphasise the importance of including the voices of the children themselves

in future research. This limitation underscores the need for further investigation into how reconfiguration impacts children's experiences and perceptions, particularly those from minority belief backgrounds, to ensure a more holistic understanding of the topic.

Finally, the study encountered a limitation in not being able to secure a participant from the broader community who opposed the reconfiguration. While the participants frequently referenced dissenting voices within the community, the absence of a direct contributor who actively campaigned against the change hindered the study's depth. Incorporating a first-hand account from such an individual could have substantially enriched the dataset and provided a more comprehensive perspective. Despite efforts to identify and involve such participants through those who did take part, these attempts proved unsuccessful. Furthermore, the inability to visit the study's locality and engage in face-to-face interactions with potential participants proved to be a significant drawback in this respect.

4.13 Conclusion

The chapter commenced with a recapitulation of the research problem, aim, and research questions. In an attempt to contextualise the study, a brief introduction to the case study school was provided. Subsequently, the chapter situated the research within a social constructivist paradigm. The researcher's positionality as an insider was acknowledged and the implications of this positionality were examined. The chapter then delved into the research logic, explicated the rationale for selecting the research design, and described the case study methodology. This was followed by a comprehensive portrayal of the participant sample, data collection, and analytical tools. The trustworthiness of the research and ethical considerations in respect of the study were addressed. Finally, the limitations associated with this study were acknowledged.

Chapter Five - Navigating the before, during, and after of the 'Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the themes that were identified during the analysis of the data. The data presented were generated through semi-structured interviews with seven participants from the case study school. As stated previously, the policy analysis and conceptual literature review, presented in Chapters Two and Three, acted as a guiding force throughout the research process. They provided a foundation for formulating research questions, selecting appropriate methodologies, and interpreting the findings within the context of existing knowledge.

5.2 Organisation of the chapter

To provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the study, this chapter begins by introducing the case study school, the participants and their relationship to the case, which were analysed through the data gathered. The findings are then presented in a chronological manner according to the themes that were identified through the analysis process. These themes are 'Ethos', 'School choice' and 'Identity', each of which is further subdivided into sub-themes. The chronological organisation of data illustrates the evolution of the reconfiguration process in Scoil na Carraige, contextualising the changes and providing a clear understanding of the process unfolding over time. Additionally, it demonstrates the impact of the change process on the participants over time. Throughout the chapter, the discussion of the themes and sub-themes is framed by the conceptual framework. Each theme concludes with a summary of the key findings from the research.

5.3 Setting the scene and introducing the participants

Scoil na Carraige is located rural Ireland and has been part of the local community since the mid 1800s. At the time of writing, the school had an enrolment less than 30 pupils and two mainstream class teachers[29]. Since its establishment, it had been under the patronage of the Catholic Church and espoused a Catholic ethos. In recent years, the school became one of the first Catholic schools in the country to undergo a live reconfiguration when it transferred to a multi-denominational Community National School, under the patronage of the local ETB.

In the last decade Scoil na Carraige has experienced a consistent decline in pupil enrolments, as outlined in Figure 3. School census data show that from 2014/2015 numbers gradually decreased (DE, 2022b). As a result of this, the school was in danger of losing its second mainstream class teacher. Since its reconfiguration in 2019, enrolments have gradually risen, as shown in Figure 3. A timeline for the reconfiguration process is available in Appendix K.

Figure 3. Enrolment trajectory for case study school from 2014-2023 (DES, 2019a; DE, 2022d)[30]
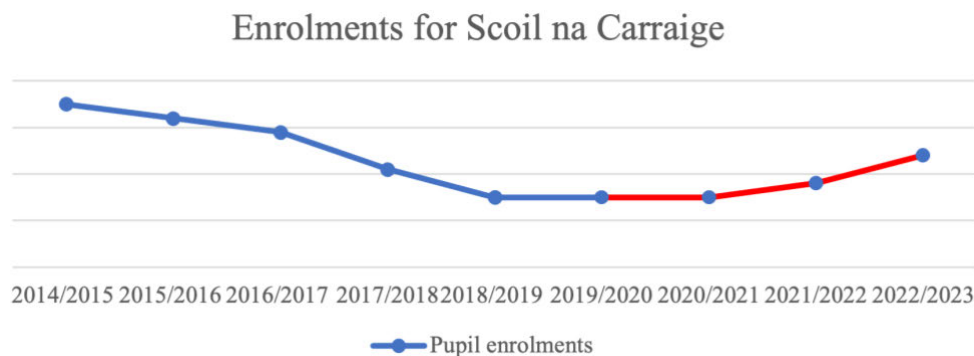
When the researcher approached the principal of the school to gauge interest for this study, there were two teachers working in the school. As noted in the previous chapter, it was not just the principal and teacher who were invited to participate; invitations were extended

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[29] Exact enrolment figures are not provided in an effort to protect the identity of the school.
[30] The change in colour the line in Figure 3 represents the point at which the patron changed.

to other people involved in the reconfiguration. Table 7 introduces each participant and their

relationship to the case study school[31]. In an effort to protect the anonymity of the participants

and the school, all place names and people's names have been changed[32].

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[31] All participants, apart from Máire (parent), were purposively selected by the researcher as a result of their direct relationship with the reconfiguration of the school before, during and after the process. Máire was selected through what could be likened to "chain-referral-sampling" (Heckathorn *et al.*, 2011, p. 356). With the assistance of the principal of the school, an invitation was sent to all families to participate in the research. However, only one parent/guardian (out of a possible six families) responded to the invitation.

[32] The use of a case study methodology poses particular challenges in relation to anonymity, particularly when the case study involves a small number of participants and the phenomenon under investigation is limited to a small community (Mills, 2012). The removal of certain identifying characteristics does not always remove the risk of identification nor reduce the risk related to the publication of confidential information. Therefore, it was made clear to participants in the plain language statement and the informed consent form that while every effort will be made to protect the identity, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Table 7. Participants and their relationship to the case study school

Participant	Relationship to the case study school
Fr O'Sullivan	Fr O'Sullivan is the local Parish Priest and has been based in the locality for just under a decade. Prior to the school reconfiguring patronage, he was the Chairperson of the Board of Management.
Fr Barrett	Fr Barrett works in the office of the local Bishop and was involved in the meetings that took place between the local community and the patrons during the reconfiguration process in Scoil na Carraige. He has been involved in other successful school reconfigurations in his diocese.
Méabh	Méabh is the principal of the school. She lives locally and her children attend the case study school. She was acting principal for the past number of years and was appointed as principal when the school reopened as a Community National School. Méabh is a teaching principal, so as well as having responsibility for school administration, she also has responsibility for a multi-grade class. Prior to reconfiguration Méabh had not worked in multi-denominational education.
Oisín	Oisín is a mainstream class teacher in Scoil na Carraige. He teaches third to sixth class. He is from the locality and was appointed on a permanent basis when the school reconfigured. Prior to this, he had worked as a support teacher in the school. He has spent nearly ten years teaching in Catholic schools and this is his first experience of working in the multi-denominational sector. He has taught in both urban and rural schools.
John	John works for the Education and Training Board of Ireland (ETBI) and has responsibility for Community National Schools and school patronage. John represented ETBI at all meetings that took place regarding school reconfiguration in Scoil na Carraige. In his role, he has been involved in all school reconfigurations to Community National Schools that have taken place nationally.
Catherine	Catherine is the Director of Schools in the local Education and Training Board. As a Director of Schools, she has responsibility for leadership of teaching and learning in schools and governance and management of schools. She represented the local ETB at all meetings that took place regarding school reconfiguration in Scoil na Carraige and is now directly involved with supporting the school as a new Community National School.
Máire	Máire is a parent whose children attend the case study school. She is from the area and attended the school as a child. Máire was a member of the parent group that was established within the community to consider ways of ensuring the school remained viable in the face of falling enrolments. She was an advocate of school reconfiguration within the community. At the time of writing, she was a member of the newly formed Board of Management.

Information about the individual participants provided in Table 7 highlights the diversity of opinion and experience that informed this research. As the thematic analysis of the data shows, this diversity contributed significantly to the richness of the findings.

5.4 Themes

During the data analysis process, the researcher utilised abductive coding (combining features of both inductive and deductive inference). Three key themes were identified from the data collected through semi-structured interviews: 'Ethos', 'School choice', and 'Identity'. As discussed in Chapter Four, abductive coding is a qualitative data analysis method that is particularly useful when exploring new phenomena. It involves identifying patterns, themes, or relationships in the data that cannot be fully explained by existing theories, and using those patterns to develop new insights. Thus, although established concepts like 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion', and 'identity' provided a foundational framework for constructing certain conceptual explanations in this study, the researcher maintained a receptive and attentive stance towards potential discoveries that extended beyond existing theories. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the research questions, enabling the discovery of new perspectives and the potential refinement or expansion of existing theoretical frameworks.

The study's findings are organised thematically and offer a comprehensive response to the research and interview questions (see Appendix B). The semi-structured interviews, which took place online, enabled the researcher to elicit a broad range of perspectives and understandings about the pre-reconfiguration context, participant's rationale for reconfiguring and the experiences of stakeholders. Given the centrality of 'ethos' as a concept, the interview questions focused on participants' lived experiences and understandings of the school's ethos before, during and after reconfiguration. Considering that reconfiguration has been met with contestation in some areas where it has been proposed, the study also sought to

explore how the decision to change was negotiated at the local level and the experiences of those involved in leading community meetings about reconfiguration.

Moreover, the interview questions delved into the changes that occurred as a result of the reconfiguration process, such as changes to the school community, the curriculum and school policies, as well as its impact on stakeholders, including teachers, parents and pupils. The questions posed also examined the challenges that arose before, during and after the transition and how the school community negotiated the new 'ethos' of the CNS model. In an effort to keep 'the school' at the heart of this research, local participants were interviewed first. This was followed by interviews with patron representatives, who are somewhat removed from the local area.

Table 8 provides an overview of the main themes and their corresponding subordinate themes derived from the data analysis. Subordinate themes are subcategories that are related to and emerge from the main themes, and provide further insight and depth into the underlying concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2022). To establish a chronological sequence, the data underwent a process of 're-storying'[33], following the approach described by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) (see Appendix M). This allowed for an analysis of each theme based on experiences prior to, during, and post-reconfiguration, providing a coherent narrative. Table 8 presents the themes and subordinate themes during these three distinct phases.

To elaborate on these themes chronologically, the researcher first examines the subordinate themes prior to reconfiguration. For example, under the theme of 'Ethos', the focus is on understanding what constitutes a Catholic ethos and the tensions surrounding it prior to the reconfiguration. Similarly, under the theme of 'School choice', the emphasis is on

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[33] Re-storying is the process of gathering stories, analysing them for key elements of the story (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene), and then rewriting the story to place it within a chronological sequence (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2016). During the semi-structured interviews, when individual participants told their story of the reconfiguration process, the sequence was sometimes missing, by re-storying, the researcher was enabled to explore the links between the ideas of each participant.

exploring the lack of choice and the implications this had on decision-making. Moving on to the subordinate themes during reconfiguration, the researcher delves into the changes and challenges experienced during the process. For instance, under the theme of 'Ethos', the focus shifts to themes such as RE, understandings of a Community National School, and the impact of changing the patron's programme. Within the theme of 'School choice', the decision-making process, the influence of a Catholic hegemony on expanding school choice and efforts to attract additional enrolments are discussed. Within the theme of 'Identity' the researcher discusses the changing face of Irish Catholicism and the implications this has for school reconfiguration in a rural area.

Lastly, the subordinate themes post-reconfiguration are explored. Here, the researcher examines the aftermath of the reconfiguration process. Under the theme of 'Ethos', the focus is on the resolution of tensions and the impact on the relationship between the Church and the school. Within the theme of 'Identity', the continued connections between the Church and the school are explored, as well as the development of understanding and respect for other identities. By elaborating on the themes and subordinate themes chronologically, the study provides a clear and structured narrative of the reconfiguration process, enabling readers to follow the progression and evolution of ideas and events. This chronological approach facilitates the analysis of the factors contributing to successes and challenges at different stages and allows for an assessment of the overall impact of the reconfiguration process.

Table 8. Themes and subordinate themes

Theme	Subordinate themes prior to reconfiguration	Subordinate themes during reconfiguration	Subordinate themes post reconfiguration
Ethos	5.5.1.1 What is a Catholic ethos? 5.5.1.2 Ethos tensions prior to reconfiguration	5.5.2.1 Religious education and the sacraments	5.5.3.1 Understandings of a Community National School 5.5.3.3 Releasing the tensions or moving them somewhere else?
School choice	5.6.1.1 A lack of choice 5.6.1.2 School choice or school survival?	5.6.2.1 Who decides? Decision-making during the reconfiguration process 5.6.2.2 The effect of a Catholic hegemony on the creation of more school choice during the reconfiguration process	5.6.3.1 Attracting additional enrolments
Identity		5.7.1.1 The rise of secularism and 'Cultural Catholicism' 5.7.1.2 The role of the local school in building community, identity and preventing rural decline 5.7.1.3 Ownership of the local school and connections to the Catholic Church	5.7.2.1 Continuing connections between the Church and the school post-reconfiguration 5.7.2.2 Understanding of and respect for other identities

5.5 Ethos[34]

During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher asked all participants about their understandings and experiences of the ethos of the school pre- and post-reconfiguration, as the policy of reconfiguration is primarily concerned with 'ethos-change'. 'Ethos' was identified as a dominant theme during the exploration of the literature surrounding reconfiguration and was therefore identified as a concept that warranted consideration during the interview questions with participants. In particular, the researcher was interested in how 'ethos-change' manifested in a practical sense throughout the reconfiguration process, what participants identified as significant 'ethos' changes and the barriers or challenges encountered by the participants when reconfiguring from one 'ethos' to another[35]. Utilising abductive reasoning, the researcher remained "open and sensitive" to the data, drawing on pre-existing theories regarding 'ethos' as a "source of inspiration, and identification and interpretation of patterns" (Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018, p. 52). This section outlines a number of general, group-based observations of the data which lays the foundation for the subsequent analysis of individual interview data that sheds light on the theme of 'Ethos'.

The understandings of ethos identified during this study aligned with Donnelly's (2000, p. 150) statement that ethos is a dynamic process characterised by "inherent contradictions and inconsistencies", rather than a static phenomenon. Each participant's understandings of ethos was varied and nuanced, and while there were similarities between interpretations of the concept, there were also differences. While a prescribed ethos existed pre- (Catholic) and post-reconfiguration (CNS), the views of participants illustrated the many complexities of attempting to enforce an ethos from the outside. As discussed in Chapter Three, Hogan (1984, pp. 694-695) asserts that a positivist view of school ethos has perhaps

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[34] Excerpts from the semi-structured interview transcripts to support this theme can be found in Appendix N.
[35] The full schedule of interviews is available in Appendix B.

been "the most common one in Ireland". In this understanding, the 'ethos' is prescribed by the religious body or school authority who is the patron. However, findings from this study demonstrate that the practical expression of the school's 'prescribed' ethos is very dependent on the values of the principal and teachers in the school.

When asked to reflect on her own understanding of ethos, Méabh, the principal in this study, called attention to the relationship between the ethos of the school and the people within the school. For Méabh, the word 'ethos' reminded her of the "two or three sentences that a school used to describe themselves". However, she stated that to her it was "much more than that". Méabh described 'ethos' as "the feeling inside in the school" and as something that was lived out in the "day to day" of school life. She noted the importance of its co-construction amongst the staff of the school when she described it as a "shared feeling of what this school is about, and what it stands for and what it's trying to do". For Méabh, if the staff did not have this shared understanding of the ethos, then "the children aren't going to have it". Méabh understood 'ethos' as a social construct that spreads "through the relationships the children make through the school with each other and with their teachers". The following extract from the interview with Méabh illustrates this point:

> When I hear the word 'ethos' I think of the two or three sentences that a school uses to describe themselves. You know, your slogan, or motto or vision. But 'ethos' to me is much more than that. It's the feeling inside in the school, you can't write that. You can teach it to a certain extent. But it's more about the day to day and living it. So if I and my staff don't have that shared feeling of what this school is about and what it stands for and what it's trying to do, then the children aren't going to have it. So, for me, it's something that is created inside the walls of the school and it spreads out to the families and through the relationships the children make through the school with each other and with their teachers. (Méabh, principal, p.14, lines 340-347)

While Méabh recognised the presence of an intended ethos that had been prescribed by the patron through written artefacts, she identified the people within the school and their relationships as more crucial to the creation of an 'ethos'. Initially, she referenced the "aspirational" (Donnelly, 2000, p. 151) dimensions of ethos (formal documents of the school;

the vision/ mission statement), which were often reflective of statements from school authorities (Donnelly, 2000, p. 151), such as the patron. Donnelly (2000, p. 151) argues that this dimension of ethos is often superficial, with the deeper dimensions of ethos attributed to school structures; the environment of the school, behaviour of individuals within the school, and individual's deep-seated thoughts, feelings and perceptions. This raises significant questions for the concept of 'ethos' within the reconfiguration process. If the people within the school are the key determinants of how ethos is lived out, then to what extent will a reconfiguration be successful at changing the lived ethos of the school? How important is the 'buy in' of individual actors within the school? And what is the role of the patron, who is somewhat external, within a successful 'ethos-change' process? To consider these questions, we will begin by examining the concept of 'ethos' and how it manifested prior to reconfiguration.

5.5.1 Understandings of 'ethos' prior to reconfiguration

5.5.1.1 What is a Catholic ethos?

As stated in Chapter Three, 'ethos' in Ireland is often defined along religious lines. This was evident in all participants' responses. When asked to describe the 'ethos' of the school before it reconfigured, all of the participants described the ethos of the school along religious lines, as is illustrated here by Fr O'Sullivan:

> The school was Catholic and had a Catholic ethos and that meant that it held the old kind of traditional values. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.2, lines 38-39)

When probed about what a Catholic ethos means in practical terms, participants mentioned Catholic symbolism, prayer, school masses, sacramental preparation and Catholic RE as being a part of the school environment, as well as a close relationship with the local parish and the Parish Priest. What was interesting to note, however, was the lack of agreement amongst participants in relation to how overtly Catholic the school's ethos was prior to reconfiguration. Nelson and Stapleton (2021, p. 11) refer to the "variation of religiosity

between schools". They state that "similar to definitions of religious and non-religious people, the designation of a school as religious or non-religious is complex" as the levels of religious influence can vary significantly (Nelson and Stapleton, 2021, p. 11).

When describing the ethos of the school prior to reconfiguration, Fr O'Sullivan stressed that the Catholic ethos of Scoil na Carraige had remained more "traditional". By way of explanation of this, Fr O'Sullivan described the case study school as one in which most families were practicing their Catholic faith:

> Nearly all of those who were in the 5th and 6th classes, who were Catholics, they all became mass-servers, you know, and just loved it. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.1 14-15)

Máire, a parent of children who attend the school, also stated that "the vast majority of the parents there are still Catholic". Máire was a past-pupil of the school, and when asked about the Catholic ethos prior to reconfiguration she stated that:

> It was a school that had a Catholic ethos. We all did our Confirmation and our Communions and, we would have learned our religion during the day. And we would have gone to school and participated in school masses, and then when my own children were there, it was kind of the same thing again. (Máire, parent, p.1, lines 19-22)

Méabh's description of how the Catholic ethos of the school was lived out through the day-to-day activities of the school prior to reconfiguration appears to confirm Fr O'Sullivan and Máire's perspectives. Méabh described how the school used the 'Grow in Love' programme "to teach the Catholic faith inside the school day" through a daily lesson. Other features of the Catholic ethos mentioned by Méabh were that children "would have made their sacraments through the school" and that "prayer was a part of the school day".

However, when asked if Scoil na Carraige would have easily been identified as a Catholic school prior to reconfiguration, Oisín, a teacher in the school, stated that while you would have known that the school was Catholic because of the "symbolism up on the walls […] it wouldn't have been an overly Catholic school". Oisín remarked that the school would have catered for all different types of children and families and that it had always been open

to people with different values and different beliefs. Oisín's assessment of the school's ethos as not "overly Catholic" prior to reconfiguration is an interesting one. Later in this section, when examining ethos tensions, it is indicated that during his interview, Oisín frequently associated a Catholic ethos with the inequitable treatment of children who did not identify as Catholic, based on his past experiences. It is the interpretation of the researcher that his use of the description 'not overly Catholic' can be taken to mean that the school made efforts to include pupils of all religious and non-religious backgrounds prior to reconfiguration.

When speaking about Catholic schools in the local catchment area of the case study school, Oisín stated that not all Catholic schools were the same:

> The other schools around here are lovely, they're very nice schools. And while they are all Catholic schools in name, some of them are very Catholic and others aren't. They're diverse in their own right. (Oisín, teacher, p.13, lines 351-354)

This is in keeping with semi-structured interview research by Fahie (2017, p. 19) with 23 Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) teachers who work in Catholic schools which found that Catholic schools interpret, and manifest, their religious obligations with "differing degrees of commitment". Fahie (2017b, p. 19) notes that "while some schools were overt in the unequivocal expression of their religious ethos, other schools were more circumspect". Oisín's comment is another reminder of the variation of religiosity between schools. This highlights the dependent nature of 'ethos' as a concept and how its construction reflects the personal perspectives of the different people within the school. This poses significant questions for the reconfiguration process: To what extent is successful 'ethos-change' determined by the strength or weakness of the denominational ethos prior to reconfiguration? To what extent might the reconfiguration process be susceptible to resistance or challenges from individuals who hold personal values that differ from those of the new ethos, and how might this potentially undermine efforts to effect meaningful change in the school's ethos?

When describing the 'ethos' of Scoil na Carraige, Fr O'Sullivan associated a more traditional expression of the Catholic ethos with rural schools, thus: "the Church is at the heart of the community. […] And the school is at the heart of the community, so they are both connected" (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.2, lines 35-36). He was sceptical as to whether this close relationship between the Church and the school would also be found in urban areas. However, despite describing Scoil na Carraige as having a more "traditional" Catholic ethos, Fr O'Sullivan and Fr Barrett both referenced the change that they had witnessed to the ethos of Catholic schools more generally in previous decades. When asked about the Catholic 'ethos' of the school prior to reconfiguration he noted that:

> Our schools have changed as time has moved on. They're Catholic, in a very, very loose sense of the word. I mean, certainly a focus comes around the preparation for sacraments: First Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation. They are big events. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.2, lines 32-34)

Fr O'Sullivan attributed the changes in 'ethos' largely to a decline in religious practice more generally within Ireland, with less people identifying as Catholic, attending mass and practicing their faith. While Fr Barrett also acknowledged religious decline as a reason for a change in 'ethos', he also attributed the cause of the shift in understanding of 'ethos' to schools attempting to be more inclusive of non-religious children or those with a minority religious belief, a point which will be discussed later in this section. The topic of inclusion highlighted a number of tensions for some participants within the Catholic ethos and attention now turns to the second subordinate theme, 'Ethos tensions prior to reconfiguration'.

5.5.1.2 Ethos tensions prior to reconfiguration

As shown in Table 8, the second subordinate theme to emerge from the analysis of participants perspectives on 'ethos' prior to the reconfiguration was 'Ethos tensions'. In her discussions of 'ethos', Donnelly (2000, p. 137) warns of the tensions that can arise between "the values which the school purports to uphold and transmit and the actual values and beliefs held by individual school members". These tensions were very evident during the

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interview with Oisín, who joined Scoil na Carraige as a permanent member of staff the year in which the reconfiguration took place. He had worked as a part-time support teacher in the school prior to the school reconfiguring. From the outset of his interview, Oisín was upfront about his belief that the Catholic Church or any religious organisation should not be involved in school governance. Although the tensions he described occurred in Catholic schools he had worked in prior to Scoil na Carraige, it was important to include these experiences for a comprehensive understanding of his responses. Considering Oisín's past experiences helps us better understand the factors shaping his perspective on the CNS ethos, presented later in this chapter.

According to Norman and Stapleton (2021, p. 15), teachers can find themselves in one of three situations when the school system is heavily influenced by religious values: (1) their religious beliefs correspond to the school's ethos, (2) their religious beliefs differ from the school's ethos, or (3) they hold non-religious beliefs that contrast with the school's ethos. Oisín seems to fall somewhere between situations 2 and 3. When reflecting on the transition from a Catholic ethos to a CNS ethos, Oisín highlighted several challenges he encountered as a teacher in Catholic education. He explained that his identity as a 'non-practicing Catholic' sometimes conflicted with the school's Catholic ethos, and he didn't feel completely comfortable in sharing his identity:

> I'm not exactly a practicing Catholic. Neither would I say that I am an atheist […] and I suppose when I worked in a Catholic school, or when I was going for a job interview, I'd be kind of [pause]… I wouldn't have tried to hide it as such, but at the same time I wouldn't have been telling everyone. (Oisín, teacher, p.6, lines 156-159)

Oisín's experience is similar to that of applicants to state-funded ITE programmes in Ireland. Heinz and Keane (2018) conducted questionnaire research involving 1042 participants and found that non-Catholic primary school teachers sometimes felt the need to conceal their beliefs or be untruthful about them when entering the teaching profession in Ireland.

Oisín shared a number of examples describing how his beliefs had caused conflict for him in the past. Firstly, he described an interaction with the principal of a Catholic school where he previously worked, explaining how non-attendance at mass by him and other teachers became an issue:

> [The principal] just couldn't understand how we were teaching in a Catholic school and we didn't go to mass. [The principal] wasn't vocal about it, but it was very clear that that's how [they] felt. (Oisín, teacher, p.6, lines 162-167)

In another example, Oisín highlighted the presence of conflicting priorities between him and the school principal. He spoke about being asked to lead his class in reciting the rosary on a daily basis for a month during school hours. Oisín expressed annoyance and reservations about this practice, feeling that it wasn't suitable for primary level RE. According to Oisín, the principal stopped his class every day at noon for the Angelus, which Oisín considered excessive. The principal also provided teachers with lists of prayers to say, but Oisín chose not to follow them as he felt they were unnecessary and, instead, he focused on covering other curriculum subjects:

> [The principal] gave me the month of the Angelus. [They] decided to give me the rosary, the mysteries of the rosary. [They] put them up on my wall there for the month of the rosary. And like, realistically, I just thought it wasn't the most suitable thing to be doing for religion at primary school level. But [they] stopped every day for the Angelus. At 12 o'clock every day, [they] said the Angelus with the class and it was very… it was just a bit too much. [...] [The principal] was giving us lists of prayers to say. Which I didn't do because I felt that I didn't need to. I was trying to cover a curriculum [...]. I didn't and none of the other teachers followed those prayers. They just covered the 'Grow in Love' or whatever. (Oisín, teacher, pp.6-7, lines 163-173)

Oisín's account highlights the tensions that may arise for some teachers in Catholic schools, who disagree with aspects of the Catholic ethos. Despite his disagreement with the school principal's interpretation of the Catholic ethos, Oisín stated that he "covered" the 'Grow in Love' programme. However, as a more subtle form of protest, he chose to disengage when it came to fulfilling requests to cover additional material such as the "lists of prayers". This resonates with the findings of a study by Kieran and Mullally (2021), who explored students'

perceptions of the religiously unaffiliated. They found that pre-service student teachers felt the need to conceal or alter their religious or non-religious perspective to conform with the beliefs of lecturers for fear of discrimination or hostility towards those with different beliefs.

In another instance, Oisín discussed training he attended for the 'Grow in Love' programme in a Catholic school before joining Scoil na Carraige. During the training, Oisín reportedly shared his scepticism regarding the importance placed on RE by the Catholic patron with the facilitator:

> I said if my children are not getting a maths concept, and my religion time on the timetable is from 12 until half 12. […] I'm not going to pick up religion. I'm going to continue on with math. […] I was just saying what every teacher does, in a Catholic school. (Oisín, teacher, p.8, lines 214-216)

He strongly expressed the belief that Catholic instruction is not seen as important by many young teachers, and their employment in Catholic schools is primarily due to the majority presence of such schools:

> We don't feel that Catholic instruction is important, it just happens to be that we're employed by Catholic schools because they're in the majority. The vast majority of young teachers would not feel the way the facilitator feels about religious education. (Oisín, teacher, p.8, lines 202-204)

He also went on to express his doubts as to whether teachers are actually spending the recommended amount of time on the subject:

> Most teachers are not spending two and a half hours a week teaching it [RE]. (Oisín, teacher, p.8, lines 212-213)

Oisín's questioning of the time allocation for RE aligns with findings from other studies which have shown that in some cases teachers spend less time on RE than the recommended 2.5 hours allocated in the Primary School Curriculum (1999) (Dineen, 2009, cited in Kieran and Mullally, 2021; Sloan et al., 2021). This may suggest that Oisín's beliefs regarding the importance of RE in the curriculum reflect broader tensions within the primary education system.

Oisín's account highlights the tensions that can arise between the values held by the school's patron and the values of individual teachers. It is a reminder that "sometimes there is great dissonance between what is the official policy of a subject and what is the working policy in the classroom" (Askling, 2000, p. 112). In the examples shared, Oisín demonstrates his agency by prioritising subjects other than religious education and disregarding requests from the principal to focus on Catholic prayer. This places Oisín in a position of conflict with the ethos described by the CPSMA:

> In a climate of growing secularism, Catholic schools are distinguished by faith in the transcendent mystery of God as the source of all that exists and as the meaning of human existence. This faith is not simply the subject-matter of particular lessons but forms the foundation of all that we do and the horizon of all that takes place in the school. (CPSMA, 2016, p. 22)

These differing views regarding the purpose of education highlight the challenges associated with developing a Catholic ethos in contemporary Ireland, as highlighted by Tuohy (2008).

Unlike Oisín, Méabh (the principal) appeared to experience a greater alignment between her personal values and those of the Catholic ethos prior to reconfiguration. However, tensions were also evident for Méabh in relation to the values of 'equality' and 'inclusion'. During Méabh's interview, the researcher highlighted the assumption which arose during the policy analysis (see Chapter Two), that the value of equality is not as overt in a Catholic school as a multi-denominational school, and asked if she felt that was the case prior to reconfiguration. Méabh was reluctant to state that 'equality' wasn't evident prior to reconfiguration, however agreed that it is fore-fronted in the CNS:

> It's not to say that a Catholic school can't be very conscious of the equality of children and staff. […] but in a Community National School it is equality-based. […] So, it's more up front and it is very, very clear that it is the ethos that your school follows. (Méabh, principal, p.14, lines 354-358)

The clarity around 'equality' post-reconfiguration was something that Méabh described as very beneficial to her as a school leader:

> It gives you a kind of clarity that sometimes isn't always there under a Catholic
> ethos. We are what it says on the tin and there's no need for your own interpretation
> on that. It takes the ambiguity out of it I think. (Méabh, principal, p.14, lines 361-
> 363)

When asked about Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), an area that has been a point of tension within Catholic education according to media commentators (McGarry, 2020; Casey, 2021; Daly, 2021), Méabh expressed her uneasiness in teaching about potentially divisive issues. Upon reflection on the Catholic ethos before reconfiguration, Méabh was critical of what she perceived as a lack of a clear position from the Catholic patron on issues such as the one mentioned above, which resulted in a wariness on her part. When asked if she felt like she was on firmer ground post-reconfiguration when teaching topics that have the potential to be considered controversial, Méabh stated that post-reconfiguration, it became very clear what she could say:

> I just think it's clearer what you can do and say in a CNS. And if the line is blurred,
> you'd be a little bit wary of doing it. Even if you wanted to push it a small bit, you'd
> be a little bit wary of doing it. Whereas the lines are very, very clear now. (Méabh,
> principal, p.15, lines 373-375)

Méabh is not alone in feeling this way. In a review of RSE conducted by the NCCA (2019, p. 38), primary school principals identified "school ethos as being a possible barrier to teachers adopting a comprehensive approach to RSE", although it was not the most significant barrier. The denominational ethos of a school was found to "pose challenges in opening up discussion about different kinds of families and same-sex relationships, or in responding to questions that arise about contraception in the context of learning about conception" (NCCA, 2019, p. 38). Like Méabh, principals expressed "a disconnect between what they felt was expected of them based on their school ethos and addressing the reality of the classroom and the needs of their pupils" (NCCA, 2019, p 38).

However, in 2021, the Council for Catechetics of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, with the support of CPSMA, introduced an RSE programme called 'Flourish' specifically for Catholic schools (CPSMA, 2021). This programme was released alongside

previously issued guidelines titled 'Guidelines on Relationships and Sexuality Education' by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference in 2016. 'Flourish' has faced criticism for its exclusion of representation for same-sex families and relationships, as well as its view of marriage as exclusively between a man and a woman (Casey, 2021; Daly, 2021; McGarry, 2021; Morgan, 2021). Despite the Catholic patron expressing their position to the education system, this standpoint seems to make many people in today's Ireland uncomfortable, as evidenced by the significant negative response the programme has received (Casey, 2021; Daly, 2021; McGarry, 2021; Morgan, 2021). As mentioned in Chapter One, Ireland has undergone substantial social and cultural transformations in recent years, particularly concerning LGBTQ+ rights and equality. These developments reflect a shift in societal attitudes, with an increasing acceptance and support for diverse family structures and relationships. It is the researcher's assessment that the Catholic Church is grappling with the reality highlighted by Askling (2000), who emphasises that nowadays, tensions arise within religious settings associated with the Church and confessionalism due to the growing efforts of individuals to respect democratic values and pluralism in modern society. Given this, one might think that Ireland is poised to embrace a pluralist approach to education, however, the insights gleaned from the reflections of research participants during the reconfiguration process indicate the necessity for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic between school communities and Catholicism.

5.5.2 Understandings of 'ethos' during the reconfiguration process

The focus now shifts to the participants' experiences during the negotiation phase of the reconfiguration process. As part of this process, the school community engaged in a "listening exercise" (Fr O'Sullivan, p.5, line 116) which involved thoughtful deliberation by both the school and the broader community regarding the factors to be taken into account when deciding whether or not to reconfigure the school's ethos. Catholic RE, particularly sacramental education, was identified as a critical concern for parents and the local community. This emphasises the intricacies and difficulties of reconfiguring Catholic primary schools in modern-day Ireland and underscores the significance of considering the relationship between 'ethos' and 'identity' in such processes.

5.5.2.1 Religious education and the sacraments

Discussions during the various meetings that took place to vote for or against reconfiguration were reported by participants to focus mainly on changes to the school's ethos that were linked to religion, with particular emphasis on arrangements for sacramental education. When asked if the reconfiguration process had met with any resistance within the local community, Catherine (Director of Schools for local ETB) noted that one of the "big questions" for the community was sacramental preparation:

> The other big question was sacramental preparation […] because this is a school which it would still have at least 60% of the population who are Catholic in the school. They were very keen to continue sacramental preparation for their children. (Catherine, Director of Schools for local ETB, p.6, lines 130-133)

None of the interview questions asked participants about sacramental education, however despite this, all participants raised the issue of preparation for celebration of the sacraments (First Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation) as a site of struggle between the old and the new order of Catholicism and between the old and new ethos of the school. Despite a decline in religious practice, the sacraments were consistently identified as an important milestone in the lives of children, even within families who no longer practice their

faith. The challenges posed by this were discussed by Fr O'Sullivan in his recount of the

sacrament of Confirmation. He described working in "the local big town", where you would

have "maybe 90 children for Confirmation". However, he noted that the following Sunday,

after the Confirmation "you wouldn't get three or four children". He proceeded to share a

joke about this where he stated that:

> It's about this priest, he had terrible trouble getting rid of the bats from the roof of
> the church. He tried everything, everything, you name it. Then an old man came up
> to him and said, "Father I'll tell you now, if you want to get rid of them confirm
> them". (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.2, lines 32-34)

However, despite his good humour, Fr O'Sullivan's disappointment at this change was

evident. His description of the sacraments is a clear indication that, despite a decline in

orthodox adherence to Catholicism, many parents may still be happy for their children to

have a Catholic cultural formation (Inglis, 2017). Máire (parent, p.5, lines 73-74)

demonstrated this further when she spoke about some parents' attitudes towards the

sacraments. She stated that for some parents it was "a token gesture to make Communion and

to make Confirmation" and believed that parents were getting their children to receive the

sacraments "because everyone else is doing it".

In Catholic primary schools, children are prepared for the sacraments of First

Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation within the school day (Coll, 2005; Faas,

Darmody and Sokolowska, 2015; Hyland and Bocking, 2016) and in a Community National

School children are prepared outside of the school day by the parish (ETBI, 2018). When

asked if this was a negotiable aspect of the reconfiguration process, Catherine stated that it

was "non-negotiable":

> If there's any semblance of faith formation happening during the school day, then
> that's not multi-denominational. (Catherine, Director of Schools for local ETB, p.6,
> lines 137-138)

The prominence of sacramental education during the negotiations is somewhat surprising

when one considers the significant decline in Catholic mass attendance over the past decade

(Bradshaw, 2020; Edwards, 2023) and the decline in the number of people identifying as

Roman Catholic (84.2% in 2011 to 78.3% in 2016 to 73.4% in 2022 (CSO, 2016, 2017,

2023a)). As discussed earlier, when asked to describe a Catholic school, Fr O'Sullivan

elucidated that there has becen a decrease in how overtly Catholic primary schools with a

Catholic ethos are at present. Notwithstanding these changes, a particular aspect of the

Catholic school that has retained its significance was the sacraments, which Fr O'Sullivan

described as "big events":

> Our schools have changed as time has moved on. Like they're Catholic, in a very,
> very loose sense of the word. You know what I mean? I mean, certainly a focus
> comes around the preparation for sacraments; First Penance, First Holy Communion
> and Confirmation. They are big events. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.2, lines 32-34)

However, in recent years questions have been raised about the sustainability of this

practice (Foley, 2019) as many people present their children for the sacraments "while

possessing only marginal commitment" to the faith (Coll, 2005, p. 325). Lewis *et al.* (2009)

stated that 90% of the population in Ireland were baptised into Catholicism, but as Coll

(2005) argues, for many individuals, the sacraments have become trivialised and are viewed

as commodities that can be easily obtained. The commitment to regularly practicing and

nurturing the faith professed during significant sacramental events such as Baptism, First

Penance, First Communion, and Confirmation is often minimal, except for occasions such as

weddings, funerals, and Christmas (Coll, 2005).

Oisín (teacher) stated that parents were worried about losing this provision during

reconfiguration process and worried about who would support them in this if not the school:

> I think that was a worry with the changeover for some people, the fact that "they're
> not going to do that [Catholic RE] for us now" or help us with that. (Oisín, teacher,
> p.9, lines 249-250)

The apprehensions expressed in the above statement aligns with the findings by Darmody,

Lyons, and Smyth (2016), who conducted qualitative research in five schools with school

principals, teachers, parents, and children, and found that Catholic parents depend heavily on

the school for RE. While the model of preparation in Catholic schools is often cited as a three-pronged approach, where children are prepared by the school, the home and the parish, the brunt of the work can often fall to schools, particularly where parents are not practicing the faith in the home (O'Keeffe and O'Brien, 2020). The disconnect between a family's adherence to Catholicism and their desire for their children to receive the sacraments caused frustration for Oisín, who when asked about his experience of working within a Catholic ethos, felt that RE, and in particular the sacraments, would be better placed outside the school day:

> It's a bit frustrating, especially when you see children that don't go to mass. Their parents clearly don't go to mass, and then it's up to the teacher to teach them religion, even though you know that those kids and their families aren't going to mass or practicing. I just think that that should be taken out of education. (Oisín, teacher, p.2, lines 33-37)

His rationale for this was that, in his experience, many of the children prepared in school by teachers for the sacraments do not practice their faith because their family are not practicing. For Oisín, this results in a situation whereby primary school teachers are largely responsible for passing on faith to children. When speaking about sacramental education that he had been involved in during his years as a teacher in Catholic schools, Oisín noted the significant amount of time that was given to sacramental preparation:

> Well, it's the time that it takes to prepare for sacraments. And it's the time when you're trying to get your year wrapped up and they just take up a lot of time, and I don't feel that it's beneficial. (Oisín, teacher, p.2, lines 39-42)

In contrast, when speaking about the post-reconfiguration arrangement, he was glad that sacramental education would now take place outside of the school day and that children would not be treated differently because of their religious or non-religious identities. According to Oisín, sacramental preparation in a Catholic school has the potential to exclude non-Catholic children, as per his personal observations. He described a sense of relief at no

longer having to treat children differently because of their religious identities post-reconfiguration:

> If they aren't receiving the sacraments [post-reconfiguration] nobody is putting them down the back of the Church. (Oisín, teacher, p.5, line 138)

During the interview, the researcher inquired about the challenges of implementing the policy of reconfiguration at a national level, and Fr Barrett cited examples of other areas where the process had faced opposition. He also expressed concerns about the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018, which he found problematic. When the researcher suggested that the Act had limited Catholic schools to using religion as a criterion for enrolment because Catholicism was the majority religion, Fr Barrett argued that defining Catholicism in contemporary times was not a straightforward task. He further differentiated between individuals who actively practice Catholicism and those who receive sacraments but do not practice, as indicated in his statement:

> What exactly does a majority religion mean in the 2020s? Catholicism in the traditional practice sense would be quite low. Nominally of course, they will all be Catholics because they have been baptised, married and buried in the church, but they probably wouldn't be in the Church today as practicing Catholics at all. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, pp.6-7, lines 143-147)

The accounts of participants about the negotiations that took place during the reconfiguration process, and particularly the centrality of sacramental education raise significant considerations about the role of 'hegemony' and 'identity' in the reconfiguration process. These concepts are examined in more depth in the section about the theme of 'Identity'. The final section of this theme looks at the experiences and understandings of 'ethos' post-reconfiguration.

5.5.3 Ethos post-reconfiguration

Attention now shifts towards exploring the perceptions and experiences of 'ethos' that were present after the reconfiguration process. Through interviews with school-level participants including the principal, the teacher, and the parent, the researcher sought to investigate their

perspectives on the practical changes made to the school's ethos. This section explores the participants' understanding of the new ethos and their experience of implementing the GMGY curriculum. It also revisits the earlier tensions identified between participants' values and those of the school in order to understand why such tensions appear to have dissipated after the reconfiguration.

5.5.3.1 Understandings of a Community National School

Participants described the ethos of the school as multi-denominational post-reconfiguration. At patron level, this was illustrated by Catherine (Director of School in local ETB, p.2, lines 35-36), who, when discussing the CNS model, stated that CNSs now define themselves as "multi-denominational, co-educational state schools with five clear core values of respect, care, community, excellence in education and equality". For Catherine, such schools provide a multi-denominational option for "all children, and for families of all beliefs" (p.2, lines 39-40). John (ETBI) also identified 'equality' as a core aspect of the multi-denominational ethos of the school post-reconfiguration. When discussing the changes that are evident as part of the new ethos post-reconfiguration, John noted that one of the biggest changes is that the school must become "as equality-based and inclusive as possible". As will be discussed in more detail later, for John, there were "structural things in a denominational school" (p.4, line 82) that prevented them from being equality-based. When asked to elaborate on this, he referenced the patron's programme as being predominately for one group and the inclusion of religious practices throughout the school day that, in his opinion, were not suitable for children who are not Catholic to partake in, for example school masses or Catholic prayer.

While the ethos prior to reconfiguration was purely defined along religious lines by participants, post-reconfiguration there was an attempt to broaden the understanding of ethos to include aspects like 'excellence in education' and 'equality'. This change in how ethos was defined aligns with how ethos is described in international literature, which often focuses on

student attainment and promoting high quality teaching and learning environments (Mc Laughlin, 2005). When asked if it had been his experience that this broader conceptualisation of ethos appeals to parents, John stated that it did, in particular the focus on excellence in education and the creation of a "culture of high expectations" (p.11, lines 283-284) for the staff and students of CNS schools. While this broader understanding of ethos was apparent in interviews with the patron representatives from the local ETB and ETBI, it was less apparent in interviews with school-level participants. During interviews with school-level participants, the discussions about the new ethos of the school mostly focused on the change that had taken place in relation to the RE provision within the school.

5.5.3.2 Changing the patron's curriculum

During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher asked all school-level participants about their experience of changing the patron's programme as part of the school reconfiguration process. It is important to note that the researcher inquired specifically about all four strands of the GMGY curriculum during individual interviews. However, both the principal and teacher provided similar responses and stated that they had only recently begun implementation and were focusing on one strand at a time. They had decided to focus their attention on strand four of the curriculum, 'Beliefs and religions', initially. Therefore, at the time of research, their engagement with the strands of 'My stories', 'We are a Community National School' and 'Thinking Time' had been minimal. For this reason, the section that follows predominately focuses on the implementation of the 'Beliefs and religions' strand of the GMGY curriculum. Despite discussions largely focusing around RE, Méabh and Oisín both described GMGY as a multi-belief and values curriculum. This is in keeping with the description given within the curriculum itself (NCCA, 2018b). In addition to RE, the Goodness Me, Goodness You! curriculum incorporates identity education, values education

and philosophy for and with children (NCCA, 2018b). This breadth of content and pedagogies aims to provide a holistic learning experience for the child (NCCA, 2018b).

When asked about the biggest changes for schools in relation to their day-to-day practice post-reconfiguration, John identified the change in the patron's programme as a significant shift in philosophy and values for the school. For him, the implementation of the GMGY curriculum signified a move away from catering for one dominant group of children towards providing for all children equally. He was aware that this change would be "a lot for the school community to get their heads around" (John, ETBI, p.4, line 88). In 2015, the NCCA (2015b) proposed the introduction of a curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics (ERBE). If implemented, the proposal would have seen a move towards a pluralist approach to RE, whereby every teacher would have been obliged to teach 'about' religions, similar to the approach used in multi-denominational schools. The proposals met with opposition from some stakeholders, including parents, teachers and school leaders[36] (NCCA, 2017b) and were also hindered by structural and legislative issues within primary education (Grayson, O'Donnell and Sargent, 2014). As a result, a curriculum for ERBE never came to fruition. As reported by the NCCA at the time:

> Questions of teacher education and competency to teach the subject matter of the ERB component, in particular, were raised. Some teachers pointed to the potential for a reduced sense of a teacher's self-efficacy, since they have not taught such subject matter previously. (NCCA, 2017a, p. 41)

Given the concerns raised during the ERBE consultation, one would expect school reconfiguration to present a similar challenge for the teachers in Scoil na Carraige. During

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[36] During a public consultation on the proposed ERBE curriculum, the majority of respondents supported the proposed aims of the curriculum and saw the new curriculum as an opportunity to introduce new dimensions into the curriculum. Others, however, felt that such a curriculum is not needed; that the current curriculum is already overcrowded; and that the suggested topics duplicate a lot of what is already taught in the primary schools. Views diverged along the lines of religious denomination. Teachers in diverse schools were more likely to be open to teaching about different religions, beliefs and acknowledging peoples' rights for secular views as well as support character development and social justice. Interestingly, views also diverged within the Catholic school sector, with some teachers arguing for removing religious instruction from schools and making faith formation the responsibility of the parents; while others argued for maintaining the present practice. (NCCA, 2017a)

their interviews, both reported only having experience of teaching Catholic RE. To explore if

changing to a multi-denominational approach was challenging, the researcher asked how they

felt about moving from a denominational approach to a multi-denominational approach.

Oisín expressed confidence in his ability to adapt and teach the GMGY curriculum:

> I didn't really think twice about it to be honest. I was excited in a way, the fact that this is something new, something innovative for the area and I was a part of it. I suppose, I wasn't really apprehensive at all. (Oisín, teacher, p.2, lines 50-52)

One aspect of the GMGY curriculum that appeared to give Oisín confidence in his ability to

teach it were the similarities between the methodologies used in it and other curriculum areas

of the Primary School Curriculum. He described teaching GMGY as being similar to

teaching "geography or history" and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). For

Oisín, teaching GMGY required a similar skillset to those required for teaching other

curriculum subjects, where children were exploring and finding out new information:

> I think about it [teaching GMGY] like I do about teaching geography or history. In the sense that it's the same kind of skills used to explore and find information and stuff. […] It's very similar as well to SPHE […] So, personally I feel the GMGY is a very nice curriculum and it complements the rest of the curriculum nicely. (Oisín, Teacher, p.5, lines 114-120)

The ability to integrate it with other curriculum areas was seen to reduce curriculum

overload, a common challenge cited by teachers when discussing the challenges of the 1999

Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 2020).

In contrast, Méabh was more apprehensive about the change. She was "afraid" and

"worried" that she wouldn't be able to "do it correctly". Méabh's concerns were focused

around her own ability to teach it and areas that she thought she would lack knowledge

about:

> I questioned myself saying "would I be up to speed enough to be able to answer the children's questions". (Méabh, Principal, p.12, lines 301-302)

Méabh's concerns echo those expressed by teachers during the ERBE consultation (NCCA,

2017a). However, she reported that she soon realised that "there was not a whole pile to

worry about in the long run". Her initial apprehension was assuaged after receiving training from the ETB and the ETBI on GMGY.

When asked about his experience of using the GMGY curriculum to date, Oisín compared and contrasted GMGY to the 'Grow in Love' programme. The main difference identified by Oisín was what he called an "open approach" in GMGY that enabled children to discuss their family's background and beliefs. For Oisín, discussions about other religions were no longer absent from the classroom:

> I found in the Catholic school, if there was a Church of Ireland child in front of you, that would be something that we would not talk about. It was something that would not be mentioned. (Oisín, teacher, p.3, lines 63-67)

It could be argued that this is a very limited view of Catholic RE. The discussion of other faiths is encouraged in the 'Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland' (Kennedy and Cullen, 2021) and in the 'Grow in Love' programme (Veritas, 2021b, 2021a). Throughout his interview, Oisín repeatedly alluded to instances where children in Catholic schools he had worked in were excluded from RE or religious events during school hours. While this may arise because of 'opt-out' practices in place in the schools, it may also be a result of Oisín's understanding and interpretation of Catholic RE and signals a need for additional training in the area of inter-belief dialogue and the inclusion of all children in Catholic RE. As illustrated in the quotation above, Oisín embraced the change in approach to RE as he felt that it was more inclusive of all children and enabled him to treat all children equally.

In contrast to Oisín, Fr Barrett expressed concern about the change in approach to RE in a multi-denominational school. Fr Barret felt that it was incorrect to describe GMGY as a multi-denominational curriculum, as it had no aspect of faith formation included within it. For him, the move towards GMGY was viewed as a weakening or diminishment of RE:

> The ETB programme is known as Goodness Me, Goodness You! but it's generally known in the country as Godless me, Godless you. And that is because God and faith does not come into it at all. […] to me it's not a formation programme. You can't say there is religion and at the same time say there is no religion. It's trying to be all things to all people. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, pp.6-7, lines 164-174)

It is important to note that the 'Beliefs and religions' strand of the GMGY curriculum does not aim to form children in any faith, instead, the multi-denominational RE strand aims to enable children to develop an awareness of religions and beliefs and promotes study about religions and beliefs which should be delivered in a "fair, accurate and objective manner" (NCCA, 2018b, p. 14). This is a significant shift away from the denominational RE approach outlined by the Irish Episcopal Conference (2015) which was in Scoil na Carraige prior to reconfiguration. This form of RE focuses on "curriculum religion", which emphasises the "teachings and values of the Catholic Church" and "faith formation" which "forms children's characters in the virtues and values of Jesus; supports their faith development and helps them to experience what it means to be a member of the Church community" (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2015, pp. 13–14).

What Fr Barrett raises in his comment is the question of 'truth' in RE. As explained by Kennedy and Cullen (2021), there are two competing models of RE in Ireland (denominational and multi-denominational) and each holds a differing perspective on the concept of 'truth'. Kennedy and Cullen (2021, p. 1) explain that denominational RE operates from the presumption that objective truth exists[37]. On the other hand, multi-denominational RE, which Kennedy and Cullen (2021, p. 1) refer to as an 'active pluralist approach' is "sceptical of any claim to objective truth". For Fr Barrett, this is problematic and his difficulty in accepting multi-denominational RE as a valid approach is best described by

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[37] A denominational model of RE is a form of RE that is based on the belief that there is an objective truth in relation to religious beliefs and practices. This objective truth is usually tied to a specific faith or denomination. Therefore, in denominational schools, the content of RE is typically based on the doctrines, teachings, and practices of a particular religion or denomination. Examples of objective truths in Catholicism include the existence of one God in three persons (the Trinity) and the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Kennedy and Cullen (2021). Kennedy and Cullen (2021, p. 2) explain that in Catholic education, the existence of God is viewed as an "objective truth"[38]. They state that this stance cannot be adopted by non- or multi-denominational based approaches to RE. Instead, a multi-denominational approach operates "from the paradoxical postmodern designation that the only objective truth that exists is that there is no such thing as the truth" (Kennedy and Cullen, 2021, p. 2). As explained here:

> This understanding of objective truth refutes any conception of neutrality in relation to the question of truth, not only in religious education but also in the wider educational enterprise as well as in wider society. This discussion, more often than not, takes on a rather polemical trajectory with stake-holders either arguing for denominational RE or for non-denominational RE. (Kennedy and Cullen, 2021, p. 2)

The question of truth in RE also arose in discussions with Meábh. When speaking about implementing the 'Beliefs and religions' strand of GMGY, both Oisín and Méabh referenced the changed role of the teacher when comparing GMGY to the 'Grow in Love' programme for Catholic Schools. The teachers described themselves as facilitators but also as co-participants in the learning. The lessons were seen as being led by the interests and curiosities of the children, with the teacher enabling children to engage in dialogue constructively. When comparing teaching GMGY to teaching 'Grow in Love', Méabh described the approaches as "quite different". For Méabh, the 'truth' or what she referred to as "facts" in denominational RE are "written in the book or on the board" (p.11, lines 270-271). This gave a level of clarity to what the teacher should teach, and Méabh recalled "not varying from that". In contrast, when teaching RE as part of GMGY she described the experience as "more fluid and opinion based". This can be interpreted as moving from one

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[38] Kennedy and Cullen (2021) define objective truth in the context of denominational RE as the belief that there is a single, transcendent, and objective reality that exists beyond an individual's subjective perception or interpretation. They argue that this objective truth is often associated with the concept of God in the Christian tradition, and that it serves as the foundation for all truth claims within denominational RE. In other words, objective truth is seen as something that exists independently of individual perspectives or opinions, and it is considered to be a fundamental aspect of religious belief within the denominational model.

objective truth to a plurality of realities. For Méabh, changing to this new approach in GMGY had resulted in children "asking more questions" and co-constructing and leading their learning. Oisín also described GMGY as child-led and as a dialogical experience for the children:

> The experience of the children in front of you is going to lead where you go with the lessons. It's really child-led. The teacher takes a backseat with it really and it's all about enabling the children to share their experience and listen to each other. (Oisín, teacher, p.9, lines 225-227)

It should be stated that the 'Grow in Love' programme actively names conversation as a key characteristic of the pedagogical approach it employs (Veritas, 2021a). The promotion of dialogue and interaction among children in the 'Grow in Love' programme creates space for other perspectives to emerge and encourages children to explore their faith in a collaborative and engaging way (Veritas, 2021a). However, based on Oisín's comments throughout his interview, this was not something he felt empowered to do when working in a Catholic school, again highlighting the necessity for professional development opportunities for teachers within the Catholic sector.

Méabh and Oisín were positive about their experience of teaching the 'Beliefs and religion' strand to date, and, as discussed later, felt that the curriculum was beneficial to all the children in the school. Despite this significant change in approach to RE, both Méabh and Oisín reported the transition positively. Most importantly, when discussing the GMGY curriculum Oisín stated:

> We're actually doing it. We are teaching it. (Oisín, teacher, p.5, line 128)

Oisín's statement that he is making time to teach GMGY shows a change in attitude towards the patron's programme/ curriculum post-reconfiguration. In the post-reconfiguration context, the patron's curriculum appears to have assumed a greater value for Oisín as a subject.

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One aspect of the 'Beliefs and religions' strand that was the focus of a lot of the discussion during the interviews was the 'Family Project'[39]. As a teaching principal, Méabh has responsibility for Junior Infants to Second Class, which include two of her own children. For Méabh, engaging with the 'Family Project' as both a parent and a teacher was a positive experience. As a parent, the 'Family Project' provided opportunity to reflect on her beliefs and to have conversations with her children about their practices and traditions at home. At school, Méabh reported that the experience allowed her to get to know more about her pupils and encourage them to speak about what is important to them. For Oisín, the 'Family Project' was viewed as an opportunity for parents to take a more active role in passing on their faith to their children. He felt strongly that passing on of a faith was the role of parents and not teachers and that the 'Family Project' rightly placed the "onus" on parents:

> I think the 'Family Project' is great because it gets them discussing and it puts the focus where it should be. It's in the home and it encourages parents to have those discussions with their children. (Oisín, teacher, p.9, lines 240-242)

Coming from a denominational education background, Oisín was critical of the expectations and pressures placed on teachers in Catholic schools to form children in the faith. His comments reflect those of Dineen (2021, p. 195) when she states that "Catholic education in Ireland is mostly conceived as Catholic schooling" and that this means that Catholic schools "are laden with many expectations when it comes to children's religious formation".

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[39] The 'Family Project' is a methodology used in GMGY that encourages the children to engage in conversations with their families and peers about themes explored in school (Malone, O'Toole and Mullally, 2021). Children learn about various beliefs and religions through "a thematic approach presented by the teacher", moving from "a local perspective" to "a global perspective" (Malone, O'Toole and Mullally, 2021, pp. 377–378). Children are then "asked to engage in conversations with their families about how the beliefs and customs related to these themes are expressed in their home" (Malone, O'Toole and Mullally, 2021, pp. 377–378). Finally, children are invited to "present these projects to their peers in school" in an effort to educate one another "about how they express or live out their beliefs" (Malone, O'Toole and Mullally, 2021, pp. 377–378).

For Méabh and Máire, both of whom had children in the school, it was really important that their children were prepared for life in a multi-cultural society and they both viewed GMGY as something that would help prepare their children for this:

> I want them [her children] to respect everybody else's religion, and respect everybody else and to actually understand that everyone doesn't believe the same thing. And that's okay. (Máire, parent, p.5, lines 126-128)

Méabh, Máire, and Oisín referred to terms such as "tolerance", "multi-cultural" and "respect" when asked about learning in GMGY, but the majority of their interviews emphasised the 'Beliefs and religions' strand of the GMGY curriculum and concentrated on religious diversity, rather than diversity more broadly. This emphasis could be explained by the fact that the school was in an early phase of implementation during the study, and that the teachers had only received professional development in the 'Beliefs and religions' strand at the time of data collection. It is worth noting that the GMGY curriculum explicitly states that:

> The strands described in the GMGY curriculum are not discrete areas of learning, as they overlap and interact to form a holistic learning experience for the child. (NCCA, 2018b, p. 10)

Moving forward, it will be essential for the teachers to engage with the full range of pedagogies and strands of the curriculum if its vision is to be realised in Scoil na Carraige.

5.5.3.3 Releasing the tensions or moving them somewhere else?

As discussed earlier, a number of tensions arose within the Catholic ethos for the teacher and principal in this study, particularly in relation to issues of equality and inclusivity within the Catholic ethos. At a national level, the reconfiguration of schools has sparked a lively debate among academics and politicians regarding its potential impact on social cohesion, religious identity, and inclusivity. Opponents argue that reconfiguration poses a risk of segregating the school population along religious, ethnic, and socio-economic lines (Humphreys, 2015; Oireachtas Library and Research Services, 2015). For example, then Senator Averil Power, a member of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection, contended

that the Catholic Church's motivation to divest is rooted in a desire to intensify the Catholic character of their remaining schools (Humphreys, 2015). Conversely, proponents of Catholic education counter these arguments, asserting that Catholic schools actively strive to foster inclusivity among all students (Dineen, 2018; Griffin, 2019).

The tensions experienced by the principal and teacher prior to reconfiguration seemed to diminish post-reconfiguration. It should be noted that the literature surrounding multi-denominational education indicates that tensions regarding equality and inclusion can also arise in these schools (discussed in Chapters Two and Three). However, tensions related to the new ethos were not reported by participants, despite being asked about the challenges faced post-reconfiguration. The principal, Méabh, expressed a stronger alignment between her personal values and the values of the CNS, particularly in terms of equality, which is a core value of the CNS (ETBI, 2018b). She was very happy that the value of equality was now explicitly stated in official documentation regarding the ethos of the school. Méabh emphasised the importance of treating all children equally and highlighted her efforts to achieve this prior to reconfiguration, although she stated that this was not explicitly documented in the written artefacts pertaining to the school's ethos:

> They [children who were not Catholic] were never ostracised or singled out because they weren't Catholic, of course not, but the ethos that was in the school, not written down on paper, but the feel that was in the school prior to the reconfiguration was always a feel of 'equality'. But now we had it officially. […] Every one of my children inside in here [in the school] is equal, and that's hugely important for me, for them to know that. (Méabh, principal, p.5, lines 111-116)

Similarly, the teacher, Oísin, described a greater alignment between his personal values and the ethos of the CNS post-reconfiguration. He emphasised the CNS model's commitment to acknowledging and respecting children's different backgrounds and was happy that the change in provision for RE had ensured that children who previously 'opted-out' of religious education were no longer excluded or treated differently at school:

> We're not trying to hide children's identities. We're not trying to gloss over the fact that they might have a different background from the child sitting next to them. If they aren't receiving the sacraments, nobody is putting them down the back of the church or […] nobody's saying "well we need someone to look after him because his parents don't want him to go to church for the Christmas mass". (Oisín, teacher, pp.5-6, lines 136-140)

However, as noted earlier, Oísin's interpretation and experiences of the Catholic ethos diverge from the guidance provided by the Catholic Schools Partnership (2015), which emphasises inclusion of children from other faiths and provides practical recommendations for schools. Interestingly, Máire (parent) also noted changes in the school's ethos regarding inclusivity. She highlighted that since reconfiguration her children had observed that children who are not religious no longer have to "sit back" or feel excluded during religious activities:

> They would have noted as well that there is children in the schools that are not religious. And like, I suppose, in the past, when they were doing their religion in school, those children would have had to kind of sit back a bit, you know? And like, I think they did comment at some stage about how those children don't have to sit at the back anymore. (Máire, parent, p.7, lines 169-173)

These observations provide a significant reminder of the need for additional examination and consideration of the concept of 'inclusion' within the policy of reconfiguration. Although participants reported a reduction in tensions following reconfiguration, the study also revealed indications that reconfiguration had the potential to generate new tensions in the Catholic schools that retain their 'ethos'.

Fr Barrett expressed a desire for Catholic schools to become "more Catholic" in the post-reconfiguration landscape. He advocated for a clearer Catholic identity, suggesting that those who do not align with Catholicism may be better suited to non-faith schools:

> I think we should be clear in saying that we're Catholic, and that's it and if that is not for you then perhaps a non-faith school would be better for you. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.13, lines 229-301)

Fr Barrett's viewpoint reflects the evolving nature of the Catholic 'ethos' in response to demands for greater inclusion and evolving societal values. He perceives the reconfiguration of schools as an opportunity for Catholic institutions to authentically embody their 'ethos'

rather than attempting to accommodate all perspectives. Dineen (2021) echoes this sentiment, arguing that a reduced number of Catholic primary schools would serve the education system and the Church itself, enabling a more genuine consideration of 'ethos' and mission (Dineen, 2021, p. 194). However, she also urges caution in relation to this change (Dineen, 2021).

The question of inclusivity within Catholic schools remains a subject of contention. For instance, John, ETBI, argues that certain structural aspects of Catholic schools can be exclusionary for non-Catholic children and that the presence of religious education activities in which non-Catholic children may not fully participate can create issues of inclusion:

> There is an equality element to it which as we would have said, "I'm sure as teachers, and as a school, that you are as equality-based and inclusive as possible", but that there are structural things in a denominational school that aren't equality based. For example, the fact that they have a patron's Curriculum and 'ethos' that really do cater for one group and exclude others, rather than one that assumes an equality of esteem for all. (John, ETBI, p.4, lines 80-84)

On the other hand, some Catholic commentators, such as Griffin (2019), argue that Catholic schools are more inclusive than their multi-denominational counterparts. Griffin (2019, p. 59) cites a 2012 study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) which found that Catholic schools had the "widest spread of nationalities" among their student population. Additionally, she notes that multi-denominational schools were least likely to have students from the Traveller Community, suggesting that Catholic schools remain committed to accommodating a diverse student body. However, it is important to recognise that these perspectives on inclusivity depend on individuals' understanding of inclusion and equality.

In keeping with Griffin's (2019) understanding of inclusion, Fr Barrett asserts that Catholic schools are inclusive spaces where children of different backgrounds are educated together. Nonetheless, when confronted with the example of sacramental preparation as a potential instance of differential treatment or exclusion for non-Catholic children, Fr Barrett concedes the possibility. He suggests that parents should assume the responsibility of arranging 'opt-outs' for religious education, thereby accommodating diverse beliefs. These

remarks highlight the intricate challenges surrounding the discussion of ''ethos'' and 'choice' within the Irish education system:

> Interviewer: And is that criticism not in someway fair? Because I hear people saying, "Well, a Catholic school is inclusive", but at the end of the day, there will be children left out during sacramental preparation. What's your response to that argument?
>
> Fr Barrett: Yes, there will. Catholic schools, I think should be more Catholic. […] If parents want them to go to a Catholic school, that's fine. Then if parents want them to be taken out from the sacraments or religion then the parents have to decide how they're going to do that.

The issue of denominational 'ethos' and its impact on equitable treatment primarily affects a minority of families, though the precise figures remain uncertain (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012; McGuire and Faller, 2017). Some commentators recognise this as a human rights concern for non-Catholic children (Mawhinney, 2007, 2014; IHRC, 2010; O'Toole, 2015), emphasising the need for further research to gauge parental satisfaction with the existing system.

For the researcher, the challenge in assessing and comparing schools' inclusivity lies in the absence of a mutually agreed framework of reference. Each model of primary school holds differing understandings of inclusion, making it difficult to make definitive claims about their relative levels of inclusivity. Despite the Government's objective to establish 400 multi-denominational schools (Government of Ireland, 2022), the majority of primary schools in Ireland are expected to maintain a Catholic 'ethos'. Consequently, the availability of diverse choices for parents, particularly in rural regions, may be impeded. Therefore, any discussion surrounding Catholic schools becoming "more Catholic" should be approached cautiously, taking into account the sector's commitment to inclusive education for all children. In 2015, the Catholic Schools Partnership published the guidance document entitled 'Catholic primary schools in a changing Ireland sharing good practice on inclusion of all pupils' (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2015) which gives a clear indication from the Catholic patron of a desire for their schools to be inclusive of children attending Catholic schools who

do not adhere to the Catholic faith. Striking a balance between preserving the denominational ethos and ensuring an inclusive and equitable educational experience for every child, irrespective of religious or non-religious background, is of paramount importance. It is imperative to ensure that reconfiguration does not inadvertently give rise to tensions in other areas of the education system.

5.5.4 Conclusion

This section delved into the understandings of 'ethos' that were present in Scoil na Carraige, a recently reconfigured school. The participants perceived 'ethos' as a dynamic social phenomenon that can change over time and is influenced by the individuals in the school. While a Catholic ethos was officially stated before the reconfiguration, participants described how they personally interpreted it. Their description of the school's ethos primarily revolved around religious aspects, although there was a broadening of this perspective among patron representatives after the reconfiguration. Nonetheless, school-level participants still predominantly emphasised the 'multi-belief' dimensions of the new CNS ethos post-reconfiguration. The tensions that existed between the Catholic ethos and the values and beliefs of the teacher and principal before the reconfiguration were explored.

During the reconfiguration process, the main concern of the school and wider community, reported by participants, were changes to RE provision post-reconfiguration. In particular, the sacraments emerged as holding significant importance within the school prior to reconfiguration, even for Catholic families who were described as 'not practicing'. The move towards Catholic RE provision outside of school hours was welcomed by the majority of participants in this study, many of whom raised questions about the place of the sacraments in modern Ireland and their connection to "Cultural Catholicism" and identity formation, which are discussed in the next section.

The patron's curriculum was identified as an important aspect of the school's change of ethos post-reconfiguration. Participants differed in their experience of implementing the GMGY curriculum, but initial concerns were offset by training provided by the new patron. Participants' response to the GMGY curriculum was very positive. The 'Family Project' in the 'Beliefs and religions' strand of GMGY was noted as an important link between the home and the school and participants felt it would encourage families to take responsibility for passing on their own traditions and beliefs within the home, while also enabling children to learn from each other at school. Both teaching participants cited the changed role of the teacher in GMGY, describing themselves as facilitators of learning. Discussions of GMGY focused largely around the 'Beliefs and religions' strand. It will be important that a broader understanding of the curriculum is developed overtime so that it can be implemented as it was envisioned.

Finally, post-reconfiguration, Méabh and Oisín both expressed a sense of greater alignment between their personal values and the core value of 'equality' that is central to the ethos of the CNS. However, as discussed, the issue of inclusion in Catholic schools remains contested and while some participants argued that the structure of Catholic schools can be exclusionary, particularly with regards to children of minority belief backgrounds, it is challenging to discuss what is understood by an 'inclusive school' without a shared frame of reference. The lack of alternative provision for children who 'opt-out' of RE or religious events during the school day was highlighted as a challenge faced by teachers in accommodating all children and are a reminder of the importance of creating greater levels of choice for families who are not Catholic. While one participant viewed reconfiguration as an opportunity for Catholic schools to become 'more Catholic', it is the researcher's opinion that this be approached with careful consideration. It is the responsibility of everyone involved in Catholic education to ensure that the progress made towards inclusivity in Catholic schools is

not compromised in the pursuit of increased 'choice'. By recognising the importance of inclusivity and embracing diversity, Catholic schools can continue to evolve and adapt to meet the needs of all students and families. Efforts to foster a sense of belonging and respect for different backgrounds and beliefs should be nurtured and sustained. It is through this commitment to inclusivity that Catholic schools can effectively navigate the challenges and opportunities presented in a changing educational landscape. Attention now turns to the second theme that emerged during data analysis, 'School choice'.

5.6 School choice[40]

The second theme that was identified during this research was 'School choice'. As elaborated

in Chapter Two, the main objective of the 'SRFDP' was to establish a greater level of

provision and choice for non-Catholic families. However, during initial scoping before

selecting the school, anecdotal evidence suggested that the school's motivation for

reconfiguration was largely school survival. Therefore, the researcher did not explicitly

inquire about school choice during the semi-structured interviews, instead she posed the

question: Why do you think the school considered reconfiguration? Nonetheless, the topic of

school choice arose during these discussions when examining the rationale for changing

ethos and the repercussions of such changes on enrolment. It should be noted that the

peculiarities of the patronage system mean that school choice is understood differently in

Ireland. As Lynch and Moran (2006) explain:

> Ireland's choice-based system has devolved from a colonial past riven with
> religious tensions and, as such, has a very different profile to other marketized or
> partially marketized school systems (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). Choice was
> officially implemented on denominational grounds, and constitutionally protected
> on the grounds of natural law; specifically, parental rights. (Articles 42 and 44, p.
> 244)

The Irish education system challenges the typical assumption of current theorists in school

choice, often based on the idea of marketisation[41], due to its "denominationally privatised

system that has gradually come to be subsidised by the state" (Lynch and Moran, 2006, p.

224). While the system can be understood as partially driven by choice, it is crucial to

acknowledge the historical factors that have influenced its development (Lynch and Moran,

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[40] Transcript excerpts to support this theme can be found in Appendix O.
[41] Marketisation refers to the process of applying market principles and competition to public services, including education (Säfström and Månsson, 2022). In relation to school choice, marketisation means that education systems are increasingly being structured to operate like a market, where parents and students are seen as consumers who can choose between different schools that are competing for their business (Lynch and Moran, 2006).

2006) and to recognise that discussions on school choice in Ireland often revolve around school ethos (Buchanan and Fox, 2008; Fox and Buchanan, 2008).

5.6.1 School choice prior to reconfiguration

This section explores the theme of 'School choice' as it emerged from this research prior to the school's reconfiguration. A lack of school choice in rural Ireland was identified by participants as a factor that drove change, although, as will be explained, the primary motivation was not to improve school choice but rather to ensure school survival.

5.6.1.1 A lack of choice

In 2018, Darmody and Smyth (2018, p. 5) observed that, to that point, there was "little systematic research […] on the factors influencing primary school choice in the Irish context". Qualitative case study research by Smyth, Lyons and Darmody (2013), based on individual interviews with parents, teachers and school principals, as well group interviews with sixth class children in five case study schools, reported that in Ireland, location was often the most important factor for parents when choosing a school for their children, with most parents choosing the local school. For Darmody and Smyth (2018, p. 5) location also had the potential to act as "constraint on choice" because schools "in rural areas were more likely to be the only school in the vicinity". Based on secondary analysis of the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) data, they found that, at the time, children travelled "further to attend minority faith and multi-denominational schools, indicating that their families are making very active choices of school by going outside the local area" (Darmody and Smyth, 2018, p. 5). Darmody and Smyth's (2018) finding resonated with participants' responses in this research.

As Méabh explained:

We have quite a lot of Catholic primary schools in an area that the population isn't that high in. (Méabh, principal, p.2, lines 29-30)

Prior to the reconfiguration of Scoil na Carraige, all schools in the area were reported to be

Catholic. This meant that if parents wished to avail of multi-denominational education, they

had to undertake a significant commute (of over an hour) to the nearest large town. However,

while lack of choice in regard to religious provision was evident prior to reconfiguration,

diversity of language provision was evident between schools in the locality and parents were

reported as exercising choice in this regard. Therefore, while choice was largely described

along religious lines in this study, participants recognised that other factors that influenced

parental choice also existed.

Lack of school choice is often referred to as an issue for parents (O'Mahony, 2008),

however, it was also reported as problematic for the teacher in this study. Prior to working in

Scoil na Carraige, Oisín had only worked in schools with a Catholic ethos. When speaking

about his experiences of working in Catholic education, it was evident that Oisín felt there

was a lack of choice in the primary system for teachers who wanted an alternative to a

Catholic school:

> It just happens to be that we're employed by Catholic schools because they're
> in the majority. (Oisín, teacher, p.8, lines 203-204)

Oisín's experience resonates with qualitative interview research by Fahie, discussed in

Chapter Two, which explored the experiences of 23 self-identified LGB teachers who worked

in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. The study reported that for teachers "living in rural

communities where there were a limited number of multi-denominational schools", it is not a

matter of choice to work in denominational education, but rather a necessity as a result of

"restricted opportunities for employment elsewhere" (Fahie, 2017b, p. 16). As outlined

earlier in this chapter, Oisín reported feeling more content teaching in a CNS because of a

perceived greater alignment between his beliefs and values and those of the school. His

experience points to the challenges faced by primary school teachers living in rural areas

whose values and beliefs are not aligned with those of the Catholic Church. When considered

alongside the fact that even if the GoI reach their target of 400 multi-denominational schools by 2030 (Government of Ireland, 2022), just over 80% of schools will still have a religious ethos, it is obvious that this issue will not be solved by the 'SRFDP'. However, one issue that the policy was reported to have a positive effect on was the survival of a small rural school.

5.6.1.2 School choice or school survival?

Chapter Two of this study highlights that the provision of greater school choice is often seen as a means of promoting social inclusion and providing a more equitable education system for minority religions or non-religious families (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012; Hyland, 2020). However, participants in this study reported that the rationale for reconfiguring their school was primarily based on the need to ensure its survival. This phenomenon was similar to what had been experienced during the transformation of schools in Northern Ireland (Montgomery et al., 2003; Topping and Cavanagh, 2016), where most schools that chose to transform were small Stand-Alone Schools on the brink of closure.

For John, the reconfiguration of small rural schools to CNSs had been an unexpected outcome of the reconfiguration process. He had expected larger urban schools with greater levels of religious and belief diversity to be the schools who opted to reconfigure. When asked about the case study school's rationale for changing ethos, John stated:

> I presumed in the reconfiguration space that I would be spending most of my time in urban areas, in Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick, where there were big populations, and schools where there was genuinely religious and belief diversity. (John, ETBI, pp.4-5, lines 102-105)

Fr Barrett echoed John's experience and noted that the reconfiguration process had been primarily attractive to small schools that were "failing". When asked about his role in the reconfiguration process he stated:

> Really and truly the [reconfigured] schools were failing. […] They were going to close. Out of the 21,000 pupils we have in national schools in this county, we gave over 19 pupils. To say that we had a huge divestment programme wouldn't be right, it wasn't really that. It was either close or try something a bit different. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, pp.1-2, lines 25-29)

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While the research participants viewed the provision of multi-denominational schooling in rural areas positively, the lack of larger schools reconfiguring raised concerns about the effectiveness of reconfiguration as a national policy. Fr Barrett questioned the impact of the GoI's target to reconfigure 400 schools by 2030, given that all the schools in his diocese that had reconfigured were small rural schools that affected only a small number of families:

> If you think about the numbers of this. Its three schools, but really, it's 19 pupils in total. So, they [Department of Education] might be able to say we divested three schools […] but when you look at how many families that actually impacted, it's a very small number. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.19, lines 448-450)

However, O'Kelly (2022) reported that a sizable urban school in Nenagh, County Tipperary, would reconfigure in September 2022, marking the first "thriving" school to undergo the process. As of 2023, three additional large urban school have also chosen to reconfigure (DE, 2023a, 2023b). This expansion beyond the earlier pattern of only small schools reconfiguring may signify a more impactful outcome in terms of the number of pupils and families who may access multi-denominational education.

The CNS was reported as the chosen model to reconfigure to for a number of reasons, one of those being its ethos of equality and inclusion:

> A Community National School would be able to acknowledge people who are non-Catholic. And it might attract some non-Catholics from outside the catchment area. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.3, lines 66-68)

Lynch and Moran's (2006) study focused on social class and school choice at post-primary level in Ireland, however, many of their observations resonate with this research. They recognised schools as "active collaborators" who "actively interpret and redefine the rules of the game as it is played out on their own stage" (Lynch and Moran, 2006, p. 226). For example, they state that "schools are autonomous entities interested in their own survival" (Lynch and Moran, 2006, p. 226). This was certainly the case in Scoil na Carraige. Competition between other schools in the local area was evident. Reconfiguration to a multi-

denominational ethos was viewed as an opportunity to stand out from other schools in the

area and make themselves the "school of choice", thereby ensuring their survival. This was

illustrated by Máire. When asked about the school's rationale for reconfiguring ethos, she

stated that other schools in the area were all Catholic:

> We kind of felt that if we took the route of changing to the ETB, that we would be giving ourselves another selling point - a selling point that no other schools in the area had. (Máire, parent, p.2, lines 41-43)

Participants also felt that if they didn't reconfigure, then another school in the area would,

and they would have lost their opportunity to become unique:

> Chances are, some other school in our area would probably go down the route of the ETB in the next five years, and then it would have been a lost opportunity for us. (Máire, parent, p.8, lines 201-203)

Máire displays a high level of cultural capital with respect to her understanding of the

education system. Cultural capital in relation to education is often understood

as the knowledge and understanding that allows an individual to use the education system to

their personal advantage (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013). However, in this research,

we see people within the school community using their knowledge of the education system to

the advantage of the local community in an effort to save their school. Survey research by

Smyth *et al.* (2009, p. XVI), which explored the experiences of 746 primary school principals

in "catering for immigrant children and young people", highlighted the possibility of

competition for enrolment between schools, but focuses on areas where oversubscription was

common. In contrast, this example highlights the competition that exists between rural

schools who are struggling to maintain enrolment numbers required to maintain teaching staff

or to keep the school open.

5.6.2 School choice during the reconfiguration process

Attention now turns to a discussion of the theme of 'School choice' as it emerged during the reconfiguration process. Chapter Two of this study highlighted the challenges of determining the locus of decision-making power with regards to school reconfiguration policy. Commentators have attributed this power to different stakeholders. For example, O'Toole (2015, p. 90), in her conceptual paper which critiques the policy of reconfiguration, positions parents as having significant power with regard to decision making in the reconfiguration process and expresses a concern regarding the tension that lies between the "dialectic of parental rights and social responsibility" in the school reconfiguration process. Her view of parents as powerful within the process is based on the importance given to parental preference by the State in the identification of suitable areas for divestment and reconfiguration. However, media discourse surrounding the phenomenon of reconfiguration often attributes the ultimate decision-making power to the local Bishop (McNamee, 2016; McGuire, 2021).

The publication of detailed guidance regarding a path forward for reconfiguration in March 2022, offered some clarification on the issue of decision-making. The guidance states that in order to provide "choice for parents", a process will be agreed "whereby the existing majority patron (the relevant Catholic Bishop in most cases) can engage with the Department and the local community to identify a suitable school for reconfiguration" (Department of Education, 2022, p. 10). As promised, this is likely to happen on a pilot basis in "towns or areas of cities" where there are currently a number of denominational schools but no multi-denominational schools[42] (Department of Education, 2022, p. 10). The guidance document is

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[42] The pilot areas listed were Arklow, Athlone, Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, Limerick and Youghal (DE, 2022a).

a clear statement that the ultimate decision-making power to reconfigure a school lies with the school patron:

> The school patron is responsible for decisions on any transfer of patronage. (DE, 2022a, p. 1)

This study's findings indicate that the decision-making process during school reconfiguration is more nuanced and complex than previously thought, and therefore warrants discussion.

5.6.2.1 Who decides? Decision-making during the reconfiguration process

The case study provided valuable insights into the decision-making process involved in school reconfiguration and offers important lessons for future negotiations and community engagement efforts in areas where school reconfiguration is being considered. Although somewhat different from the process outlined in the recent DE guidance (2022b)[43], this case study did identify potential challenges and tensions that may arise during future school reconfigurations. However, it also revealed strategies for addressing these challenges and overcoming obstacles. During the individual semi-structured interviews the researcher asked all participants about the decision making process within the reconfiguration process. Although all participants reported that the final decision to reconfigure the school rested with the Catholic patron, it would be remiss to underestimate the influence of parents and the local school community in the decision-making process. As an 'early-mover' school, Scoil na Carraige self-selected to reconfigure. When asked about how the process of reconfiguration was initiated, the principal reported that it was a predominantly parent-led initiative:

> The first conversation that even happened about reconfiguration was two parents from the school approached me and we discussed it (Méabh, principal, p.2, lines 45-46)

The parent group sought additional information about the reconfiguration process from their local ETB and once they had decided that this was a potential way to save their school from

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[43] The newly published guidance by the DE does not specifically address the case of 'early-mover' schools who self-select to reconfigure (DE, 2022a).

closure, they approached the local Bishop about the possibility of changing the school's ethos. When asked about how the reconfiguration process began, Méabh explained that Fr O'Sullivan, as the then Chairperson of the Board of Management, acted as the intermediary between the BOM and the patron:

> So any communication between the Board [of Management] and the Bishop it was fluid because we had that mediator there as well. So that was a really good help for us. […] The Bishop was supportive of this decision. (Méabh, principal, p.5, lines 125-128)

Fr O'Sullivan stated that the Bishop gave permission for the BOM to lead a 'listening exercise' with the local community, in order to establish if a majority was in favour of the change. The parent group, assisted by Fr O'Sullivan, identified the groups who would be a part of the consultation process: the BOM, school staff, parents, and the local community. Fr O'Sullivan stated that the Bishop required a significant majority of the community to be in favour of the change before he would support it:

> The Bishop was very, very clear that, he didn't want a Brexit situation, you know, for 51, against 49, you know. He said that it had to be an overwhelming majority. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.5, lines 121-123)

The response from the Bishop appears to be in keeping with recommendations from the 'Report on the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector', which stated that "where a Stand Alone School community has gathered evidence that shows that change of patronage is warranted, a calm, reflective process should follow" (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 79). When asked to describe the process that took place in the community, Fr O'Sullivan explained that great lengths were taken to ensure that the consultative process was as extensive as possible. As outlined earlier, a number of community meetings were held with different stakeholder groups and finally the decision of whether to reconfigure was put to a community vote. As Fr O'Sullivan explained, the community voted in favour of reconfiguring the school:

> There was over two-thirds in favour of changing. […] The whole community were informed and were involved. And it was really their decision. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.6, lines 152-158)

Because a significant majority was in favour of the change, Fr O'Sullivan stated that "the Bishop had no problem in supporting it" (p.6, line 158). As will be discussed later in this section, Fr Barrett stated that the Bishop considered the school to be a local institution that belonged to the parish. Consequently, he was willing to delegate his decision-making power to the parish community.

Participants from the ETB sector noted that the Catholic Church had generally been cooperative in enabling community decision-making about reconfiguration. However, John expressed concerns about a specific case in another county where a different Bishop had denied permission for reconfiguration, despite the community's desire to proceed with it:

> I've only experienced once where a Bishop has refused that [reconfiguration request], but in the main, the Bishop will go with the desire of the school community, and they should be acknowledged for that, they do respond to the desire of the school of community. (John, ETBI, p.11, lines 262-267)

In the case that John mentioned, reconfiguration did not take place after the Bishop had denied permission. Therefore, while Scoil na Carraige provides a positive example of the Catholic Patrons being receptive to the wishes of their communities, John's experience serves as a reminder that the process is not always successful. Although the Bishop in this study was open to change, it is important to note that it was within his power to choose not to engage in the process, despite the wishes of the community, and the school would not have been reconfigured in that case. Nonetheless, the Catholic patron representatives in this study held a strong belief that the local primary school belonged to the local community, which played a significant role in the success of the reconfiguration.

Throughout his interview, Fr Barrett referred to Scoil na Carraige as the "local parish school". When asked about the defining features of a Catholic school, Fr Barrett stated that a parish school is "closely connected to the parish" and as such is a "very localised entity":

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> It isn't a Department of Education school, and the Catholic Church is too big an entity, too wide, too broad, too vague-- most schools are parish schools. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.1, lines 4-5)

This is in keeping with language used by the DE who recently stated that:

> For historical reasons, most primary schools are State-aided parish schools, with the local Bishop as patron. (DE, 2022a, p. 1)

Interestingly, Fr Barrett argued that in a parish school, the power of the Bishop (or patron) is limited, going so far as to say that:

> It's a parish school. The Bishop has no say in that school. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.5, lines 115-116)

Fr Barrett emphasised that if the parish indicated a need for change the Bishop would not obstruct the process. It should be noted that prior to reconfiguration, the Parish Priest held the position of Chairperson of the Board of Management, which indirectly gave the Bishop some influence over the school's operations. However, the researcher infers from Fr Barrett's statement that the Bishop generally avoided involvement in local school issues unless required. This inference is supported by a further comment by Fr Barrett. When asked about the challenges of school reconfiguration Fr Barrett raised the issue of BOMs. He argued that the BOM in a CNS is less of a local entity than the BOM of a Catholic school, which he explained was made up largely of the local community:

> The Chair and one other person is nominated by the patron officially. It's not the Bishop there, picking 300 people to sit on boards. It's the local parish that do that. The Bishop rubber stamps it more than anything else. Of course, if there is a huge dispute and it has been through the grievance process, it goes to the Bishop eventually, or his office. And they try and solve the whole issue before it all hits the fan. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.15, lines 338-342)

Unlike the DE, that placed emphasis on prospective parents' preferences, Fr Barret described decisions regarding the future of the school as beyond the remit of the current or future parent body of the school. The school was recognised by Fr Barrett as belonging to the past, present, and future parishioners, rather than parents. In the case study school, he

explained that "It wasn't up to the parents", but rather that it "had to be the decision of the parish community":

> Because the existing parents of 2021 wouldn't decide anything. […] The past ones and the future ones are also really important. The parish had to agree as well, so you had the Board of Management, the teachers, the parish all had to agree before they had a vote. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.3, lines 61-63)

In this case study, while the responsibility for deciding whether or not to reconfigure the school rested with the Bishop, he had delegated decision-making power to the local parish. The parish is considered a territorial unit in Ireland that is linked with Catholic practice and identity formation (O'Mahony and Murphy, 2018). However, the boundaries of the parish are not publicly known, and its use in conversation is often as shorthand for the concept of community (O'Mahony and Murphy, 2018).

Interviews with other participants indicated that the entire community (including those outside the Catholic community) were invited to partake in discussions and to vote about the future of the school. However, Fr Barrett's reference to the role of the Parish Council and families associated with the school in the past is an indication of a consultative process that could be problematic for prospective parents. While it is probable that these members of the community have contributed to the school over the years, the extent to which their preference should influence the education of children (that are not their own) in the future is questionable. It undermines the concept of 'parental choice', as outlined in the Constitution (Government of Ireland, 1937), if those who are not current or prospective parents of the school have equal voice in relation to the future patronage of the school.

This erosion of "parental choice" through the inclusion of non-parent voices in the decision-making process brings into focus the broader dynamics of power and influence within society, particularly the concept of hegemony. Hegemony refers to the dominance of one group or ideology over others, often resulting in the marginalisation or silencing of minority perspectives (Haugaard and Lentner, 2006; Karlidag-Dennis, McGrath and

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Stevenson, 2019). Examining the role of hegemony during the reconfiguration process was deemed to be important to help illuminate the ways in which power and influence were manifested in the decision-making procedures. Consideration of the impact of hegemony on the reconfiguration process led to valuable insights into the challenges faced by reconfiguration in other areas where it has met with contestation.

5.6.2.2 The effect of a Catholic hegemony on the creation of more school choice during the reconfiguration process

During individual interviews conducted as part of this study, evidence of a Catholic hegemony within the local community emerged, even though the participants were not explicitly asked about the concept of hegemony. As discussed in Chapter Three, Catholic hegemony operates through the consent and acquiescence of the majority, whereby the dominant group's ideas, beliefs and practices become widely accepted and internalised as the societal norm and lead to the maintenance of a *status quo* (Stapleton, 2019). With the exception of one participant, the majority of respondents found the denominational ethos of the school to be unproblematic prior to the reconfiguration. Máire, a parent, exemplified this sentiment during her interview, expressing that if the school had not faced closure, there would have been no desire to deviate from the Catholic ethos:

> [The school] had a Catholic ethos [...] it's always been a great school. I suppose the only issues we ever used to have really were with numbers [...] would we have enough numbers to make sure that this was a viable school? (Máire, parent, p.1, lines 22-26).

While the proposal to change the school's ethos was generally supported by the majority of the community, there was opposition, primarily centred around changes to RE provision. Participants highlighted the community's and parents' reluctance to embrace something different to that with which they were familiar and had experience of. This resistance to change was explained by Méabh, the principal, who stated:

> We did meet opposition. [...] With any change, anything new, you know, there will be opposition. And particularly in a small community like this where there wouldn't be major massive changes. (Méabh, principal, p.3, lines 70-73)

Fr O'Sullivan, the Parish Priest, also expressed a similar sentiment, stating:

> People have been accustomed to this mentality all their lives, right? This is the only model that they know so suddenly, you know, change. Oh, why? Change, they fear it. It's this unknown. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.12, lines 319-321)

To address this fear and resistance, the local ETB and the ETBI attended community meetings to provide information about the CNS model and address any concerns or questions from the community. Méabh, the principal, emphasised the importance of this support, acknowledging that she wouldn't have been able to answer all the questions herself without the presence of the ETB representatives. She stated:

> We came up against a lot of questions. Questions that ETB were very happy to answer as they've [...] had the same issues with other communities as well, and people have questions naturally. And so those questions were answered. [...] I wasn't able to answer them from the outset either because we were all learning [...] about what it meant to be a CNS. (Méabh, principal, pp.3-4, lines 73-82)

Looking ahead to the national implementation of reconfiguration, several participants emphasised the need to educate and inform parents throughout the country about the CNS model. Catherine, the Director of Schools in the local ETB, suggested that schools should be informed about the model, and the ETB could provide information at an annual meeting approved by the Department of Education:

> I do think there's one missing step there that would be very helpful and that is that schools would be informed of the model. That would be a Department approved activity [...] that we would provide information for anyone who wanted to come to a meeting about Community National Schools and [...] the ETB would provide information on this [...] at a meeting once a year. And perhaps that would be a way to get those numbers moving. (Catherine, Director of Schools in local ETB, p.11, lines 256-262)

These suggestions align with Griffin's commentary (2019), which emphasises that for divestment to become more common, parents need assurances about new patronage models and their offerings. The longstanding prevalence of Catholic education in Ireland has resulted in a trust among most parents in Catholic education provision, as they themselves have

experienced a Catholic education. Consequently, alternatives to Catholic education remain

unknown to many parents, leading to uncertainty and hesitancy towards embracing

alternative approaches, as highlighted by Catherine:

> People have just accepted it [the denominational education system] the way it is
> over the years, and they didn't see that there was an alternative, and most people
> still wouldn't be aware of the alternative. (Catherine, Director of Schools, ETB,
> p.12, lines 291-293)

Previous research conducted in the Dublin diocese in 2008 indicated that 48% of the

503 parents who responded to the survey would choose a school under the management of a

religious denomination (O'Mahony, 2008a). This finding is supported by the experience of

Máire, a parent participant in this study, who expressed contentment with denominational

education as it had served the community and her family well for generations:

> All my family would have gone to that school as well. [...] It was a school that had a
> Catholic ethos. We all did our Confirmation and our Communions, and we would
> have learned our religion during the day [...] it's always been a great school. (Máire,
> parent, p.1, lines 8-24)

Although the DE found evidence of support from parents for increased school choice in 23 of

the 38 areas surveyed (DE, 2013), as discussed in detail in Chapter Two, resistance to

changes that directly impact their own children's school becomes apparent in cases where

reconfiguration have been attempted outside of the 'early movers' provision (Thomas, 2019;

Donnelly, 2023). As Archbishop Diarmuid Martin explained, "everybody is in favour of it

but not in their school" (Foley, 2019). Fr Barrett echoed this sentiment when discussing the

challenges of implementing reconfiguration on a national scale:

> The Bishop becomes patron because the local community has asked him to be
> patron. That's where the big stall or the roadblock is in that no one will make the
> decision. [...] It's the local community that would have to be convinced and that
> they [the Department of Education] would have to deal with, not the Bishops. (Fr
> Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, pp.6-12, lines 121-278)

Fr Barrett's statement sheds light on the difficulties faced by policy makers and government

officials when attempting to implement the reconfiguration process. This tension between the

desire for change and resistance to it poses a significant challenge in creating a more diverse

education system in Ireland. Scoil na Carraige exemplifies the significance of nurturing

community-led change as a catalyst for school reconfiguration.

During his interview, Oisín's perspective on denominational education challenged the

dominant norms within the Irish education system. As discussed earlier, he firmly believed

that denominational education could result in the exclusion of non-Catholic children. He

observed a general acceptance of Catholic education as the societal norm, coupled with a lack

of public interest in educational matters. In Oisín's opinion Catholic schools had become

"less Catholic" in recent years, but he also cautioned that this may vary depending on the

individual school:

> I'd say the majority of people are just indifferent to it. […] I mean, the Church isn't
> as involved in recent years in a lot of Catholic schools. […] It depends on the Priest
> and the parish. It depends on the Bishop and the Diocese. […] It's just passively
> accepted that it's been done like this for years. (Oisín, teacher, pp.11-12, lines 263-
> 279)

Catherine shared similar concerns about the Catholic Church's involvement in education. She

questioned whether the Church's role as a patron is primarily focused on religious formation

rather than education more broadly, highlighting the need for reflection on the

appropriateness of this rationale in modern-day Ireland:

> The current patron needs to look at why it needs to be in school patronage because,
> are you there for the education or are you there for the religious doctrine, really? I
> think, what I would look for from the Catholic Church is that they would reflect on
> that and look at why are we in education. (Catherine, Director of Schools in local
> ETB, p.13, lines 326-330)

While Touhy (2008, p. 135) asserts that "religion is a 'value-added' dimension to both the

individual and to society, and that Catholic schools (and other faith schools) deserve the full

support of government in their operation", Catherine and Oisín present a contrasting

viewpoint, serving as a reminder of the diverse perspectives that exist within the system

regarding this matter.

John held the belief that the Catholic Church has a genuine desire to transfer schools, but encounters difficulties when it comes to persuading school communities to accept and embrace change:

> I think that there has been lots of public declarations particularly from the Catholic Church, because they hold the majority of the schools, of their willingness to divest. They genuinely face problems in convincing school communities to change because people are used to what they're used to. (John, ETBI, p.8, lines 201-204)

John reflected on his own teaching career, admitting that he was initially unquestioning of the denominational education system until he experienced an alternative while teaching abroad. He recognised that teachers also contribute to the slow pace of change within the sector, attributing their silence and unquestioning attitudes to the dominance of a Catholic hegemony:

> It was just something that I had no idea until I moved abroad and saw other school systems and then came back [to Ireland] and went, "Oh, that's not part of everybody's role as a teacher. It doesn't just go hand in hand with teaching". That's a very Irish thing. I don't think that people understand that. (John, ETBI, p.9, lines 217-219)

Reflecting on his work with undergraduate student teachers, John spoke about the acceptance and ambivalence toward the denominational education system among undergraduate student teachers, which he attributes to the societal norms ingrained in those who have gone through the Catholic education system:

> Even teachers, I meet them all the time in teacher training colleges, because they've gone through a Catholic education system, that's their norm that they have been told all their lives, they haven't questioned it just yet either. (John, ETBI, p.9, lines 219-222)

His use of the word "yet" is interesting, and suggests that if and when some teachers encounter a different experience of education, they may begin to understand the issues raised by those who question the largely denominational education sector in an increasingly diverse country.

According to a number of the participants in this research, the prominent influence of the Catholic Church in the education system was seen as a distinctive characteristic specific to Ireland, a perspective that aligns with previous observations made by Mawhinney (2007). Méabh [the principal] shared a personal anecdote about her mother, who had lived abroad and experienced surprise upon returning to Ireland and witnessing the prominent role of the Church in education:

> That was kind of strange for her [Méabh's mother], in that she was kind of going 'Why would the Church have any input on my children's education?' The two just didn't marry together at all. Whereas it's probably the opposite for a lot of Irish parents, it's nearly the accepted norm. It's that kind of a *meon aigne* [mindset]. (Méabh, principal, p.20, lines 501-505)

Méabh pointed out that, for the majority of the Irish population, the association between the Church and education was considered the norm and embedded in the Irish psyche, reflecting a deeply ingrained acceptance of the Church's influence on education. As reported by Méabh, her mother found this connection between the Church and education to be perplexing. She questioned why the Church would have any involvement in her children's education, as it was a relationship she did not encounter in her experiences abroad. Méabh highlighted that, contrary to her mother's perspective, many Irish parents consider the Church's involvement in education to be the accepted norm—a reflection of the prevailing "*meon aigne*", or collective mindset, in Irish society. This cultural mindset reinforces the traditional association between the Catholic Church and education, further illustrating the entrenched acceptance of the Church's influence among the Irish population and perhaps shedding light on why reconfiguration has met with opposition in many areas.

5.6.3 School choice post-reconfiguration

During the latter section of the semi-structured interviews with participants in this research, the focus shifted to the experiences of stakeholders following the reconfiguration of the school. A wide range of topics were covered, including the effects of the change on the physical environment, curriculum, and policies of the school, as well as the challenges and experiences encountered since the transition. The role of parents, the understanding and mediation of the CNS ethos and the overall perception of the change were also explored. Furthermore, the support provided by the new patron, the benefits and potential drawbacks of the change, and the participants' future aspirations for the school were discussed. Lastly, participants were invited to share their perspectives and offer advice to other schools considering similar changes. Within the theme of 'School choice' in a post-reconfiguration context, one subordinate theme emerged: 'Attracting additional enrolments'.

5.6.3.1 Attracting additional enrolments

As mentioned earlier, a study by Darmody and Smyth (2018), which documents the role of socio-cultural and religious factors in the choice of primary school, cited location as the most important factor in relation to parental choice in Ireland, with the majority of parents choosing the 'local' school. However, data from 'The Growing Up in Ireland' (GUI) study indicates that children from minority belief backgrounds were most likely to travel further to attend "minority faith and multi-denominational schools, indicating that their families are making very active choices of school by going outside the local area" (Darmody and Smyth, 2018, p. 5). Reports by participants in this study appear to confirm this finding. Since opening as a CNS, Scoil na Carraige has attracted additional enrolments of children from non-religious backgrounds (see Figure 3. Enrolment figures for case study school from 2014-2023). Parents from minority religious backgrounds and non-religious parents were cited as

actively exercising their choice, and in some cases by-passing their 'local' school to receive a

multi-denominational education as is explained here by Oisín:

> This [school] gives parents an option for something different. We have a bus
> coming from [name of neighbouring area removed] now because there's people
> interested in their child attending a multi-denominational school […]. They're
> coming from all over the place because, they like the fact that we are a Community
> National School. […] it's appealing to a lot of young parents. (Oisín, teacher, p.10,
> lines 319-325)

When discussing the impact that reconfiguration had on the school, Fr O'Sullivan also

reported additional enrolments in the school by parents who were non-religious:

> There were two children in a Catholic school in a neighbouring village whose
> parents decided to move them to the school when it changed to a Community
> National School. Their parents weren't happy for their children to be there [in the
> Catholic school] while religion was happening. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.3, lines 70-74)

While enrolment in Scoil na Carraige have increased since reconfiguration, Fr Barrett was

sceptical of the long-term success of reconfiguration in the area. He argued that the

population just wasn't there to sustain so many small schools:

> The trouble is the population isn't there. Transferring to the ETB isn't going to
> create more babies in the area. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.3,
> lines 65-66)

Fr Barrett raises questions about the long-term feasibility of the change. This is something

that Oisín was also aware of. When discussing the future of the school he stated:

> You're not guaranteed to succeed, especially in rural Ireland, like it's always going
> to be a struggle for us to keep me here as the second teacher. We're taking a lot of
> pupils in next year, but we'll have a fight for the following September again. It'll
> always be that challenge. (Oisín, teacher, p.14, lines 363-366)

In areas facing a declining population, survival presents a constant challenge. However, the

experiences of Scoil na Carraige demonstrate that reconfiguration can provide hope and

opportunities for struggling schools. However, the establishment of a multi-denominational

school amidst a landscape dominated by small Stand-Alone Schools could precipitate the loss

of students for other denominational schools in the vicinity. The repercussions might range

from declining enrolment to the looming threat of closure and staff reductions. While it was

beyond the scope of this study to explore the direct effects of reconfiguration on neighbouring schools, its findings undeniably raise important questions regarding the potential impact on other small schools in the area in the future. For example, where parents have opted to bypass their local school for their eldest child, it is highly likely that any siblings will follow suit.

In light of these concerns, John proposed a potential solution. When asked about the prevalence of small schools undergoing reconfiguration, he voiced apprehension regarding the risks associated with this pattern. Drawing upon the experiences of school transformation in Northern Ireland, John elucidated that a feasibility study is typically conducted in the region prior to reconfiguration. The intention of such a study is to ensure that there exists sufficient demand and growth within the area, providing a foundation to sustain the school in its reconfigured form:

> In the North, you have to do a feasibility study, you have to prove that in X number of years you will grow by X percent. We don't have any of those checks and balances to see if this is a good move that will lead to genuine growth. (John, ETBI, p.5, lines 122-125)

By requiring a feasibility study, Northern Ireland's approach provides a systematic way to evaluate the long-term viability of a reconfigured schools. Without this in place, there is a risk of proceeding with reconfiguration without fully understanding the potential outcomes and implications. Crucial for informed decision-making, feasibility studies minimize risks, provide clarity on potential effects, and enable strategic planning to mitigate adverse consequences.

5.6.4 Conclusion

This section reminded the reader that school choice is often understood in Ireland along religious lines. Participants' responses in this study largely present this understanding, with the majority of participants discussing choice in terms of denominational and multi-denominational education. However, to narrow the concept of choice purely to religion

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would be inaccurate, as other characteristics such as language provision were also identified as impacting the choices parents make about schooling in regard to their children.

Participants identified a lack of school choice in the case study area, with all schools reported as being Catholic Schools. The challenge of choice in rural Ireland was discussed both in regards to parental choice and the ability of teachers to work in a school that aligns with their personal beliefs and values. Participants in this study were clear that the school had taken decisive action regarding their patronage in an effort to save the school from closure. In doing so, they hoped to attract more enrolments from outside their catchment area. The individual actors in the school (the principal, teacher and parent) all referenced the opportunity presented by reconfiguration that enabled them to 'compete' for enrolments and become the 'school of choice'. While the literature around competition between schools in Ireland largely focuses on large urban areas where a diversity of school type exists (Fox and Buchanan, 2008; Darmody and Smyth, 2018) this study shows that competition between schools also happens in the case of Stand Alone Schools, that are all vying for survival in the face or rural depopulation.

Next, discussion turned to decision-making in the school reconfiguration process. As explored in Chapter Two, early documents addressing divestment emphasised the significance of parental choice in selecting suitable schools for reconfiguration (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather, 2012; DES, 2014). However, recent policy guidance (Department of Education, 2022b) and the insights shared by participants in this case study indicate that the decision to reconfigure a school, or not, ultimately lies with the local Bishop as the school's patron. Nevertheless, this research reveals the need for a more nuanced understanding of the decision-making process, where the local Bishop entrusts the decision to the parish community. While this approach is commendable, it raises questions regarding the concept of

'parental choice' within the reconfiguration process, as it grants equal influence to parishioners as it does to current and prospective parents.

The impact of a Catholic hegemony during the reconfiguration process was explored. Responses from participants indicated the existence of a Catholic hegemony in the psyche of Irish parents and teachers when it came to education. Participants used words and phrases like 'norms', 'mindset', 'psyche', 'how it's always been' and 'tradition' to describe Irish people's unquestioning attitudes towards the denominational education system. A general apathy towards education by the Irish public was referenced by a number of participants, and it was generally felt that the public were unaware that the Irish system of education is an anomaly when it comes to its patronage model. Findings from this research suggest the existence of a Catholic hegemony within the local community, where the denominational ethos of the school was largely unquestioned prior to the reconfiguration process. Resistance to change was primarily centred around concerns related to RE, as familiarity with the *norm* of Catholic education created hesitancy towards alternative approaches. To address the hesitations and concerns surrounding reconfiguration, one proposed action from a participant is to educate parents about the CNS model and the unique offerings it brings. However, the challenges of implementing reconfiguration nationally remain evident, as the reluctance to change within individual communities will impede progress. The findings highlight the importance of community involvement, transparency, and addressing parental concerns in successfully reshaping the education system in Ireland.

Finally, this section revealed the active exercise of parental choice, both by parents within the immediate vicinity of Scoil na Carraige and those residing beyond the school's catchment area. The school has experienced an increase in enrolment, primarily attributed to parents seeking an alternative to Catholic education. However, the lack of feasibility data presents a challenge in accurately assessing whether the proposed changes will lead to

genuine growth or potentially compound the difficulties faced by other small schools in the area. Conducting feasibility studies prior to reconfiguration would establish a structured approach to evaluating the demand for alternative school options, the impact on neighbouring schools, and long-term sustainability. As the following section will discuss, it is crucial not to underestimate the significance of small schools for the rural communities they serve, ensuring that the survival of one does not detrimentally affect the survival of another. Bearing this in mind, the focus now shifts to the final theme of 'Identity, belonging, and culture in the Stand Alone School'.

5.7 Identity and belonging in the Stand Alone School[44]

The concept of 'identity' was not explicitly explored during the semi-structured interviews, and at no point did the researcher ask participants about their religious/non-religious identities. Despite this, the theme of 'Identity and belonging in the Stand Alone School' was discovered during the data analysis. The questions in the semi-structured interviews which led to the emergence of this theme encompassed various aspects, such as the school's state before reconfiguration, the rationale for reconfiguration, the extent of the interviewee's involvement in the decision-making process, initial concerns and the nature of communication with both the old and new Patrons. Additionally, responses to questions which explored challenges faced during the transition, the level of parental involvement and their satisfaction, the perceived benefits resulting from the change, and the interviewees' aspirations for the future of the school provided significant insights into this theme.

This section provides valuable insights into the dynamics of the rural community that Scoil na Carriage is located within. Drawing from participant responses, it reveals the intricate framework of community identity within which the reconfiguration process occurred. The section goes on to explore the diversity of religious beliefs in rural Ireland, challenging the assumption of religious homogeneity by examining the emergence of what Inglis (2017, p. 22) refers to as "Cultural Catholics". Furthermore, it delves into the role of identity and belonging in a rural school, leading to the participants' reflections on the altered role of the school in shaping identity after the reconfiguration.

Ó Cadhain's (2021, p. 19) doctoral research, focusing on the experiences of ten teachers and principals in rural Stand Alone Schools in the West of Ireland, defines Stand Alone Schools as those serving small populations where alternative patronage options are not available. According to the 'Report on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector'

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[44] Transcript excerpts to support this theme can be found in Appendix P.

(Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather, 2012), nearly 2000 schools outside urban areas fall into this category, situated three to five kilometres away from their nearest neighbouring school. Ó Cadhain (2021) notes that these schools comprise almost two-thirds of all Irish primary schools in 2021.

Wake (2012, p. 23) argued that rural schools are special, in that they can "unify the community and provide a sense of identity". They often work to "build pride and a sense of place creating a more connected, thriving community" (Wake, 2012, p. 23). However, school localities are "complex, multi-layered publics" that involve "encounters between bodies, buildings and places" (Kitching, 2020, p. 55). The experiences of the participants in this case study affirms the unique and intricate nature of the local school, emphasising its significance in shaping local identity and a sense of belonging. Consequently, this case study demonstrates that changes to rural schools are not devoid of contestation and challenges. It underscores the importance of recognising schools as more than mere local amenities or services during the reconfiguration process. The insights from the participants highlight the school's integration into the fabric of the rural community's life and traditions. Additionally, due to the denominational nature of the education system, the school is intricately intertwined with people's religious identities, further adding complexity to its impact and esteem.

Chapter Three defines identity as a complex concept concerning how individuals perceive and understand themselves within their social environment. Cohen (1982) reminds us that reflection on our own identity and culture often occurs when we encounter other ways of being at the boundary of our own identity. The participants' experiences in this study shed light on the transformative journey of the community through the school reconfiguration process. It compelled them to reflect on their own identities and confront the established norms of traditional denominational education deeply ingrained in their locality for generations.

5.7.1 Identity, belonging and the local school during reconfiguration

5.7.1.1 The rise of secularism and 'Cultural Catholicism'

In this study, participants identified members of the local community as predominantly Catholic. However, they also acknowledged and recognised the increasing diversity of religious identities within the area, as highlighted by Oisín's comment:

> There is a diverse range of people living in this area now. And I'm not just on about people who are culturally diverse or religiously diverse, but people from all walks of life with different outlooks and values. And that brings a real richness to the area. (Oisín, teacher, p.13, lines 336-339)

Inglis (2017, p. 21) reminds us that in our not-too-distant past, "the Republic of Ireland was a homogeneous society and culture", where the majority of people were Catholic. However, he argues that over the last five decades, the cultural makeup of Ireland has changed dramatically. This has resulted in a shift in the "balance of institutional cultural power away from the Catholic Church towards the state, the market and the media" and has resulted in the Catholic Church losing their "monopoly over morality and spirituality" (Inglis, 2017, p. 2). In turn, day to day life "has become more secularised: people no longer operate in Catholic time and space as they once did" and are "increasingly making up their own minds as to what is right and wrong" (Inglis, 2017, p. 2). Ó Corráin (2018, p. 738) defines secularisation as the "process by which religious institutions, actions and consciousness lose their social significance" and asserts that the theory of secularisation claims that the "diminishing importance of religion in social and individual life is a consequence of an inherent tension between modernity and religion". He reminds us that there are several versions of secularisation theory:

> Some emphasise abandonment of Church membership; others focus on measuring traditional institutional forms of religious expression with Church attendance the most widely used indicator of attachment; while a more recent approach argues in favour of the privatisation of religion. (Ó Corráin, 2018, p. 739).

This rise of secularisation has an impact on peoples' Catholic identity, and manifests in a number of ways. Based on qualitative data from a study of contemporary Irish identities in 2003– 2005 and data from the European Values Study, Inglis (2017) proposes that there are four types of contemporary Catholic identities evident in Ireland, each of which personal belief and belonging to the institution of the Church remain important but to varying degrees. Ó Corráin (2018, p. 740) summarises Inglis's typology as:

> Orthodox Catholics are loyal members of the institutional Church. Creative Catholics mix and match beliefs and practices from Catholic and other religious menus in a type of 'smorgasbord Catholicism'. Cultural Catholics identify less with the institutional Church but strongly with their Catholic heritage and tradition. They may go to mass, receive the sacraments and send their children to Catholic schools but no longer see the Church as a spiritual or moral force in their lives . Lastly, individualist Catholics identify themselves as Catholics but do not believe in some of the Church's fundamental teachings.

Supporting Inglis' ideas, a variety of 'types of Catholics' were evident throughout this study. This diversity is illustrated here by two of the participants. Both identify as Catholic, but have very different personal beliefs and practices when it comes to their Catholic faith.

Máire appeared to align with what Inglis refers to as an 'Orthodox Catholic'. She reported that religious practice and mass attendance were central tenets of her faith. When talking about the impact that moving Catholic RE outside of the school day would have on the faith of her children, she confidently explained that she was not worried about her children losing Catholic RE during the school day. As their parent, she felt best placed to pass on the faith and expressed the personal responsibility she felt for her children's religious identity formation:

> We go to mass on Sunday as well. Well we've been tuning in online with my parents during lockdown. So, I would be one of those parents that would be adamant that my children will do their Communion and do their religion and go to mass on Sunday up until they're 18, and then after that, they can go and make their own choices. (Máire, parent, p.7, lines 180-183)

Despite Máire's attachment to her faith, she described herself as having been part of a parent group that led the reconfiguration agenda in the community. For Máire, the removal of

Catholic RE from within the school day was viewed as an opportunity to remove what she

referred to as 'tokenistic' practice when it came to receiving the sacraments:

> For a lot of parents […] it's a token gesture to make Communion and to make
> Confirmation. You're doing it because everyone else is doing it. If you actually
> have to think about, well, why are you actually doing it? And if you have to bring
> your children to religion specifically, well, maybe it actually increases your own
> faith as well. (Máire, parent, p.3, lines 73-76)

Máire viewed reconfiguration as an opportunity for people to reflect on what their faith

means to them and their commitment to it. Ultimately, she saw it as a means for some people

to take more responsibility for their faith and in doing so increase the religiosity of the family

as a whole:

> We bring our children to football and we bring our children to basketball and we
> bring them to music and drama and dancing. […] well, this is one extra thing. If you
> want your child to have Catholic faith formation, you have to bring them to religion.
> (Máire, parent, p.3, lines 68-70)

Máire's comments highlight the differences that exist within the Catholic faith between those

parents who practice and those who do not.

Oisín provides another example of a 'type of Catholic' that exists in rural Ireland

today. When speaking about his religious identity, Oisín described himself as a non-

practicing Catholic:

> I'm not exactly a practicing Catholic. Neither would I say that I am an atheist or
> anything like that, but, um, I wouldn't be practicing. (Oisín, teacher, p.6, lines 156-
> 157)

Despite identifying as Catholic, Oisín expressed a desire for what Ó Corráin (2018) refers to

as the 'privatisation of religion', whereby Catholic RE would be removed from the school

day and Church involvement in education would be ended:

> Personally, I really believe that the religion, as it's currently taught, like with faith
> formation, should be taken out of the schools. I think that every school should be
> multi-denominational. […] That's my belief. (Oisín, teacher, p.1, lines 24-26)

Inglis (2017) puts forth the argument that there has been a shift away from traditional and

orthodox forms of Catholicism towards more individualistic and liberal expressions. While a

majority of Irish people still identify as Catholic (CSO, 2016b), Inglis (2017) suggests that their affiliation is often rooted in a cultural context rather than a strong adherence to religious beliefs. This phenomenon has led to the emergence of what Inglis (2017, p.22) refers to as "Cultural Catholics" who maintain their Catholic identity as a reflection of their cultural heritage. Consequently, Inglis argues that the dominance of the old institutional Catholic order is giving way to a new order characterised by greater ambiguity and scepticism towards key religious beliefs and practices (Inglis, 2017).

The contrasting perspectives expressed by Máire and Oisín in the study shed light on the complex identity landscape within which school reconfiguration took place in Scoil na Carraige. Interestingly, many participants who advocated for changes in patronage also identified themselves as Roman Catholics, as highlighted by Fr O'Sullivan:

> The people who were really advocating for this were actually staunch members of the Catholic Church. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.3, lines 83-84)

The intricate nature of Catholicism in contemporary Ireland is highlighted by this paradoxical situation, wherein individuals who maintain their commitment to the Catholic Church may also advocate for school reconfiguration and increased diversity in school patronage. Similarly, those who are not actively practicing their faith may still value denominational education due to its familiarity and connection to their personal or cultural identity. The convergence of cultural, religious, and societal influences creates a complex context that surrounds school reconfiguration.

While none of the participants in this study advocated against the reconfiguration process at a local level, all participants mentioned that there had been members of the community who were against the change. The reason for this opposition was largely cited as being due to people's fear of losing the Catholic identity from the local area. When asked about the concerns raised by the community during the reconfiguration process, Méabh explained:

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> The main area [of the reconfiguration process] that people seemed to have the issue with was the religious aspect. […] when it was explained then as to how it was going to benefit the school, the children, us, in general, as a community, the staff, everything, then they kind of understood that it wasn't a case of getting rid of the Catholic faith, do you know? And I think that's where people really struggled. (Méabh, principal, p.4, lines 86-92)

Kelly (2009, p. 2) argues that rural places are places of "great loss – of people, natural resources, and, often, as a result, any vision of long-term viability". She goes on the say that "in such places, loss as a persistent condition of life is vividly felt" (Kelly, 2009, p. 2). While a sense of loss was evident in the responses of some participants, particularly in relation to the Catholic faith, what was more striking was the will of those living in this rural locality to ensure that their school survived and was not another casualty to rural decline. This battle against loss drove people within the community to stand at what Cohen (1982) refers to as the 'boundaries' of a person's identity. They were forced to examine the place of their faith within their school, and to decide whether it was worth sacrificing its central place to ensure their school's survival. The complexities involved in this deliberation was illustrated by Máire. When asked if it was difficult to let go of the tradition of Catholic education, she stated:

> The people who were involved in it were adamant that we wouldn't be losing our Catholic education. We stipulated from the very start that it wasn't about religion. It was about ensuring the viability of the school in the future, and in all the discussions that took place, we emphasised that we wanted religion made available in the school after school hours for the children that wanted to continue their Catholic education. (Máire, parent, p.2, lines 48-53)

Although reconfiguration could be perceived as a challenge to the Catholic identity of Catholic children/ families in the school, the participants in this study preferred to see it as an opportunity for rethinking the place of faith formation. Rather than perceiving the relocation of Catholic RE outside of school hours as a drawback, it was regarded as a strategic measure to enable a different form of identity development during school hours while ensuring the continuity of Catholic identity formation within the local community. It was this reimagining

process, driven by a predominantly Catholic community, that played a crucial role in their willingness to embrace reconfiguration and move forward with it.

The next section delves into the multifaceted role of the local school in rural areas, exploring its significance in building community ties, shaping personal and cultural identities, and acting as a bulwark against the forces of rural decline. In doing so, it considers why changes to such an institution might be emotive and evoke strong response during reconfiguration.

5.7.1.2 The role of the local school in building community, identity and preventing rural decline

Cohen (1982, p. 6) recognises 'locality' as an expression of culture and argues that "awareness of commitment and belonging to a culture is a ubiquitous feature of peripheral communities". Cawley (1989) highlights the significant role of primary schools in Ireland in fostering community cohesion and facilitating the socialisation of children within a familiar environment. For Bauch (2001, p. 204), rural schools are dramatically different from their urban counterparts and an advantage of the rural school is that they are "set in a community context that values a sense of place". In the Irish context, Stand Alone Schools are recognised in the Forum's Report as having a particular "social dividend" within their communities (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 73).

The strong connection between the school and the surrounding local community was keenly articulated across interviews with participants. This was expressed in a number of ways: the role of the school in community and identity building, the importance of the school in maintaining the local community in the face of rural decline, a sense of ownership over the local school and the connection between the school and the local Church. Participants provided insights into the differing ways in which the local school was understood to relate and contribute to their local context. The connection between the Stand Alone School and the

local community was something described by all participants, and was considered to be an important aspect of school life in a rural school. The case study school had been a part of the community since the mid 1800s and participants spoke about the inter-generational nature of the local school, and the importance attached to it because of this. When asked about her relationship to the school, Máire stated:

> I'm from the area myself. I went to that school as well. So yeah, born and bred here. And now I'm living there with my family, I have a very close connection to the school. It's very close to my heart. […] All my family would have gone to that school as well. […] You know, that's just up the road from it. We have generations that have gone through the place. (Máire, parent, p.1, lines 2-10)

For Máire there was a strong sense of tradition attached to the school. She positively described how her children's educational experience was not that different from her own and therefore created a shared experience within the family;

> That's why I wanted my own children to go there […] I wanted to give them the same opportunities that we had. (Máire, parent, p.1, lines 14-19)

Blaylock *et al.* (2021, p. 93) acknowledge that a "shared experience" can contribute to a sense of shared identity. They further elaborate that when individuals are physically present, engaged in the same activities, and witness the same rituals, it can lead to an assumption of shared identity (Blaylock *et al.*, 2021, p. 93). The inter-generational nature of the school had developed a sense of educational tradition and a shared sense of identity within the family, but wider than this, the shared experience of schooling was perceived by Máire as a means of creating a sense of belonging to the community.

Reay (2010, p. 277) states that schools play a "critical role" in identity formation. She argues that "no other public institution is as crucial for the development of the identities of children and young people will carry into adulthood" (Reay, 2010, p. 277). The reason for this is because "school norms, practices and expectations provide symbolic materials that students draw on to make sense of their experiences and define them-selves" (Perry, 2002, cited in Reay 2010, p. 277). The importance of the school as a site of identity construction

was recognised by participants in this study. When asked about the possible closure of the school Máire explained the impact that the closure would have on developing children's local identity:

> The thought of it would break your heart. For our community, if our school did close, half of our children would probably go to [neighbouring town] and the other half of our children would probably go to [another neighbouring town]. So, the children from here would actually lose their identity. (Máire, parent, p.9, lines 223-226)

Máire's description of the role of the local school goes far beyond the educational sphere. For Máire, the school was a local meeting place, where local children form seminal relationships and develop their local identity. In Máire's experience, friendships formed in the local rural primary school had the potential to last a lifetime, and to be an anchoring force for people in adulthood:

> You depend on that local school to make those bonds and connections, don't you? And to develop your connection to your area. Like when you go away to college or to work or whatever. You still have the bond or a connection to the people that you grew up with and went to school with and, they're kind of your *clan*. (Máire, parent, p.9, lines 226-228)

The importance of the school in identity building presents a challenge for the school reconfiguration process, which was reported by John to be seen as a move away from local tradition. When asked how the community responded to the proposal to reconfigure their school:

> Although the mood was very positive in the community, there were some people who felt that the transfer of patronage was a transfer away from tradition, away from Catholicism. (John, ETBI, p.3, lines 61-65)

Inglis' words ring true when considered alongside Máire's statements:

> While there have been many changes in Irish social and cultural life, the vast majority of people are deeply enmeshed in webs of meaning that are spun within families, neighbourhoods and amongst friends and colleagues. In and through these groups they create strong social bonds that enable them to develop robust identities and a sustainable sense of self. (Inglis, 2017, p. 24)

For Máire, the school is an integral part of this web of meaning and the imagined loss of such a space in their rural community was reported to have caused heartbreak and worry, as it was linked to a sense of identity loss and the degeneration of the community. This sentiment was echoed by Fr O'Sullivan. When asked about the potential closure of the school, he explained:

> And they [the community] would move Heaven and Earth to hold onto their school. And rightly so, because places like the Church, the school, they are so important for rural communities. And you just don't want them to die. If the school dies, I mean, there's something there that's been there for generations in the school, dying as well. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.3, lines 79-83)

This resonates with a presentation by Sugrue (1996) in which the point was made that many people in rural areas were adamant that the policy of closing small schools, active in the 1960s, advanced the decline of their communities. For the individuals in this study, the local school was not merely a building where knowledge was imparted but a foundational pillar that shaped their personal and collective identities. It was a place where culture, and shared experiences were cultivated, that fostered a sense of continuity and rootedness. The participants recognised the irreplaceable role of the school in shaping the trajectories of their lives, providing them with a sense of connection to their area and to the people they grew up with. Through friendships forged within its walls, they establish their place within the social fabric of their community, creating lasting bonds that endure beyond the school years.

The potential closure of the local school represented a profound disruption to the community's sense of self. It was viewed as a threat to their traditions and way of life. The emotional response expressed by the participants reflected the profound attachment they had to the school and the deep concern they harboured for the future of their community. They feared that the closure of the school would not only sever vital social ties but also contribute to the further decline of their rural community. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of the local school and its significance in the lives of individuals and communities. It underscores the need for a holistic understanding of the school that recognises the profound

social, cultural, and emotional dimensions embedded within the school's role. The voices of the participants serve as a reminder of the enduring value of these institutions and the critical role they play in sustaining and nurturing the fabric of rural communities. With this understanding, it is crucial to delve into discussion of the community's strong sense of ownership of the school during the reconfiguration process.

5.7.1.3 Ownership of the local school and connections to the Catholic Church

During the reconfiguration process, participants expressed a profound sense of ownership that the local community felt towards Scoil na Carraige. This was explained by Fr O'Sullivan as being connected to the various contributions that people have made to the school throughout the generations:

> The school has been there for maybe 100 years or even more. And many of those people [in the community] have contributed, financially and otherwise, and have been part and parcel of it. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.6, lines 142-144)

The financial contributions made towards the school and the fact that many members of the local community were past-pupils, created a sense of ownership by the local community of the school. It was for this reason, that during the reconfiguration process it was deemed essential to seek input from all members of the local community, not just those with children in the school currently, or future parents. When asked about the process of consultation that had taken place during the reconfiguration process, Fr O'Sullivan explained:

> This is something that involved the whole community and the Bishop said, and we agreed, that the whole community must know what is going on. Even if the Board of Management were in favour, and the parents were in favour, it didn't matter. We needed the community to get behind it. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, pp.5-6, lines 139-142)

This sense of ownership manifested as high levels of engagement during the consultation phase that took place with the local community. When speaking about the consultation phase with the community, John noted the high levels of interest within communities where reconfiguration had taken place:

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> It has not just been a conversation about this with the school community, it's been the entire community, because everybody seemed to be interested in the Patrons of the school. (John, Director of Schools, ETBI, p.2, lines 34-35)

At the meeting in which the vote took place regarding reconfiguration, Fr Barrett, who had chaired the meeting, recalled the large crowd in attendance:

> Actually, the hall was packed, standing-room only. Even out in the hall, outside the hall, there were people standing. It was an amazing community. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.2, lines 37-39)
>
> Participants also reported a strong perceived connection between the school

community and the local Church community. This is understandable, given the

denominational history of the school. Both Fr Barrett and Fr O'Sullivan spoke of the school

as a "parish" school. For Fr Barrett, the main feature of a Catholic primary school was it's

close connections to the parish, which made it a very local entity:

> The main feature of a Catholic primary school is that it's a parish school and it's closely connected to the parish and that makes it a very localised entity. […] But, I think one of the most defining features is that both the local parish and the school are very closely tied together. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.1, lines 3-9)

The strong sense of the school belonging to the community, as opposed to the Church or the

Department of Education, discussed earlier, is an example of one of the complexities of

school reconfiguration and is another insight into why the policy has met with little success to

date. However, on a positive note, the concept of 'local' was reported to assist the

reconfiguration process in regard to the ETB. The ETB was recognised as a local entity, as

the closest post-primary school, which many of the children from the locality will go on to

attend, is an ETB school. As Fr Barrett explains:

> The ETB isn't this new thing that's coming in out of nowhere. The secondary school in [local town], which is for the whole area is ETB […]. It wasn't being given over to some crowd in Dublin. They were given to the crowd that were running the local secondary school […] which was important to keep the local sensibilities. It wasn't a sellout. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, pp.2-3, lines 45-51)

The familiarity of the ETB as a patron was something that assuaged fears around change in

the area and once again highlights the significance of 'local identity' in rural Ireland. When

asked if at any point they considered other patron bodies, all participants who had been

involved in the reconfiguration process stated that they had not. The ETB was identified as a

known organisation, with a history of education provision in the locality, as is illustrated by

Fr Barrett's comments:

> The ETB schools here are well-established as a secondary school in this part of the
> county. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.8, lines 188-189)

The connections between the Church and the local school were evident too in the

response of the community to reconfiguration. When asked about the community's response

to the proposal to reconfigure, Fr Barrett explained:

> Of course, they [local people] were saying, "If we give away our school, will you
> close our church?" That was a big issue for them as well. I said, "No". […] I said,
> "but as long as you can support your church and keep it up it will be there". […] We
> separated that and they were happy enough with that. (Fr Barrett, member of the
> local Bishop's office, p.3, lines 55-57)

Fr Barrett's comments highlight the shared identity of the Church and the Stand Alone

School in rural Ireland. O'Mahony and Murphy (2018, p. 15) allude to this shared identity

when they state that primary schools in Ireland form one of the three pillars of Catholic

identity in a place; the other two being the household and the Church. For O'Mahony and

Murphy:

> Such an understanding of community, as an associational identity grounded
> within a particular space, refers to a dynamic social practice. This sense of a
> parish community is developing outside of the formal political process known as
> school divestment. It has a theological as well as a geographical meaning in place.
> (O'Mahony and Murphy, 2018, p. 15)

The strong relationship between the school and the Church was also evident in Fr

O'Sullivan's account of visiting the school prior to reconfiguration:

> I would always say that the local school is a very, very important part of the
> ministry for the local priest. […] I have an excellent relationship there with this
> school. […] I was chairperson of the Board of Management. […] I had a great

relationship with the teachers, and with the children as well. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.1, lines 4-13)

Fr O'Sullivan noted that his relationship with the school enabled him to encourage children from the school to become active members of the Church community, through mass service for example. Participants in a study by Ó Cadhain (2021), outlined earlier, spoke of local priests and the local Church as valuable resources in a community and expressed disappointment when this relationship was disrupted. Reconfiguration was not reported to have ended this relationship between Church and school, but rather as changing the parameters of their relationship and attention now turns to participants experience of this relationship after reconfiguration.

5.7.2 Identity and belonging in the local school post-reconfiguration

The analysis of the data revealed two prominent subordinate themes post-reconfiguration. The first theme that emerged was the continuing connections between the Church and the school post-reconfiguration. When asked about the changes that had taken place as a result of reconfiguration, participants spoke about the change in sacramental education provision being offered outside of school hours. The second subordinate theme that was identified through the data analysis was the understanding of and respect for other identities. When asked about the benefits and challenges of the change for the school, participants described the transition to a multi-denominational ethos as an opportunity for children to appreciate and respect the plurality of identities in modern Ireland. In particular, parent participants expressed the desire for their children to learn about other religions and develop religious literacy, preparing them for life in a diverse world.

5.7.2.1 Continuing connections between the Church and the school post-reconfiguration

Post-reconfiguration, Catholic RE was reported by participants to take place outside of the school day in the school building. This was reported as offering a continued link between the Church and the school for Catholic children. While Catherine (Director of Schools, ETB)

stressed that this can be a "bit of a learning curve" for the parish, the new approach was

reported to be working well in Scoil na Carraige. When speaking about Catholic RE moving

outside of the school day, Fr O'Sullivan was very happy with the new arrangement and felt

that the role and responsibility of the parent in sacramental preparation would be

strengthened:

> I was very happy with what happened in this school because it puts the emphasis
> back on the parents, back on the home. Because like I said, if it doesn't happen in
> the home it is not going to happen at all. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP, p.10, lines 255-257)

Fr O'Sullivan's remarks are in keeping with comments by some teachers and principal

participants in qualitative case study research by Darmody, Lyons and Smyth (2014) who felt

that parents were best placed to develop a child's religiosity. The parish arranged for Catholic

RE classes to take place weekly in the school building after school hours. A teacher was hired

to teach the classes and is paid using the monies generated by the diocese through the lease of

the school building:

> The money that goes to the diocese for the lease of the school building, the dioceses
> use that to provide for sacramental preparation for the children in the school and it
> is provided outside of school hours. (Catherine, Director of Schools, ETB, p.6, lines
> 133-135)

This continuation of connection between the parish and the local school highlights the

potential that school reconfiguration has to make change, while still respecting local beliefs

and traditions. Despite parting ways with the Church as patron, a link to the local Church was

still available to families who wished to avail of it. Máire's children were attending Catholic

RE outside of school hours at the time of this research. For Máire, reconfiguration didn't

mean losing the connection between the Church and the school, but rather rethinking how the

provision of RE is understood in Ireland:

> So we were not losing the religion. We're actually keeping it after school in the
> school building, outside of school hours. Your children are actually going to be
> getting a different model with the Goodness Me, Goodness You! curriculum. And
> on top of that, they're also going to still get their Catholic education outside of
> school. (Máire, parent, p.3, lines 54-57)

The removal of Catholic RE from the school day was reported to put an additional onus on parents and the children who wished to attend classes for Catholic RE outside of school hours. However, Máire spoke about this as something that should be normalised and accepted as part of a parent's responsibility if they wish to pass on the Catholic faith to their child:

> If you want your child to have Catholic faith formation, you have to bring them to religion. You bring them to everything else that's important to you. If this is important to you, then you bring your child to this as well. (Máire, parent, p.3, lines 72-73)

As Faas, Smith and Darmody (2018a) remind us, RE classes are a practice common to other religions in Ireland outside of Catholicism. However, when asked if the change in religious provision could encourage Catholic parents to take a more active role in the faith development of their child, Fr Barrett was sceptical, and was less optimistic about parents taking responsibility for their children's Catholic religious formation. Instead of strengthening commitment, as suggested by Máire and Fr O'Sullivan, Fr Barrett felt that reconfiguration could cause a further fragmentation of the relationship between the parent and the Church:

> It will be interesting to see in the three schools that have divested now, what will happen when they [parents] suddenly realise, "Oh, I haven't bothered going to the classes for religion and I want to make my Communion?" They're told, "You can't. We don't know who you are". That's when there will be issues and then the local parish is going to become the big baddie for refusing Communion to this little child. Despite the fact that they haven't been practicing. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.16, lines 365-369)

Fr Barrett also questioned whether attending Catholic RE classes after school was "enough". For him, one could not meet the same standards of religious identity formation in an after school model of provision as one would receive in a Catholic school:

> You see, if you go to a non-Catholic school, you're going to have to do religious education in another way, and really, is saying "we read the book"…is that enough? You know, you have to do a bit more than that. It's a huge issue and it'll be a huge issue for the Church to let people decide that they don't [have to do more]. (Fr Barrett, member of the local Bishop's office, p.16, lines 369-372)

Coll (2005) cautions about the potential demoralisation that may occur among those in ministry when faced with indifference and unresponsiveness. Similarly, Coll (2005) notes that both committed and searching lay faithful may be scandalised by clergy who appear negligent and perfunctory in admitting individuals to the sacraments without providing at least a basic level of catechesis. Fr Barrett's commentary demonstrates the difficult position the clergy now find themselves in. Reconfiguration appears to complicate matters for the Catholic Church in this regard. If children are no longer receiving a Catholic education and are also coming from a non-practicing household, what is the Church to do? To continue as before, or to seek to create a more devout following?

5.7.2.2 Understanding of and respect for other identities

Faas, Foster and Smith (2020, pp. 601–601) remind us that since the 1990s, Ireland has undergone a significant and swift change in its demographic composition:

> The Republic of Ireland has experienced rapid social change in recent years. Once a homogeneous white, Irish and Catholic nation, the country has witnessed a rise in the number of people of different faiths since the 1990s.

Resulting from this, schools have become more diverse and there are now "a variety of beliefs among Irish school children" (Faas, Foster and Smith, 2020, p. 602). Drawing on census data from 2016, Ní Dhuinn and Keane (2021) highlight the ethnic diversity present in Irish primary schools, stating that 89.6% primary school children had Irish nationality, 5.3% other EU nationality, 1.6% Asian nationality, and 1.2% African nationality. However, research has found evidence of a segregated system, where the distribution of children from ethnic minority groups were found to be overrepresented in larger, disadvantaged, urban schools (Byrne *et al.*, 2010; Faas and Ross, 2012; Ní Dhuinn and Keane, 2021). Faas, Smith and Darmody (2018b, p. 457) state that the literature recognises that children who attend culturally diverse schools may be in a better position to develop an understanding of the perspectives of peers from cultures and beliefs that are different to their own.

In Scoil na Carraige, the majority of families were reported as being Irish and Catholic. However, throughout the interviews, participants made reference to the presence of some religious diversity (in particular non-religious identities) and ethnic and cultural diversity that existed within the school community:

> A lot of the kids in our school, their parents wouldn't be religious and don't align themselves with any church. And there's people of different faiths from different nationalities. So while the majority faith is Catholic, we actually have a lot who wouldn't be practicing or are non-religious. (Oisín, teacher, p.4, lines 88-91)

Moving to a multi-denominational ethos was reported by some participants as an opportunity for children to appreciate and respect the plurality of identities that exist in modern Ireland. For Máire, one of the things that had attracted her to the CNS ethos was that her children would learn about other religions:

> The aspect we liked about the CNS was the multi-denominational part […] this one was welcoming to everybody and it would celebrate everybody's beliefs. […] for my children that's what I want. I want them to respect everybody else's religion and […] to actually understand that everyone doesn't believe the same thing. […] And it's fine for different people to believe different things. We can still all live together happily. (Máire, parent, p.5, lines 122-128)

Similar to findings by Darmody, Lyons and Smyth (2014, p. 255), the role of the school was recognised by Máire and Méabh (both parents of children in the school) as having "a broader cultural socialisation of which religion formed one part". Both Máire and Méabh expressed a desire for their children to have an understanding of the different religious and non-religious identities that exist in the world and also expressed a desire for their children to have a certain level of religious literacy. This was viewed as preparing them for life in a more diverse world. The ethos of the CNS was viewed by both parents as having the potential to better prepare children for life in pluralist Ireland. Parents in this study viewed school as an important place for instilling values of equality, inclusion and respect for difference and recognised the CNS as being well placed to prepare children for life. When asked why they choose for their school to become a CNS, Máire stated that:

> Society is changing, whether people like or not, it's changing. […] our children are not going to live in rural Ireland, probably for the rest of their life. […] we want to prepare them for the real world. And I think tolerance is such a huge thing and that you actually have to learn to live in harmony in society. (Máire, parent, p.3, lines 138-143)

For one participant, the change of patronage was viewed as contributing to the progressive identity of their rural community and the school was seen as a local amenity that may entice new families to the area. Oisín felt the change signified a forward looking community that was welcoming and inclusive of difference:

> There are diverse range of people living in this area now. […] And that brings a real richness to the area, it brings people with different outlooks and I think our little school will get people thinking. […] we are kind of showing that this area is progressive because of what we've done. (Oisín, teacher, p.13, lines 336-349)

For the researcher, the assumptions regarding multi-denominational schools being 'more inclusive' and better able to prepare children to live in a diverse society are not uncontroversial. Commentators like Conway (2017) argue that Catholic schools can also prepare children for a pluralist world. At the time of data collection, no challenges were reported by participants to have arisen as a result of the new ethos, apart from those that related to the organisation and management of the change, but this is not to say that they won't in the future. When asked if there was anything she regretted about the change or missed about the Catholic ethos this principal stated:

> No, no, there's not. God, how can I say that without sounding completely blunt. […] The number one goal was for it to be a positive and successful school for our children. So, I can't regret the change because that's what it brought about, the positivity and the growth and the injection of hopefulness in the school and the community. So no, I don't regret anything. (Méabh, principal, p.18, lines 463-470)

For the researcher, moving forward, it is crucial for the staff to possess an understanding of the challenges that can arise when addressing questions of values within a pluralist space. In such a context, where diverse perspectives and beliefs coexist, Halstead and Taylor (1996, 2000) remind us that conflicts and tensions regarding different value systems may emerge. It is essential for the staff to be prepared to navigate these challenges in a sensitive and

inclusive manner, ensuring that all voices are respected. By recognising the potential clashes and discrepancies in values within a pluralist environment, the staff can proactively engage in open dialogue, promote mutual understanding, and foster a culture of respect and acceptance. In professional development provided by ETBI as part of reconfiguration, it will be important to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to facilitate discussions on values, encouraging critical thinking and empathy among children.

5.7.3 Conclusion

This section began by highlighting the complex identity landscape within which reconfiguration of Scoil na Carraige took place. It underscored the broad range of religious identities present within the Catholic faith, which became evident through the participants' discussions about their own beliefs. Recognising this diversity within Catholicism is crucial for comprehending the intricacies of school reconfiguration and the perceived significance of religion during the negotiation process. Although an overall decline in religious belief is apparent, the emergence of what Inglis (2017) labels as 'Cultural Catholics' indicates the continued prevalence of Catholic influence. Importantly, however, this study also found that individuals who remained committed to the Catholic faith could still support school reconfiguration and increased diversity in school patronage.

Where opposition to reconfiguration arose, it was rooted in fears of losing the Catholic identity of the local area. During the reconfiguration process, participants emphasised the importance of addressing these concerns while also communicating clearly the benefits of reconfiguration for the school and the community. Participants in this study saw reconfiguration as an opportunity to reconsider the role of faith formation, with Catholic RE being made available after school hours. This approach aimed to ensure the continuity of Catholic identity formation while accommodating the changing educational landscape.

Next, this section delved into the concept of a 'local' identity and examined the role of the school in fostering such an identity. This case study is evidence of the many meanings and significances attached to the 'local' or 'parish' school in rural Ireland. Participants accounts demonstrated that the school was not viewed as a just building, but rather a space that was deeply entwined in the identity and values of the local area. Participants also noted the sense of ownership that the local community felt over the local school, evidenced in the high levels of engagement at community level during the decision making process. For one participant, this was because it represented traditions passed down from generation to generation and had been part of their own identity formation. Participants reported that others had contributed to the schools development and viewed its decline as a step towards the decline of the community more generally. For others still, the school was a symbol of their Catholic faith, an appendage of the local Church, and any move away from a Catholic ethos raised concerns about the impact that this would have on the future of the local Church.

Participants in this study were able to negotiate change because their local school was under threat, and rather than see it close, the community were willing to change the relationship the school had with the Church. If the school had not been facing closure, it is likely that reconfiguration would not have happened. Almost all participants from the local community who were interviewed, except for one, expressed satisfaction with the previous ethos and patron of the school. Every community in Ireland is its own entity, with its own unique identity and the school and the Church(es) will form a unique contextual part of that. Despite the name 'National School', this study suggests 'Local School' would be more accurate a descriptor when it comes to rural Ireland.

The final section explored the provision for Catholic RE outside of school hours for Catholic pupils of the school. While one participant was sceptical of how effective this method of RE would be in forming children in their faith, others saw it as an opportunity for

the Catholic community, and spoke of the possibility it held for parents to take a more active role in passing on the Catholic faith. The possibility of reconfiguration being an answer to the rise of Ireland's 'Cultural Catholics' was discussed and the challenges the current system presents to the clergy and active lay members of the Church were considered.

In the specific case of Scoil na Carraige, participants acknowledged the presence of religious and ethnic diversity within the school community, alongside the majority of Irish and Catholic families. Transitioning to a multi-denominational ethos was seen as an opportunity for children to appreciate and respect the plurality of identities in modern Ireland and the two parents in this study expressed a desire for their children to understand different religious and non-religious perspectives, preparing them for a diverse world. The school was viewed as playing a broader role in cultural socialisation, including religious literacy, and preparing children for life in a pluralist society. Participants reported no challenges arising from the new ethos at the time of data collection. However, it is crucial for the staff to be aware of potential challenges and conflicts that may arise in a pluralist space. Open dialogue, mutual understanding, and a culture of respect and acceptance should be fostered. Teachers need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to facilitate discussions on values and promote critical thinking and empathy among children.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter One of this thesis, the researcher outlined the rationale for undertaking this study. The primary education system in Ireland, which is predominantly denominational, has encountered various challenges in the face of social and cultural change, as explicated throughout this thesis. In response to this challenge, the GoI implemented a policy known as school reconfiguration, previously referred to as school divestment, with the intention of creating greater levels of school choice. However, at of the time of this research, the policy had achieved limited success. The introduction of the 'early-movers' provision within the 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process' (SRFDP) led to approximately 15 denominational schools self-selecting to change to a multi-denominational Community National Schools (CNSs). The case study school examined in this research was one such school and represented one of the first examples of a live reconfiguration from a Catholic school to a CNS in the annals of the State, rendering it a uniquely significant subject of investigation.

Guided by the following research questions, this doctoral research employed a qualitative case study approach to explore stakeholders' experiences and understanding of the 'SRFDP' in one newly reconfigured case study school:

1. *How can the concepts of 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion' and 'identity' aid understanding of the opportunities and challenges that emerged from the reconfiguration of the case study school?*

2. *What can be learned about reconfiguring ethos from the experiences of key stakeholders' in the case study school?*

In doing so, it aimed to investigate the understandings and lived experiences of school reconfiguration in a recently reconfigured case study school, and to explore the implications

of these understandings and experiences for the wider policy landscape. It also aimed to address the dearth of empirical literature regarding the lived experience of school reconfiguration. Drawing on the relevant literature discussed in Chapters Two and Three, the study's conceptual framework identified the key concepts of 'ethos' (Donnelly, 2000), 'hegemony' (Gramsci, 1971), 'identity and belonging in rural areas' (Cohen, 1982), and 'equality, diversity, and inclusion' (Baker *et al.,* 2006; Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018) as helpful in developing a comprehensive understanding of school reconfiguration within the case study school. As presented in Chapter Five, arising from a process of thematic analysis, the central themes that were identified in this research were 'Ethos', 'School choice', and 'Identity and belonging in the Stand Alone School'.

6.2 Organisation of the chapter

This chapter discusses the unique contribution that this research makes to knowledge, offers a response to the research questions, exploring the implications of the findings for policy and practice (where appropriate), identifies the limitations of the study, and suggests future directions for research. At the end of this chapter a final reflection is offered by the researcher.

6.3 The significance of the research

At the time of conducting this research, there was a notable dearth of studies examining the lived experience of school reconfiguration in the RoI. Consequently, the case study school presents a distinctive opportunity to gain valuable insights into a pivotal juncture in the history of the Irish education system. Notably, the case study school is one of the first Catholic schools to self-select to undergo a live reconfiguration. While the historical development of the patronage system in Ireland has been extensively documented, this seminal moment warrants documentation in its own right. By shedding light on this

significant event, this research contributes to the comprehensive understanding of the evolving landscape of Irish education.

This research offers valuable and practical insights into the challenges and benefits of school reconfiguration. It is based on the first-hand experiences of participants involved in the process at Scoil na Carraige. The study focuses on crucial moments of the process and provides real-life examples of the challenges encountered. Moreover, it offers practical advice on how this particular community overcame the challenges they faced, drawing from the experiences of individuals who have personally lived through the reconfiguration process. Furthermore, the research emphasises the significant place of the local rural school in shaping individuals' identities and fostering a strong sense of belonging within the community. It sheds light on why proposed changes to these schools are often emotionally charged and sensitive issues within the community. For policymakers and schools considering reconfiguration, this study offers unique insights into the real experiences of the reconfiguration process. Although it is important to recognise that case study research has limitations in terms of generalisability, the value of this in-depth case study should not be underestimated. Such research provides a snapshot of a school community in the midst of change, offering context-specific knowledge that can inform decision-making and policy development.

As outlined in Chapter Two, the undertaking of this research necessitated a rigorous engagement in policy analysis. This was primarily due to the absence of a consolidated body of policy documentation pertaining to school reconfiguration. Unlike other policies that typically feature implementation plans and periodic reviews, the documentation trail for school reconfiguration was sporadic. Consequently, the researcher embarked on an endeavour to address the contextual question at hand, exploring the unique socio/historical factors that gave rise to the reconfiguration process in the Republic of Ireland as evident in

key policy documents. The conducted policy analysis played a pivotal role in establishing a robust and comprehensive understanding of the policy under investigation. Furthermore, it served as one of the first comprehensive compilations of all published policy documentation relevant to school reconfiguration in the Republic of Ireland. By undertaking this analysis, the research fills a critical gap in the existing literature and contributes to the body of knowledge on the subject matter. Attention now turns to responding to the research questions.

6.4 A Response to the research questions

As stated earlier, the overall aim of this research was to explore the understandings and lived experience of school refiguration in the case study school and examine the learnings and implications for the wider policy landscape that emerge from it. Two key research questions informed the research aim have been addressed by the research process. A response to each question is presented in the following sections. Threaded throughout are a number of recommendations that have been developed in response to the research findings.

6.4.1 How can the concepts of 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality and inclusion' and 'identity' aid understanding of the opportunities and challenges that emerged from the reconfiguration of the case study school?

The first research question aimed to explore the potential contributions of the concepts of 'ethos', 'hegemony', 'diversity, equality, and inclusion', and 'identity' in comprehending the opportunities and challenges associated with Ireland's reconfiguration process. Through an extensive examination of socio-historical, policy, and conceptual literature, these concepts were identified as useful for the development of a comprehensive understanding of school reconfiguration, specifically within the context of Scoil na Carraige. Each concept will be discussed in the ensuing sections, emphasising their respective contributions to the researcher's understanding of the reconfiguration of Scoil na Carraige, and, where appropriate, reconfiguration as a national policy. Throughout the discussion, the researcher

will highlight several noteworthy findings, presented in Chapter Five, that hold particular significance to these concepts.

6.4.1.1. Ethos

This research further confirmed that the concept of 'ethos' is multifaceted and dynamic (Lodge and Tuohy, 2016, p. 3) and traverses many aspects of school life (McLaughlin, 2005). Throughout this study, participants offered varied interpretations of the concept, highlighting inherent contradictions and inconsistencies.

Prior to reconfiguration, one aspect of this complexity was the lack of agreement regarding the Catholic ethos of the school prior to reconfiguration. Participants held different views on the extent to which the school's ethos was overtly Catholic prior to reconfiguration. However, when participants described the school before reconfiguration, clear indications of the Catholic ethos were evident in various aspects of the school. The influence of the Catholic faith was prominent in the school's organisational structures, as evidenced by the Parish Priest serving as the Chairperson of the Board of Management. Moreover, the physical environment was described as having prominently displayed Catholic religious symbolism. Additionally, the behaviour of individuals within the school reflected the Catholic values, with close relationships established with the local church, pupils and parents attending mass regularly and acting as mass servers, Catholic religious education being taught and Catholic prayers being recited, among other practices.

However, for the researcher, the complexity of 'ethos' was further compounded when it came to the "deep-seated thoughts, feelings, and perceptions" (Donnelly, 2000) of the participants. These internal experiences and perspectives were intricately intertwined with their understanding and interpretation of the Catholic ethos within the school. Unravelling these intricate layers of personal beliefs and emotions became crucial in fully grasping the participants' viewpoints on the matter. Within the context of the Catholic ethos, several

tensions arose and the researcher observed a misalignment between the prescribed ethos of the school and the actual values and beliefs held by individual members of the school community.

One such example is Oisín, who had encountered tensions within the Catholic ethos during his previous experience in Catholic education. Oisín struggled with what he perceived as the exclusion of non-Catholic children during Catholic RE and sacramental preparation. He grappled with the significance attributed to Catholic RE by the school's patron, a significance that he did not personally place on the subject. Moreover, he experienced tension when a former school leader considered his personal commitment to the faith to be inadequate. This vividly illustrates the challenges encountered by some teachers whose beliefs or religious practices deviate from those promoted by the school's ethos. The inclusion of 'equality' as part of the formally espoused ethos was a significant relief for Méabh (principal), who had always strived to uphold this value within the school, even before the reconfiguration. Its explicit recognition as a core value of the school's ethos brought a sense of validation and reassurance to Méabh, as it affirmed the commitment to promoting equal opportunities, fairness, and inclusivity within the school community. Throughout the study, the researcher observed that both the teacher and principal in the case study school were grappling with the tensions highlighted by Askling (2000) regarding religious settings associated with the Church and confessionalism. The school community seemed to be navigating the evolving landscape of modern society, where individuals increasingly strive to uphold democratic values and embrace pluralism. While societal changes suggest that Ireland is ready to move towards ethoi that promote more plural forms of education, findings from during the reconfiguration process suggested a more nuanced understanding is required.

During the negotiation phase of the reconfiguration process, changes to Catholic RE, specifically sacramental education, were identified as a critical concern for the community involved. The significance of Catholic RE, even for families who no longer practiced their faith, underscored the challenges associated with reconfiguring Catholic primary schools in modern-day Ireland. The tensions and complexities surrounding sacramental education shed light on the difficulties of reconciling 'ethos' and 'identity' during the reconfiguration process. The Catholic ethos of the school was deeply intertwined with the provision of sacramental education, making it a central aspect of the school's ethos. However, as societal attitudes and practices evolved, the alignment between the school's ethos and the diverse identities within the community became more challenging. Fr O'Sullivan (PP) identified the sacraments as 'big events' in the community, but despite this alluded to the fact that once the event was over regular mass attendance was not to be presumed. On the other hand, Máire mentioned that some parents viewed the sacraments as token gestures or followed them merely because everyone else was doing it. These differing perspectives highlighted the complexity of accommodating various beliefs and attitudes towards sacramental education within the school's ethos. Reconciling the traditional Catholic ethos, which included Catholic RE within the school day, proved to be an important part of the reconfiguration process. It became essential to find a balance that respected the traditions and beliefs of the Catholic community while also accommodating the diverse identities and beliefs within the broader school community. This will be discussed further in the section on 'identity'.

After undergoing reconfiguration, the ethos of the school was redefined as multi-denominational, emphasising values such as respect, care, community, excellence in education and equality. Although there were indications by patron participants from ETB and ETBI of a broader understanding of ethos that extended beyond religious affiliation, individuals at the school level predominantly associated the ethos with its approach to

religious education. The implementation of the GMGY curriculum integrates identity education, values education and a pluralistic approach to RE. Where professional development had been provided for the 'Beliefs and religions' strand of the curriculum there was evidence that it had led to a clear comprehension of the new ethos and notable progress in its implementation. However, it was acknowledged that a more comprehensive understanding of the GMGY curriculum was still evolving and required ongoing efforts. In particular, aspects of values education and identity education will require professional development. The patron's crogramme was identified as a vital component of the new ethos, providing teachers who are new to the model with a valuable opportunity to comprehend the CNS.

In conclusion, this research highlighted the complex nature of ethos in schools. Participants had varied interpretations, revealing contradictions and inconsistencies. The Catholic influence before reconfiguration was evident in structures, environment, and practices. Personal beliefs added complexity, leading to tensions and misalignment between prescribed and individual values. Challenges faced by teachers with differing beliefs and the importance of promoting equality were emphasised. After reconfiguration, the ethos was redefined as multi-denominational, emphasising respect, care, community, excellence in education and equality. The GMGY curriculum and professional development played significant roles in implementing the new ethos. However, ongoing efforts are needed to deepen understanding of the new ethos.

6.4.1.2 Hegemony

The concept of 'hegemony' provides insights into the opportunities and challenges associated with Ireland's reconfiguration process. Hegemony refers to the dominance and influence of a particular group or ideology within society, shaping societal norms and values. In the context of Ireland's reconfiguration process, hegemony is epitomised by the longstanding prevalence

of Catholic education, which has significantly shaped the education system and influenced societal norms.

One opportunity presented by the reconfiguration process is the chance to diversify the education system at primary level. By introducing alternative patronage models like Community National Schools, the aim is to promote social inclusion and establish a more equitable education system. This represents an opportunity to challenge the existing hegemony and provide families with greater choice in relation to their children's education. As highlighted in Chapter Five, participants reported instances where parents actively chose to bypass their local school in favour of enrolling their children in the newly reconfigured Scoil na Carraige. This behaviour indicates a desire among some parents to seek out educational options that align with their values and preferences, even if it means leaving the locality.

However, the reconfiguration process also encounters several challenges rooted in the existing hegemony. As evident in this study, the acceptance of Catholic education as the norm in Ireland contributes to resistance and hesitancy when it comes to embracing alternative approaches. Participants in this research spoke about how many parents themselves have experienced Catholic education and harbour a sense of trust and familiarity with the existing system. Consequently, there is a reluctance to deviate from the norm and an aversion to change, particularly when it directly affects their children's schools. This resistance poses a significant challenge to the reconfiguration process, as parents may prefer to maintain the familiar Catholic 'ethos' rather than opting for alternative patronage models that they are less familiar with.

Evidence of the challenges that arise from a Catholic hegemony was evident in Scoil na Carraige. The majority of participants in the study expressed contentment with the denominational ethos of the school prior to reconfiguration. Where opposition arose, it was

primarily centred around changes to religious education provision, reflecting a reluctance on the part of parents and the community to embrace a new model that they were unfamiliar with. On the other hand, Scoil na Carraige serves as a compelling example of the positive results that can be achieved through the process of reconfiguration. It demonstrates how people can be supported to work through their uncertainty and achieve change.

Following the reconfiguration, participants in the study expressed satisfaction with the changes that took place. While the increase in enrolments was certainly a contributing factor to the school's perception of success, there was also evidence of the school community embracing the new ethos and its impact on children's educational experience. In particular, the two parents in the study (one of which was also the school principal) expressed their contentment with the fact that their children were now exposed to a broader range of religious perspectives and beliefs through engagement with the GMGY curriculum.

It is important to recognise the challenges facing the Catholic Church, as a dominant patron in the education system, in convincing school communities, accustomed to Catholic education, to embrace change and actively support reconfiguration efforts. It must be remembered that Scoil na Carraige was a school that self-selected to reconfigure to ensure its survival, and even then some members of the community were reluctant to proceed with the change. To address these challenges, education, community engagement, and dialogue are crucial. Informing and educating parents and the wider community about alternative models can dispel misconceptions and alleviate fears. As was evident in this study, holding information sessions or public meetings to share information about Community National Schools and other alternative models can foster understanding and acceptance. Open and inclusive dialogue allows concerns to be expressed and addressed, enabling stakeholders to navigate the complexities of hegemonic resistance.

In conclusion, it is essential to recognise that dismantling hegemonic structures and transforming the education system requires ongoing efforts, as societal norms and beliefs are deeply entrenched. By promoting dialogue, providing information, and addressing concerns, policymakers and educators can gradually shift the dominant narrative and foster a more open and accepting environment for alternative patronage models. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge the agency and voices of the local community in the decision-making process. While the Catholic Church holds significant power as the patron in many schools, the involvement and desires of the local community should be given due consideration, as was the case in Scoil na Carraige. Recognising the importance of community engagement and allowing for a reflective and inclusive process can help navigate the complexities of hegemonic resistance and build a more participatory and democratic approach to reconfiguration. It is also worth noting that within this study the concept of hegemony was found to extend beyond the reconfiguration process itself. Participants reported how a Catholic hegemony permeates other aspects of the education system, for example, the normalisation of a predominantly denominational education system within the teaching population.

6.4.1.3 Identity

Through an exploration of identity-related themes that emerged during the research, the complexities of 'identity' in relation to reconfiguration become apparent. As evident in the case study school, the local school in rural Ireland plays a significant role in shaping personal and collective identities, fostering a sense of connection to the community, and preserving cultural traditions. Understanding the profound meaning and significance attributed to local schools is crucial for navigating the reconfiguration process successfully and considering the impact on individual and communal identities.

There was a strong sense of ownership and attachment to the local school expressed by participants. The potential closure of the school was seen as a profound disruption to the community's sense of self, threatening their traditions and way of life. This deep concern reflects the school's role in shaping individual and collective identities, fostering social ties, and preserving community traditions. The high levels of community engagement and consultation during the reconfiguration process in Scoil na Carraige further emphasises the importance placed on the school by the local community. The experiences of Scoil na Carraige demonstrates the importance of giving a voice to local communities in shaping the future of their schools. As a Catholic school, Scoil na Carraige was described by participants as a 'local' and 'parish' school. It will be important that moving forward this connection to the local area is nurtured.

The research also highlights the changing religious landscape in Ireland, where the influence of the Catholic Church has diminished, and secularisation has led to increased diversity in religious beliefs and practices. While not the dominant motivation for change, participants acknowledged the growing diversity in their locality and recognised a desire for multi-denominational education. The transition to a multi-denominational ethos was seen as a means to foster respect, inclusivity and understanding among children, preparing them for life in a diverse society. The school was viewed by parent and teacher participants as playing a broader role in cultural socialisation, promoting religious literacy and exposure to various belief systems.

One significant lesson learned from the research is the importance of avoiding assumptions of homogeneity within the Catholic faith. A diversity in Catholic religious identity in rural Ireland was evident, with participants presenting different types of Catholic identities. A nuanced understanding of these diverse identities is essential for grasping the challenges and opportunities linked to the reconfiguration of schools. While it is evident that

religious practice is declining, the research participants described parents' affinity towards Catholic education, particularly in relation to the sacraments. Therefore, it is important to note that the decline in 'orthodox' adherence to Catholicism does not necessarily equate to a decrease in the number of individuals who still desire a Catholic education. However, when faced with the possibility of school closure, participants in this research demonstrated a willingness to reimagine the place of their Catholic faith within their child's education and viewed the relocation of Catholic RE outside of school hours as an opportunity to create space for learning about other religions and beliefs during the school day while preserving the provision of Catholic RE outside of the school day. This reimagining of Catholic RE highlights the adaptability and resilience of Catholic communities in embracing change while staying true to their beliefs and values.

The new approach was reported to be working well in Scoil na Carraige and was seen as an opportunity to strengthen the role and responsibility of parents in their child's Catholic identity formation. The weekly Catholic RE classes, which were taking place in the school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, were viewed as a continuation of the connection between the parish and the local school, highlighting the potential of school reconfiguration to bring about change while still respecting local beliefs and traditions. However, not all participants were optimistic about the impact of reconfiguration on Catholic parents' active involvement in their children's faith development. One participant expressed concerns and questioned whether attending Catholic RE classes after school was enough if the Church were to maintain a devout following.

In conclusion, a comprehensive understanding of identity is crucial for gaining valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges entailed in Ireland's reconfiguration process. Policymakers and stakeholders can navigate this process more effectively by taking into account the intricate nature of identity in relation to reconfiguration, actively involving

the community, promoting inclusivity and demonstrating respect for the diverse identities and cultural richness of communities.

6.4.1.4 Diversity, equality and inclusion

As explored in Chapter Two, the development of school reconfiguration policy emerged from the recognition of a growing demand for increased educational options among families seeking alternatives to Catholic schooling. The aim was to provide greater school choice and accommodate the preferences of these families. As evident in the Forum's report (2012) the concepts of 'diversity, equality and inclusion' were of central importance to recommendations made regarding school divestment, and later reconfiguration. Through an exploration of the reconfiguration of Scoil na Carraige, a number of important observations regarding these concepts emerge.

In Chapter Five, the data revealed varying perspectives on 'equality' and 'inclusion'. One participant believed that the mere presence of diversity equated to inclusivity. However, contrasting viewpoints emerged, with some participants emphasising that true inclusion necessitates equal opportunities for all learners, as well as equal respect and recognition for all children within the school. These diverse understandings highlight the complexity of the concepts and the importance of establishing an agreed framework for discussing inclusion in schools. Interestingly, in 2012, the Forum report suggested School Self-Evaluation for the "Inclusive School" (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 76). While the new 'Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools' (DE Inspectorate, 2022) makes numerous references to inclusion, it does not specifically apply it to issues relating to 'ethos'.

Challenges in relation to the inclusion of children who were not Catholic were raised prior to reconfiguration. The teacher expressed difficulties in being inclusive of non-Catholic pupils during sacramental preparation, as they were not equally involved or engaged

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compared to their Catholic peers. To address this issue, the Archdiocese of Dublin is engaged in a pilot project where this practice is moved outside of the school day (Foley, 2019; McCrave, 2019). The experiences shared by the teacher in this study may further contribute to these discussions. Similarly, teaching RE presented challenges, as the teacher felt reluctant to discuss other faiths. As discussed in the previous chapter, this highlights the need for continuous professional development that promotes inter-belief dialogue and teaching about other religions in Catholic schools, as is advocated for in the 'Catholic Primary Schools in a Changing Ireland Sharing Good Practice on Inclusion of all Pupils' (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2015).

One participant in the study advocated for Catholic schools to become "more Catholic" after reconfiguration. However, the majority of primary schools in Ireland are expected to maintain a Catholic ethos, which may limit the choices available to parents, especially in rural areas. It is crucial to strike a balance between preserving the denominational ethos and ensuring an inclusive and equitable educational experience for all children. The Catholic Schools Partnership (2015) has shown a commitment to inclusivity, as evidenced by their guidance documents. These documents indicate a desire for Catholic schools to be inclusive of all children attending Catholic schools, even if they do not adhere to the Catholic faith. However, during the study, sacramental preparation was identified by participants as a particular challenge for inclusion.

Although issues of 'equality' and 'inclusion' had not yet arisen within the CNS ethos at the time of data collection, it is acknowledged that they may surface in the future. The implementation of the GMGY curriculum was perceived as a positive contribution to the inclusion of all pupils, as it allowed for the participation of all children and eliminated the need for 'opting out'. However, as discussed, values can be subject to contestation in multi-

denominational schools also. Therefore, it is important for new CNS schools to be prepared for potential conflicts regarding the new ethos and to address them proactively.

6.4.2 What can be learned about reconfiguring ethos from the experiences of key stakeholders' in the case study school?

From the experiences of key stakeholders in the case study school, several valuable lessons can be learned about reconfiguring ethos. These lessons shed light on the challenges, opportunities, and important considerations that arise before, during and after the process:

1. **The importance of authentic engagement with all stakeholders:** The experiences of key stakeholders emphasise the crucial role of authentic engagement with the local community and involving them in the reconfiguration process. During the process of reconfiguration in Scoil na Carraige, high levels of community engagement was evident, in addition to clear and transparent communication among all stakeholders at every stage of the process. The initiation of the process involved a 'listening exercise', as described in Chapter Five, led by the Parish Priest. This exercise provided an opportunity for members of the local community to convene and engage in discussions regarding the potential changes. The new patron actively engaged with the community, sharing information about the CNS and addressing any questions or concerns raised. In addition, the Catholic patron was also present to answer questions that emerged about implications that reconfiguration might have on the future of the local Church. This approach ensured that all stakeholders possessed a comprehensive understanding of the proposed changes, the rationale behind them, and the potential impacts on the children and the community. The open and effective communication strategies employed during the reconfiguration process fostered high levels of engagement and interest among the local community, leading to an acceptance of the outcome of the process, even by those who had opposed the change. Additionally, the

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inclusion of a democratic voting process was found to contribute to the overall success of the reconfiguration.

2. **The need for change leadership at community level:** This case study demonstrated the importance of strong leadership from within the school community when reconfiguration was proposed. In the case study, the local change leaders had knowledge and understanding of the school's culture and the community context. As a result of this, they were able to identify who it would be important to include in dialogue regarding changing the ethos and, as insiders, they were trusted by the people in their community. This local knowledge and position of trust was crucial when it came to managing challenging negotiations and rallying the support of the local community. However, there was also evidence that local leadership in a reconfiguration process is challenging and places significant pressure on the local change leaders. As was evident in this study, there was a collective sense of relief that the process had had the intended effect and the school had gained enrolments. If this had not been the case, the local change leaders were worried that they would have faced backlash from their community. It was emphasised by participants that if the reconfiguration process had been led by individuals outside of the local community, the result could have differed significantly. In the newly released guidance, the school community is included as a relevant stakeholders in the reconfiguration process. However, the announcement also stated the assignment of 'independent facilitators'(DE, 2022a). This may pose a challenge, as local leadership was found to be crucial to gaining community trust. Ideally, facilitators should have a connection to the locality and be trusted to act in the best interest of the school and community.

3. **The need for sustained support which enables staff to consider the ethos and values of the new school:** Findings from this study around the creation and

transmission of school ethos are testament to Donnelly's (2000, p. 150) assertion that

ethos is dependent on the "key actors" in the school, and that the practical expression

of ethos is closely connected to the "values and attitudes" of the school body. Both

the principal and the teacher in this study reported their personal and professional

values aligning with those of the new ethos of the CNS. Because this was the case, the

participants reported embracing the change in ethos positively and described the

practical ways in which they were promoting the new ethos in the school. When

speaking about integrated schools in Northern Ireland, Donnelly (2004, p. 265)

cautions that to develop an inclusive ethos, teachers should not only sympathise with

the values which are promoted by the inclusive school but must also actively enact the

ethos of inclusiveness through their everyday work and through their own collegial

relationships. The findings of this study align with Donnelly's (2000, p. 150) assertion

that a discrepancy between the values of teachers and principals and those of the

school has the potential to undermine and distort the ethos. In order to prevent this

happening, Donnelly (2000, p. 265-271) recommends "open critical dialogue"

amongst staff be facilitated when values issues arise and that proactive measures such

as in-school training and development programmes that enable teachers to reflect on

their personal values be provided. In the recent guidance issued by the DE there is

evidence of the recognition of the importance of values alignment, with provisions in

place to allow teachers to be redeployed if they do not want to work within the new

ethos and to engage in a trial run before deciding (Department of Education, 2022b).

The inclusion of such considerations in relation to redeployment will certainly help to

prevent the ethos of the school being undermined and distorted by those who disagree

with it. However, as shown in Donnelly's (2000) study, teachers can sometimes be

unaware of their own biases and misconceptions. Therefore, moving forward, in

addition to the option of redeployment, ETBI should ensure that their training includes a focus on the development of a culture of "open discussion forums" within their new schools, whereby "issues which have the potential to cause conflict and intolerance are dissected and discussed with the intention of developing an ethos which recognises and celebrates diversity" (Donnelly, 2004, p. 265).

4. **The importance of assessing the viability of the school prior to reconfiguration:** This study highlights the competition that exists between rural schools struggling to maintain enrolment numbers required to keep the school open. Stand Alone Schools play a central role in rural communities, and it is important to ensure that creating more school choice in rural areas is not to the detriment of these schools. Participants in the study expressed concern about being "pipped at the post" in regards to reconfiguration, with a feeling of inevitability that one of the schools in the area was going to reconfigure. However, it is essential to consider the potential impact of reconfiguration on other schools in the area, as one school's gain may mean another school's closure. As highlighted by one participant, the DE should consider conducting feasibility studies in areas where school reconfiguration is planned, as this would enable the assessment of the viability of change and the potential impact on other schools in the locality.

5. **The benefits of collaboration between patrons and stakeholders:** This study demonstrates that successful execution of a reconfiguration process requires collaboration among various stakeholders. Scoil na Carraige provides evidence that a collaborative approach between the Catholic Bishop, the local school community, and the local ETB supported the change process. For example, the Bishop played a crucial role in supporting the local community's request to change the school's patronage. He recognised the importance of the community's input and stated that he would support

their wish to reconfigure if they could demonstrate that a majority of the community was in favour of the change. This supportive stance from the Bishop provided the local community with the confidence to move forward with the reconfiguration process and helped to ensure a smooth transition. There was evidence of a strong professional relationship between the patron bodies in this study. They worked collaboratively to support the community and ensured that the process of reconfiguration was as smooth as it could be. However, the lack of guidance from the DE at the time of this reconfiguration was a significant point of challenge for the Catholic patron, particularly in relation to navigating issues of redeployment and transfer of monies.

6. **A clear communications plan and public debate regarding the primary patronage system in the Republic of Ireland:** Participants in this study stated the need for a clear communications plan and public forum regarding the primary patronage system in the Republic of Ireland. It was felt that some of the reluctance by the communities to embrace reconfiguration stemmed from a lack of information about the CNS model and misconceptions surrounding the practical implications of patronage change. It was felt that a clear communication plan from the DE and ETBs would help to ensure that all stakeholders are fully informed about the changes and the reasons behind them, reducing the likelihood of confusion or misunderstanding. Secondly, participants felt that a public forum in the format of a citizen's assembly would provide a space for stakeholders to share their thoughts, concerns, and suggestions regarding reconfiguration and the patronage system more broadly. This would also help to build trust between the GoI, schools, and communities and to ensure that the policy is implemented in a transparent and accountable manner, which

is important for ensuring that the public has confidence in the policy and the institutions responsible for implementing it.

7. **Keeping reconfiguration alive in rural Ireland:** An announcement by the Minister for Education in March 2022 (DE, 2022a) outlined a new pilot process for the policy of reconfiguration. The announcement identified the following areas as locations where the DE will seek to create more school choice by divesting Catholic schools: Arklow, Athlone, Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, Limerick and Youghal. What is immediately noticeable is that all of these areas are urban. This research demonstrates that reconfiguration can also be successful in rural communities and can have a significant impact on creating additional choice for parents in areas where the main provision is Stand Alone Denominational Schools. It will be important that the 'early-movers' provision remains in place in this new phase of reconfiguration, so that rural schools outside the pilot areas can continue to choose to reconfigure. This will ensure that parents in rural Ireland are not forgotten about when it comes to the issue of school choice.

Overall, a detailed analysis of this case study school's reconfiguration process can provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to success or failure. By understanding these lessons and applying them to other reconfiguration processes, schools and their patron bodies can increase their chances of achieving a successful reconfiguration.

6.5 The limitations of the study

While the study gathered rich data on the experience of stakeholders in the 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process', there are nevertheless limitations in the scope of the research. Although the study gathered second-hand accounts indicating that the majority of parents supported the reconfiguration, it must be stated that despite extending an invitation to all parents in the school community to participate in the research, parental voices remain

underrepresented in the study. Children were not consulted as part of the 'SRFDP' and therefore, due to limited time and access to the school as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic, it was decided not to include the voice of the child in this study.

It is important to note that all participants came from similar cultural backgrounds. While participants noted that cultural diversity was evident within the parent and pupil population of the school, no parents who were from cultural minority backgrounds came forward to be interviewed as part of this study. The majority of participants in this study were from the locality or lived within the county the school was based in.

Finally, as alluded to earlier, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 Pandemic, when national travel restriction were in place. The original intention of the researcher was to conduct the semi-structured interviews face-to-face and to spend time in the school in order to fully explore the lived reality of the case study context. However, this was not possible. In an effort to overcome this limitation, the researcher had a number of introductory calls with participants to 'get-to-know' them, before the interview took place. The researcher followed the school's social media pages, which included frequent videos from the classroom and pictures of children's work and activities. These insights allowed the researcher to develop her knowledge of the case study context, however, it should be noted that digital interaction and insights are not a replacement for being there in person.

6.6 Future directions for research

This study is the first study to explore the lived experience of the reconfiguration of a Catholic school in the Republic of Ireland. Since the time of this research, a number of schools have self-selected to reconfigure from a Catholic National School to a Community National School. Of particular note are three live reconfigurations of thriving urban schools in Nenagh, Athlone and Dublin. These additional schools offer the potential to further explore the phenomenon of school reconfiguration.

This research was conducted with stakeholders in one newly reconfigured school. It was a small-scale exploratory study but offers insight into the challenges and benefits of school reconfiguration in rural Ireland. The addition of Nenagh Community National School offers particular opportunity to explore the phenomenon of reconfiguration in an urban setting, where the rationale is perhaps not school closure but rather religious diversity. In order to better support newly reconfigured schools and schools considering reconfiguration, more wide-ranging research into the experiences and perspectives of schools who have gone through the reconfiguration process is required.

A number of participants made reference to the changed experience of children post-reconfiguration, and some offered anecdotes of how children have understood the change in patronage. A similarity that ran through these anecdotes was how children from minority belief backgrounds felt a greater sense of inclusion post-reconfiguration. The researcher believes that how children experience reconfiguration warrants particular investigation. Therefore, the voice of children, particularly those who identify as a minority belief within a denominational school, need to be reflected more closely in the research. Parents and teachers in this research spoke of the positive change in the equality of condition experienced by children post-reconfiguration and the change to the approach to RE experienced by children. At times, participants were very aware of the potential for children to feel marginalised and excluded and at other times, less so. However, regardless of the awareness of the participants to the experiences of children, the voice of the children themselves is essential to fully understanding this experience.

As mentioned earlier, the impact of school reconfiguration on other schools in the locality and on the relationship between local schools was beyond the scope of this study. Participants spoke of rural decline and the competition between small schools to attract enrolments in an effort to remain viable as a school. Participants also stated that new

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enrolments often came from neighbouring villages. Moving forward it will be important to capture the impact of school reconfiguration as a national policy on small denominational schools in rural Ireland. The small Stand Alone School was identified as a central piece of infrastructure in a rural village, and any risk to their continuation warrants investigation. The closure of small denominational schools should not be the collateral damage of a national policy of school reconfiguration.

6.8 Concluding reflection

Undertaking this research has proven to be a challenging endeavour. It has compelled me to self-reflect and confront my own preconceptions and prejudices regarding denominational education and the process of reconfiguration. Consequently, it has been a transformative journey that has fostered personal growth and prompted deep reflection.

At the beginning of this journey, I was heavily influenced by the prevailing narrative in the mainstream media, which depicted a resistant Catholic Church unwilling to move forward with the reconfiguration process. However, Scoil na Carraige presents a contrasting narrative, showcasing a Bishop and clergy who actively support the aspirations of the local community and play a pivotal role in facilitating and championing change. This is not to imply that the Catholic patron and his representatives did not experience a sense of loss. However, there was a distinct acknowledgment of the local school belonging to the community, and a genuine willingness to honour this relationship throughout the entirety of the process. I am struck by McGraw and Tiernan's (2022) observation: "The incredibly strong gravitational pull of local interests and school communities appear to be a driving factor in shaping whether divestment is possible".

When Scoil na Carraige feared closure, nothing could stop these parents and families from keeping their school open, even if it meant changing their patron and ethos. While the reconfiguration was never conceived as a policy for rural Ireland, the accomplishments of

Scoil na Carraige stand as a testament to the potential that reconfiguration holds for small rural schools. A prominent finding throughout this study was the profound esteem and affection bestowed upon the 'local school' in rural Ireland. Therefore, policymakers must give serious consideration to the broader landscape of rural education and devise strategies to empower local schools to continue serving their communities effectively in the future, acknowledging and valuing their significance, and recognising opportunities to provide additional choice of school type in rural Ireland. While McGraw and Tiernan (2022) are critical of the threat of school closure as the motivation for reconfiguration, the post-reconfiguration landscape in Scoil na Carraige demonstrated what the researcher perceived as a genuine commitment to the values inherent within the CNS model.

Scoil na Carraige also serves as a commendable illustration of what can be accomplished when parents embrace a different educational model. The parents at Scoil na Carraige demonstrated a readiness to envision Catholic RE beyond the traditional model within school hours, considering the addition of multi-belief education as an enriched experience for their children rather than a deficit-based model. While one participant from the Catholic patron expressed scepticism regarding the effectiveness of this approach, only time will reveal whether this reimagined RE provision will indeed have a favourable influence on the children's religiosity at Scoil na Carraige.

It is important to recognise the enduring attachment that many parents maintain towards Catholic education, even amid evolving religious practices. Consequently, it becomes crucial to effectively communicate and clearly articulate alternative provisions, instilling confidence in parents that suitable alternatives indeed exist. If reconfiguration is to be the GoI's main policy vehicle for increasing the diversity of school choice at primary level then the journey will be a gradual process that will likely span across decades, demanding patience, perseverance, and concerted efforts from various stakeholders. Incremental

progress, school by school, should be seen as crucial to building trust, understanding, and consensus among all stakeholders involved. While this may disappoint individuals hoping for immediate change, it is crucial to maintain a realistic perspective regarding the current state of the education system and society. To conclude, this journey has imparted valuable lessons, the most challenging being that the realisation of a greater diversity of school type necessitates a long-term perspective. The process of reconfiguration demands sensitivity, perseverance, and an unwavering commitment to fostering an inclusive educational environment that embraces diverse beliefs and values.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Scoil na Carraige, the case study school, for their graciousness in allowing me to capture this transformative period in their school's history. Their remarkable openness and cooperation throughout the research process were invaluable, and I offer my sincere wishes for their ongoing success in the future. To all of the research participants, go raibh míle maith agaibh agus beannacht Dé oraibh!

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Appendices

Appendix A: List of databases used and search term examples

Databases:

Dublin City University Library Search
ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)
JSTOR
EBSCO
Taylor and Francis
SAGE Journals Online
Science Direct
Wiley Online Library
ResearchGate
Google Scholar Advanced Search

Search term examples:

Concept	Keywords/ search terms

School Reconfiguration	School divestment
	Ethos change
	Change of ethos
	Transformation
	    School patronage in Ireland
	    Primary school patronage
	    Changing school patronage
	    Catholic school patronage
	    Church of Ireland school patronage
	    Multi-denominational school patronage
	    Gaelscoileanna (Irish language school patronage)
	    Educate Together school patronage
	Department of Education and Skills patronage

Ethos	Characteristic spirit
	    School culture
	    School values
	    School philosophy
	    School climate
	School atmosphere

Equality	Educational equity
	    Equal access to education
	    Inclusive education
	    Educational opportunities for all
	    Equity in school funding

	Culturally responsive teaching/ leadership Diversity in education
Inclusion	Inclusive classroom Inclusive schools Inclusion and diversity in education
Rural identity	Rural culture Rural traditions Rural lifestyle Rural community Rural schools Stand Alone Schools in Ireland Small schools in Ireland
School choice	Parental choice School admissions in Ireland Primary school choice in Ireland School enrolment policies in Ireland Catholic schools in Ireland Multi-denominational schools in Ireland Gaelscoileanna (Irish language schools) Educate Together schools
Religious Education	Religious education curriculum Ireland Catholic religious education in Ireland Multi-denominational religious education Religious education and diversity Religious education teacher training Religious education in primary schools Religious education and inclusion in Ireland Grow in Love programme Goodness Me, Goodness You!

Appendix B: Interview schedules

Individual Interview Schedule for teacher and principal
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
My name is Jacinta Regan, and I am currently undertaking doctoral research under the supervision of Associate Professor Jones Irwin (School of Human Development) and Dr Zita Lysaght, (School of Policy and Practice), DCU. I am a primary school teacher in a Community National School, currently seconded as an Education Officer for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The title of my research is: *The 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'; a case study of one reconfigured primary school in the Republic of Ireland'.* Today, I would like to talk to you about your own lived experience of the reconfiguration process. 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.

Please note the interview will be conducted in English.

1. Tell me about the school before it reconfigured and your role in the school?
2. Describe the ethos of the school pre-reconfiguration.
3. Why do you think the school considered reconfiguration?
4. Were you involved in the decision- making process? If so, how?
5. When was the final decision to reconfigure made?
6. How did you feel about the decision to reconfigure?
7. Did you have any initial concerns?
8. What communication did you have with the old and new patrons about reconfiguration?
9. Were you offered the opportunity to be redeployed if you did not want to work in the newly reconfigured school?
10. Why do you think the CNS model was chosen as opposed to other multi-denominational models?
11. Tell me about reopening as a CNS?
12. Were there immediate changes?
13. Were there changes to the physical environment of the school?
14. Were there changes to the curriculum?
15. Were there changes to school policies?
16. How did you feel about these?
17. Did you encounter challenges initially?
18. Tell me about the process of transition?
19. What supports did you receive from your new patron to help with the transition?
20. How do you understand the ethos of the CNS?
21. How is this ethos negotiated, transmitted and sustained in the school?
22. How was ethos mediated during the reconfiguration process?
23. What happens when a conflict of values/ ethos occurs?
24. Have you encountered challenges in relation to the new ethos?
25. How do you feel about the change?
26. What is the role of parents in the reconfiguration process?
27. Do you think parents are happy with the change?
28. Has the school benefited from the change? If so, how?
29. Are there parts of the old ethos you miss? Why?
30. What supports are provided by the ETB as patron of the school?
31. How do you think pupils feel about the change of ethos?
32. What are your hopes for the future of the school?
33. What would you say to other schools who are considering making this change?

Individual Interview Schedule for parents

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

My name is Jacinta Regan, and I am currently undertaking doctoral research under the supervision of Associate Professor Jones Irwin (School of Human Development) and Dr Zita Lysaght, (School of Policy and Practice), DCU. I am a primary school teacher in a Community National School, currently seconded as an Education Officer for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The title of my research is: *The 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'; a case study of one reconfigured primary school in the Republic of Ireland'.* Today, I would like to talk to you about your own lived experience of the reconfiguration process. 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.

Please note the interview will be conducted in English.
Sample semi-structured interview questions

1. Tell me about the school.
2. How long have your children attended the school?
3. Tell me about the ethos of the school before it reconfigured.
4. What do you know about the 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'?
5. Why do you think the school changed to a CNS?
6. Were you involved in the decision-making process?
7. Were you happy with the decision to reconfigure?
8. Did you have any concerns about the reconfiguration?
9. Tell me about some of the changes you noticed straight away?
10. What are your understandings of the new ethos?
11. What values are promoted in the school? Have these changed alongside the reconfiguration?
12. How has this been communicated to you?
13. What is your role as a parent in relation to this new ethos?
14. In your opinion, has the change been successful?
15. How do you feel about the change now?
16. Are your children happy with the change, do they notice a difference?
17. What are your hopes for the school in the future?
18. Would you recommend this process to other parents?

Individual Interview Schedule for patron Representatives (ETB/ETBI)

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

My name is Jacinta Regan, and I am currently undertaking doctoral research under the supervision of Associate Professor Jones Irwin (School of Human Development) and Dr Zita Lysaght, (School of Policy and Practice), DCU. I am a primary school teacher in a Community National School, currently seconded as an Education Officer for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The title of my research is: *The 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'; a case study of one reconfigured primary school in the Republic of Ireland'.* Today, I would like to talk to you about your own lived experience of the reconfiguration process. 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.

- What is your understanding of the 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'?
- Tell me about the role of the ETBI in relation to school reconfiguration.
- Tell me about your role in relation to the reconfiguration of the case study school.
- What are the challenges of reconfiguration?
- What are the benefits of reconfiguration to the school and more broadly to the education system?

- The case study school self-elected to reconfigure. How is this different to schools who are chosen to reconfigure by their patron?
- What consultation/ negotiation occurs between the existing patron and the proposed new patron?
- How are schools supported in making the decision to change patronage?
- How is the characteristic spirit of the Community National School understood by ETBI and explained to perspective schools?
- Has it been your experience that this characteristic spirit is appealing to schools/ parents?
- What are the changes required in order for the reconfiguration to take place?
- Are there non-negotiable aspects of reconfiguration?
- How are the old and new values mediated during the reconfiguration process?
- What supports are provided by the ETBI to the newly reconfigured school?
- How are schools support in interpreting, transmitting and sustaining the change in characteristic spirit?
- Have any challenges arisen?
- What are your hopes for CNS in the future?
- To date the reconfiguration process has been slow to progress. Why do you think that is?
- Do you think the reconfiguration process will meet its target of 400 schools by 2030?
- Do you think school choice is important? Why?

Individual Interview Schedule for patron Representatives (Parish Priest and member of the Bishop's office)
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
My name is Jacinta Regan, and I am currently undertaking doctoral research under the supervision of Associate Professor Jones Irwin (School of Human Development) and Dr Zita Lysaght, (School of Policy and Practice), DCU. I am a primary school teacher in a Community National School, currently seconded as an Education Officer for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The title of my research is: *The 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'; a case study of one reconfigured primary school in the Republic of Ireland'.* Today, I would like to talk to you about your own lived experience of the reconfiguration process. 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.

Member of the local Bishop's office:
- What are the defining features of a Catholic primary school in Ireland?
- Tell me about your role in the reconfiguration of the case study school.
- Why do you think the school reconfigured to a Community National School as opposed to another multi-denominational model?
- From your experience, what challenges and advantages are presented by school reconfiguration?
- Progress to date in relation to reconfiguration has been slow, why do you think this has been the case?

Parish Priest:
- Tell me about the case study school and your relationship to the school before it reconfigured.
- Tell me about the school's ethos before it reconfigured.
- Tell me about why the school decided to reconfigure and how the idea came about.
- Was everyone in agreement, or were there concerns about the change in ethos? If so, how was this negotiated and a consensus reached?
- How did you feel about the change? Were you saddened to see the school change from a Catholic ethos?
- Did you feel like you had a voice in the decision?
- Tell me about what happened once the community decided to go down the school reconfiguration route?
- Why did the school choose the Community National School model (CNS)?
- What is your understanding of the CNS ethos?
- Did any challenges arise during reconfiguration?
- What is your relationship to the school now? How has it changed?
- What are your hopes for the future of the school?
- What advice would you give to other schools who are thinking about school reconfiguration?

- To date, not many schools have reconfigured. Why do you think this is the case?
- Catholic schools have been an important part of the Irish education system since it began, do you think this will change? Do you think it should?

Appendix C: Example of coding during data analysis

Sacraments taking away from curriculum time

Well it's the time that it takes to prepare for sacraments. And it's the time when you're trying to get your year wrapped up and they just take up a lot of time, and I don't feel that it's beneficial to takes away from a lot of curriculum time.

R: So it's fair to say, you weren't really there for the early part of the reconfiguration process?

No, I was in the background but I wasn't involved in it. I was employed in another school at the time and I was calling here for five hours a week to do the Irish language support. So I wasn't involved in the process. Now I heard about it, and I was in the know with certain things, but no, I wasn't involved in the process.

R: Okay, that's fine, so when you started in your post did you feel confident going into teaching in a multi-denominational school or were you a bit apprehensive because your experience had only been in denomination education?

I suppose, I didn't really think twice about it to be honest. I was excited, in a way, the fact that this is something new, something innovative for the area and I was a part of it. I suppose I wasn't really apprehensive at all. You know it's the same curriculum. Just taking out the 2.5 hours a week of Grow In Love and you switch it with GMGY. So apart from GMGY it's the same thing. And I didn't mind that because GMGY is a much nicer, friendlier and educational way to spend that time in my in my view.

What about how ethos impacts other orcs?

* GMGY [

R: We might delve a bit deeper into that piece and actually talk about the differences between the two approaches. So obviously, in the Growing in Love, you're responsible for providing faith formation inside the school day. Whereas, you're in a very different position in the GMGY curriculum, you're kind of taking more of a facilitatory role and your also expected to teach beyond religion, for examples values education? So could you talk to me about your experience of that?

GMGY

Catholic ethos

Catholic ethos exclusion

Well we're still just rolling it out here to be honest, but at the same time the main difference I can see is the fact that it's a way more open approach, it's just a way more open thing. The children are free to discuss their family background with the family projects and, you know they're free. They're not inhibited by their difference. I found in the Catholic school, if there was a there was a Church of Ireland child in front of you. That would be something that we would not talk about. It was something that would not be mentioned. We won't talk about that. We won't mention the fact that this child is different. We just we won't focus at all on it. We'll just keep that quiet and we'll just focus on our Grow In Love. And even that like, the Grow In Love programme, it was monotheist. We're not allowed even talk about polytheistic religions. When you're talking about other religions you're only allowed to focus on monotheist religions. There could be Hindu children in front of you, there could be Children from a Buddhist background or anything like that, but they're not allowed to be acknowledged. You can only look at Christianity and Islam and Judaism. And they're the only three belief systems that are acknowledged. And I just think it's very insular. And, just the training that I received for it when I was working in the Catholic school. And don't get me wrong, I was in a great school. But the training we received from the diocese I was based in

equality ethos

Appendix D: Clustering of codes during data analysis

Catholic Ethos ll
Teacher identity
Grow in Love l / faith formation
Sacraments llll
Prayer
Religious identity
Tradition l
Religion
Equality lll (barriers)
CNS Ethos / multi-denominational ll
Family Projects ll
Beliefs + Religions l
GMGY l
Role of teacher
Child led
Thinking Time
Values education
Changing religious practice
Governance
State school
Irish Language
Irish school
Church + school relationship
Redeployment
Role of parents

Catholic Ethos

Grow in Love (faith formation / role of teacher / issues of inclusion)

Sacramental Education (cultural v religious / role of parents / change of provision)

Ethos tensions (diversity / inclusion / teacher identity / grey areas)

GMGY (Family project / Religions + Beliefs / Role of teacher / Child-led) Approach to

CNS Ethos (multi-d / State school / GMGY / equality)

Language + ethos (Irish Language)

Understandings of ethos (positivist / anti-positivist / role of patron)

272

Appendix E: Thematic maps – Stages 3-5 of data analysis

Stage 3 Thematic Map – Ethos
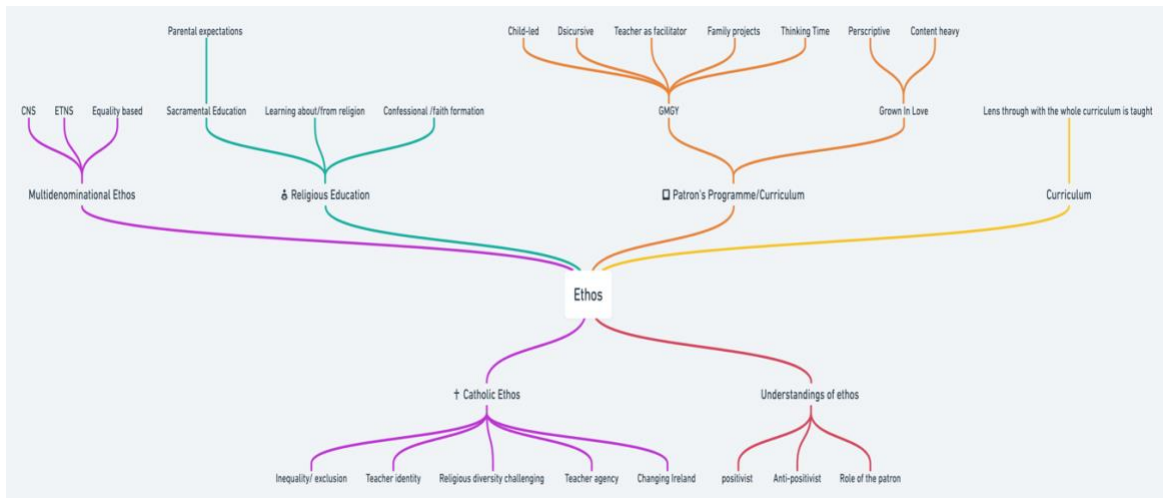
Stage 5 Thematic Map – Ethos
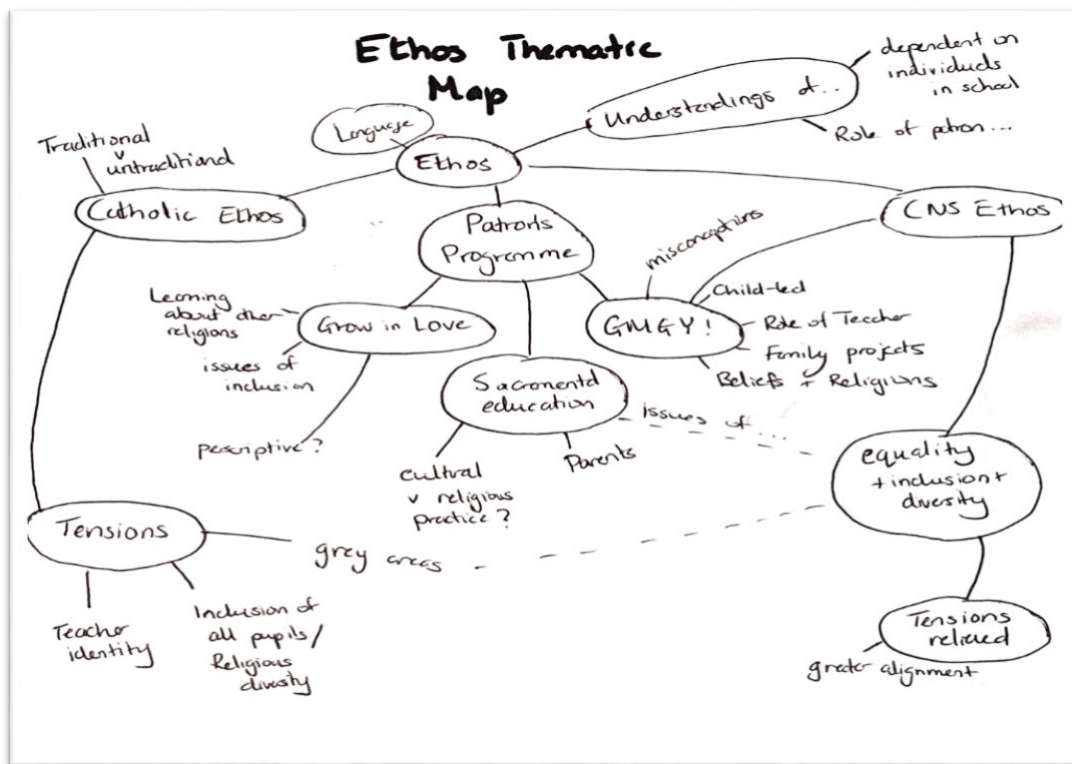
Appendix F: Chronological map of data excerpts

Themes and subordinate themes - iteration 2

Themes	Subordinate themes
Ethos	· Understandings of ethos · Ethos tensions · Changing the patron's programme – from denominational to multi-denominational education

Theme 1 – Ethos
Sub theme 1 – Understandings of ethos

Pre reconfiguration	During reconfiguration	Post-reconfiguration
Catholic ethos – understandings of the Catholic ethos in rural schools – declining, but at a slower pace *Plurality within sectors – some schools more Catholic than others* *Lack of choice for teachers in employment – working in an ethos that is misaligned with personal values* *Conceptual understanding of ethos - constructed by the actors within the school (ground up approach)*	*Ethos understood and discussed along religious lines – negotiation of ethos change centered around the question of religion* *Attempt to broaden understandings made by ETB/ ETBI – e.g. excellence in education, care, equality – moving beyond denominational and multi-denominational* *Primary concern of parents is religious education and how that changes post-reconfiguration*	*Multi-denominational ethos – focus largely on Religious Education as opposed to broader conceptualization of ethos.* *Recognition that ethos can change but this takes considerable time and buy-in from actors (staff) within the school* *No change in the conceptual understanding, but greater alignment between personal values and values of the patron* *Pose question – when this greater alignment is achieved, what does this mean for ethos – transition to next theme on ethos tensions.*

Supporting quotation for sub theme 1

Pre-reconfiguration	During reconfiguration	Post-reconfiguration
So I developed a guidance document called 'Becoming a Community National School: A Step-by-step Guide', which outlined a path or process, very much inspired by the process of Northern Ireland for integrated schools,	A lot of consultation happened with each of these schools in the country in post primary and primary, again to clarify what should be the agreed the ethos and core values of each of these.	We've made the case that for this to be a genuine process, and not just a branding exercise, that it means time and space for critical reflection on what aspects of the ethos that they have, that they want to keep that are in line with the new ethos and what aspect that they have to change. Not just the teachers in the school but there's a hope there to lead the whole school community through that process so that everybody buys into the new ethos really meaningfully lives that out. I think the cost neutrality aspect of this is naive because it does take time and effort. No initiative can work without resources and time being put into it.
We've spent a lot of time since then discussing and exploring and expressing our core values and characteristic spirit.	The title Community National School, it is nothing about the community. It's based-- it's a National Community School. It's not community. If the local community decided, "Everyone here is Catholic. We would like the Catholic faith to be taught," they couldn't do it.	We now define ourselves as multi-denominational, co-educational state schools with five clear core values of respect, care, community, excellence in education and equality. We're working all the time to make sure that everybody in our sector fully understands that and fully embraces that spirit in the primary and in the post-primary schools. That's what we have to bring to this context, where we can provide for equality. We can provide multi-denominational education for all children, and for families of all beliefs we provide that choice.

there would have been the symbolism up on the walls and stuff. But the school would have catered for all different types of children and families. It was always open to people with different values and different beliefs, but it would still have been a Catholic school. The Grow in Love programme was being taught. But it wouldn't have been an overly Catholic school. But at the same time, you would have known. Yeah, definitely. The sacraments were being prepared and stuff.	It was really clear that the CNS were open to all religions and none, you know. With some of the other models, I suppose, and they seem to be more non-religious, you know, whereas this one was like, welcoming to everybody and it would celebrate everybody's beliefs.	The biggest differences were around being multi-denominational and equality based as we understand it, rather than Catholic. That there is an equality element to it which as we would have said, I'm sure as teachers, and as a school, that you are as equality-based and inclusive as possible, but that there are structural things in a denominational school that aren't inequality based. For example, the fact that they have a patron's curriculum and ethos that really do cater for one group and exclude others, rather than one that assumes an equality of esteem for all. That would be a transformative shift in the thinking of a school. [...] My understanding was that they really wanted a difference in ethos from other Catholic schools in the area. We had to be very clear and honest about what those differences are because they had to buy into those to be able to sell themselves on those differences. If they weren't going to buy into them, then they weren't going to really want to achieve that change for that school.
Nearly all of those who were who in the 5th and 6th classes, who were Catholics, they all became mass-servers, you know, and just loved it. There's a whole lovely, lovely relationship, you know, that you get to have when you work with a school	People were afraid that by changing from a Catholic ethos that God was going to be taken out of the school. But the parish were to step up and provide religion classes outside of school. But, a lot of the kids in our school, their parents wouldn't be religious and don't align themselves with any church. And there's people of different faiths from different nationalities. So while the majority faith is Catholic, we actually have a lot who wouldn't be practicing or are non-religious.	I think the culture of the school that would have been here before that was created by the principal was one that was open and that has carried through. The main priority here is to make sure the children are happy in school. That is the main thing. There's no shouting or screaming in this school. The children are looked after very well here. There is an easy-going atmosphere for children to learn in. So, I suppose, the parents were happy with that before and they're happy with it now.
I would always say that the local school is a very, very important part of the ministry for the local priest. Just going in, showing a presence, you know, never asking them whether they go to church or anything like that, but just getting to know them and then allowing them to get to know me	That's the local element of it. I think that's one of the important bits. It isn't so much the doctrinal or the theoretical thing about ethos, it's the local parish and the element to that, that's linked in, which I think is very important. As well as of course, the patron's programme that is probably from the national level, that's where the Patrons would have probably a bigger issue with this. They supply that programme that is running the school.	**Interviewer: At the minute, do you think the Catholic ethos is being diluted somewhat to make it appear more inclusive? Interviewee:** I think it is. Yes. I think we're trying to be all things to all people, and it doesn't work. I think we should be clear in saying that we're Catholic, and that's it and if that is not for you then perhaps a non-faith school would be better for you.

Appendix G: Ethical approval

Jacinta Regan
School of Human Development

Assoc. Prof Jones Irwin
School of Human Development

Dr. Zita Lysaght
School of Policy and Practice

26th February 2021

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2021/027**

Proposal Title: **The 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'; a case study of one reconfigured primary school in the Republic of Ireland**

Applicant(s):   **Jacinta Regan, Assoc. Prof Jones Irwin, Dr. Zita Lysaght**

Dear Colleagues,

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,

Dr Geraldine Scanlon
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

Appendix H: Plain language statement for parent participants

Plain Language Statement for Participants

The Researchers: Jacinta Regan (Doctoral Student), Associate Professor Jones Irwin (Supervisor) and Dr Zita Lysaght (Supervisor)

About the researcher
My name is Jacinta Regan, and I am currently undertaking doctoral research under the supervision of Associate Professor Jones Irwin (School of Human Development) and Dr Zita Lysaght, (School of Policy and Practice), DCU. I am a primary school teacher in a Community National School, currently seconded as an Education Officer for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

What is the research about? Why is the research being conducted?
The title of my research is: *The 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'; a case study of one reconfigured primary school in the Republic of Ireland'.* The research aims to investigate the experiences and understandings of stakeholders in the 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'. School reconfiguration is a new phenomenon in the Republic of Ireland, there is no existing research on the topic. As pioneers in the 'School reconfiguration for diversity process', your 'early-mover' school offers a unique insight into the process of reconfiguration. The reconfiguration of schools is a seminal moment of change in the history of Irish education and the first-hand accounts of those directly involved in the process will be valuable in understanding this transformation. Through qualitative semi-structured interviews, reflexive photography and document analysis, this research hopes to capture the lived experience of school reconfiguration and the understandings of ethos that emerge from it.

What does participation in this study involve?
You will be required to take part in one semi-structured interview, approximately half an hour in duration. The researcher will adhere to all health advice pertaining to COVID-19, therefore the interviews will take place online, using Zoom. When the findings of the research have been drafted, a copy will be sent to you to ensure that any data from your interview has been interpreted correctly by the researcher (this process is commonly referred to as member-checking).

What are the benefits and risks involved in taking part?
The overall aim of this doctoral research is to investigate the experiences and understandings of stakeholders in the 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process' in one case study site. Taking part in this project will ensure this seminal moment in the history of Irish education is authentically documented from the perspective of patron's, school leaders, teachers and parents. It is hoped that participation will also support the Education and Training Boards of Ireland in developing research informed supports for reconfigured schools. We have determined that the risk involved in taking part is low; while a time investment is involved in this project, it does not broach sensitive or potentially upsetting topics. Consent will be acquired from all participants, as well as the Board of Management of the School, before commencing the project.

How will privacy be protected?
Data Protection/Privacy Notice (Personal Data – GDPR Compliance)
Data will be protected within the legal limitations of data confidentiality. Data will be available only to the researcher (Jacinta Regan) and her supervisors (Assoc. Prof Jones Irwin and Dr Zita Lysaght). Copies of data will be saved in a password protected folder on the researchers DCU Google Drive, which will be accessed by her through a password-protected laptop in a locked office of the researchers. Personal data (such as names) will not be linked with these data. All records and data will be disposed of appropriately after a period of 5 years, in accordance with DCU Data Protection Policies. Data collected from this study will be included in a doctoral thesis and may inform future publications in academic journals and presentations at conference proceedings.

The storage and maintenance of the data will be in line with best practice guidance on GDPR. For the purpose of this project, DCU is the data controller and Jacinta Regan is the data processor. To access your personal data, or if you have further questions in relation to data protection please contact the DCU Data Protection Officer – Mr. Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie Ph: 7005118 / 7008257). If at any point you feel that there has been a breach of your general data protection rights, you have the right to lodge a complaint with the Irish Data Protection Commission. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you elect to discontinue participation, any information already collected will be discarded. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or penalty. If you wish to withdraw your consent, please contact the primary researcher, Jacinta Regan.

Further information and Research Findings
If you agree to participate in the study, you will learn about ongoing findings as part of the project. You will also be provided with a summary of overall findings at the completion of the project.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this information. The researchers and DCU research ethics committee may be contacted using the details below.

Jacinta Regan (EdD Student, Researcher)
Email: Jacinta.regan4@mail.dcu.ie
Assoc. Prof. Jones Irwin (Research Supervisor)
Email: jones.irwin@dcu.ie
Dr. Zita Lysaght (Research Supervisor)
Email: zita.lysaght@dcu.ie

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:
The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, E-mail rec@dcu.ie

Appendix I: Informed consent form for participants

DCU

School of Human Development
Institute of Education, Dublin City University

Informed Consent Form for Participants

Research Study Title: *The 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'; a case study of one reconfigured primary school in the Republic of Ireland*

Researchers: Jacinta Regan (Doctoral Student), Associate Professor Jones Irwin (Supervisor) and Dr Zita Lysaght (Supervisor)

Guidelines for participation
This research is being carried out to investigate the experiences and understandings of stakeholders in the 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process' in one case study site. In order to take part in the study, you will take part in one 30 minutes/ 1-hour semi-structured interview with the doctoral researcher (at a mutually agreeable date and time) and one shorter follow up interview for clarification of responses, if required.

Data Protection
I am aware that the data controller for this study is Dublin City University (DCU) and the data processer is the researcher, Jacinta Regan. I am aware that data will be available only to the researcher (Jacinta Regan) and her supervisors (Assoc. Prof Jones Irwin and Dr Zita Lysaght). I know that copies of data will be saved on password-protected PCs in the locked office/workplace of the researchers. Personal data (such as names) will not be linked with these data. I have been informed that all records and data will be disposed of appropriately after a period of 5 years. I know that data collected from this study will be included in a doctoral thesis and may inform future publications in academic journals and presentations at conference proceedings.

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.

Confirmation about confidentiality
I am aware that in the reporting of findings, all names will be replaced with pseudonyms (fictitious names) and that data that could potentially lead to identification of the school/participants will be omitted or anonymised. I know that while every effort will be made to anonymise the study, anonymity cannot be guaranteed. I know that confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

Please indicate your responses to the following statements by circling either Yes or No

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	Yes / No
I understand the information provided	Yes / No
I understand the information provided in relation to data protection	Yes / No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	Yes / No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	Yes / No
I am aware that my interview will be recorded	Yes / No

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participants Signature:

Name in Block Capitals:

Witness:

Date:

Appendix J: Letter to Board of Management of case study school seeking permission to

undertake the research

School of Human Development
Institute of Education, Dublin City University

Dear Chairperson of the Board of Management,

My name is Jacinta Regan, and I am currently undertaking doctoral research under the supervision of Associate Professor Jones Irwin (School of Human Development) and Dr Zita Lysaght, (School of Policy and Practice), DCU. I am a primary school teacher in a Community National School, currently seconded as an Education Officer for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

The title of my research is: *The 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'; a case study of one reconfigured primary school in the Republic of Ireland'.* The research aims to investigate the experiences and understandings of stakeholders in the 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process'. School reconfiguration is a new phenomenon in the Republic of Ireland, there is no existing research on the topic. As pioneers in the 'School reconfiguration for diversity process', your 'early-mover' school offers a unique insight into the process of reconfiguration. The reconfiguration of schools is a seminal moment of change in the history of Irish education and the first-hand accounts of those directly involved in the process will be valuable in understanding this transformation. Through qualitative semi-structured interviews, this research hopes to capture the lived experience of school reconfiguration and the understandings of ethos that emerge from it.

I am writing to you today to seek permission to conduct my research in X. If the school agrees to participate, the teachers in your school would be asked to take part in one semi-structured interview, approximately 1 hour in duration and if necessary, one follow-up semi-structured interview of shorter duration, which will provide the researcher with further clarification.

The researcher will adhere to all health advice pertaining to COVID-19, therefore the interviews will take place over the phone or online (e.g. using Zoom). When the findings of the research have been drafted, a copy will be sent to you to ensure that any data from your interview has been interpreted correctly by the researcher (this process is commonly referred to as member-checking).

What are the benefits and risks involved in taking part?
The overall aim of this doctoral research is to investigate the experiences and understandings of stakeholders in the 'School Reconfiguration for Diversity Process' in one case study site. Taking part in this project will ensure this seminal moment in the history of Irish education is authentically documented from the perspective of patron's, school leaders, teachers and parents. It is hoped that participation will also support the Education and Training Boards of Ireland in developing research informed supports for reconfigured schools. We have determined that the risk involved in taking part is low; while a time investment is involved in this project, it does not broach sensitive or potentially upsetting topics. Consent will be acquired from all participants.

How will privacy be protected?

It is important to note that while anonymity is endeavoured towards it cannot be guaranteed. The use of a case study methodology poses particular challenges in relation to anonymity, particularly when the case study involves a small number of participants and the phenomenon under investigation is limited to a small community, as is the case in this study. To protect your privacy, in the reporting of findings, all names will be replaced with pseudonyms (fictitious names). The name of the school and the area/location it is based within will not be published. Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

Data Protection/Privacy Notice (Personal Data – GDPR Compliance)

Data will be protected within the legal limitations of data confidentiality. Data will be available only to the researcher (Jacinta Regan) and her supervisors (Assoc. Prof Jones Irwin and Dr Zita Lysaght). Copies of data will be saved on password-protected PCs in the locked office/workplace of the researchers. Personal data (such as names) will not be linked with these data. All records and data will be disposed of appropriately after a period of 5 years, in accordance with DCU Data Protection Policies. Data collected from this study will be included in a doctoral thesis and may inform future publications in academic journals and presentations at conference proceedings. The storage and maintenance of the data will be in line with best practice guidance on GDPR. For the purpose of this project, DCU is the data controller and Jacinta Regan is the data processor. The school's participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you elect to discontinue participation, any information already collected will be discarded. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or penalty.

Further information and Research Findings

If you agree to participate in the study, you will learn about ongoing findings as part of the project. You will also be provided with a summary of overall findings at the completion of the project. Thank you for taking the time to consider this information.

Kind regards,

Jacinta Regan

Appendix K: Timeline for the 'Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity Process' in Case Study School

The timeline was developed by the researcher based on the accounts of the research participants in this study. It assisted in the arrangement of data in Chapter Five in a chronological sequence.

```
┌──────────────┐
│ Parent group │
│ established  │
└──────────────┘
      ↓
   ┌──────────────┐
   │ Permission   │
   │ sough from   │
   │ Bishop       │
   └──────────────┘
         ↓
      ┌──────────────┐
      │ Listening to │
      │ the          │
      │ community    │
      └──────────────┘
            ↓
         ┌──────────────┐
         │ Final decision│
         │ of the Bishop │
         └──────────────┘
               ↓
            ┌──────────────┐
            │ Notifying the│
            │ Department of│
            │ Education    │
            └──────────────┘
                  ↓
               ┌──────────────┐
               │ Negotiations │
               └──────────────┘
                     ↓
                  ┌──────────────┐
                  │ Opening as a │
                  │ CNS          │
                  └──────────────┘
                        ↓
                     ┌──────────────┐
                     │ Navigating   │
                     │ the change   │
                     └──────────────┘
```
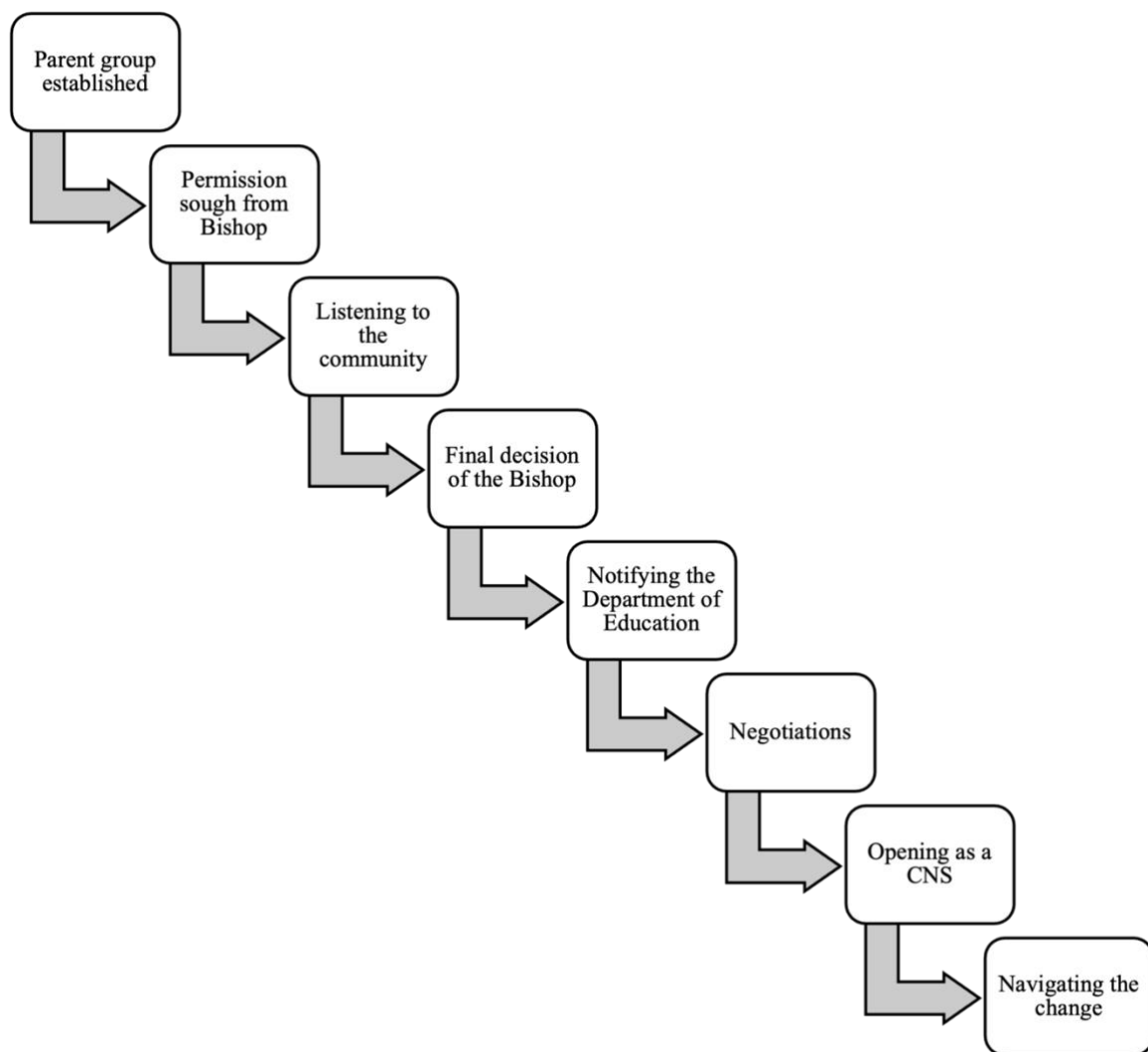
Appendix L: Full transcript for Méabh

1 **Tell me about the school before it reconfigured and your role in it.**

2 Okay, so before it was reconfigured, the Catholic Church was our patron. So, we were a Catholic

3 school. Ya, a small little catholic school as such. And my role was vice principal or the second

4 teacher in the school.

5 **Okay. Could you kind of give me an insight as to what it means to be a Catholic school in**

6 **Ireland?**

7 So, the impact on our children and on our kind of daily activities and the school would have been that,

8 uh, we use the 'Grow In Love' programme to teach the Catholic faith inside the school day. And the

9 children would have made their sacraments through the school so they would have made their

10 communion and their confirmation through school as well. And they would have daily lessons in the

11 Catholic religion, inside in the classroom as well and prayer was a part of the school day.

12 **And for a teacher does that that have any particular significance? So, when you were being**

13 **hired, you know, was there something that you needed or was the fact that it was a Catholic**

14 **school part of your consideration for taking the job?**

15 Um well, it wasn't a huge consideration for me applying to the school as such. I didn't apply because it

16 was Catholic school. In the process of interviewing, there were some questions in my interview that

17 related to it being a Catholic school, for example my view on the religion curriculum that was being

18 used, which would have been the old curriculum that was there beforehand. There was a bit of

19 training when I attended Hibernia as a post grad student, when I was training to become a primary

20 school teacher. And I did receive a certificate at the end that you had to completed in order for you to

21 be able to teach in a Catholic school as well.

22 **Okay, so tell me about how the idea of reconfiguration came about?**

23 The idea of the reconfiguration came about because we had a community meeting about how we

24 could increase the numbers in the school. So this was just one of our ideas that came about, um and it

25 was probably the biggest undertaking out of all the ideas that we did have, in that it was going to

26 change our patron. Obviously to reconfigure the school then as well, we were looking at how we can

27 entice people to us. We had to ask the questions 'What makes us different?' 'What makes us

28   interesting?' and 'What could give more choice in a very small rural community like ours?' The

29   population is quite low and we have quite a lot of Catholic primary schools in an area that the

30   population isn't that high in. So it was just about giving people a choice as well. And, um, that was

31   kind of one of the main reasons that we choose to go down this route, that we were trying to offer

32   something different.

33   **Okay. And it would have been fair to say that your numbers were declining. So that was**

34   **probably the main driver for even considering change at all?**

35   Yes, it was a change at all, in any way, shape or form. Whether it was reconfiguration or anything

36   else, change had to happen in order for us to start getting new enrolments to increase our numbers

37   inside in the school and to maintain the school, it was vital that we did something drastic, but in in a

38   positive light. But we needed to do something drastic in order for us to change the pattern that was

39   happening.

40   **So, it would be fair to say that there was no issue with the Catholic ethos. You were happy as a**

41   **Catholic school. It was other factors that were the drivers for change.**

42   Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

43   **Okay. Perfect. So, it sounds like you were involved in the whole process, but I'm wondering how**

44   **did you come to the conclusion that okay, yes, we are going to reconfigure?**

45   Yeah. So, the first conversation that even happened about reconfiguration was two parents from the

46   school approached me and we discussed it. So, we decided that we were going to meet with the CEO

47   of the local ETB. They came down and we had a meeting. So, there was four of us all together in that

48   meeting, and he just explained what the ETB was and what it meant to be a Community National

49   School. That we would be state run, that it was going to be directly under the Department of

50   Education. And what the whole kind of look would be for the school. So, when we then had that

51   information, um, it was a conversation then for the Board of Management. There was four kind of

52   main groups; there was the Board of Management; the current and future parents; the staff and the

53   community. So, after we'd kind of discuss this as a board, then we opened it out. Then we had

54   community meetings about it and the ETB came down. And they did talks with us as a whole

55   community, which was open to everyone to come, whether they had a connection with the school or

56 not. So, it was very open, very transparent. And they [the ETB] came down and discussed that with us

57 after we had all these meetings and questions were asked and answered and everything else. And then

58 it came to a point where we ended up having a vote, to see whether there was a majority in favour of

59 this, or against it. So, each of those four groups were given the opportunity to come on a particular

60 day to vote whether they were in favour or against it, and it was a private vote.

61 **Okay, so it sounds like it was a really democratic process**?

62 Yeah, it was. It was. It wasn't rushed through. I think the whole process took about a year and a half

63 until we were officially transferred. Um, so the process was quite lengthy. But in saying that, I think it

64 could have taken longer, do you know? So, we could have drawn it out longer, but it was in our

65 benefit to have it completed before the new school year as well. So that was kind of one of our drivers

66 as well. We thought it would be better to start the school year with our new patron.

67 **And obviously, I'm sure there were people who are probably against it, and maybe a bit fearful**

68 **of the change, because the local Catholic school is something that's so part of the tradition of an**

69 **area. Did you meet any opposition and if you did, how did you bring people with you?**

70 We did meet opposition. From the outset there was an awful lot of positive support for this, amongst

71 the community and with our parents as well. Um, but of course, there was opposition as well. With

72 any change, anything new, you know, there will be opposition. And particularly in a small community

73 like this where there wouldn't be major massive changes. So yeah, of course we did. We came up

74 against a lot of questions. Questions that ETB were very happy to answer as they've come up... Um, I

75 was going to say against, but I don't mean against, but they've had the same issues with other

76 communities as well, and people have questions naturally. And so those questions were answered.

77 The main area that people seemed to have the issue with was the religious aspect. Um, there's a lot

78 more involved in being a community national school and transferring patronage, then just the

79 religious aspect. But that was where people did hone in on. And this was the biggest bone of

80 contention for us was trying to answer these questions. Um, I wasn't able to answer them from the

81 outset either, because we were all learning. Like all of us were learning together. So, we were all

82 learning from the ETB about what it meant to be a CNS.

83 **And is it fair to say that whatever the ETB said in response to those questions soothed some of**

84 **those concerns because the vote obviously went in favour of changing to a CNS?**

85 Oh, there was. There was a huge majority in favour. And, um, there were a few who obviously were

86 between two minds, and that's fine. That's natural. There was no issue with that. Uh, but when it was

87 explained then as to how it was going to benefit the school, the children, us, in general, as a

88 community, the staff, everything, then they kind of understood that it wasn't a case of getting rid of

89 the Catholic faith, do you know? And I think that's where people really struggled with that. It was

90 like, but why would you take away the religion as opposed to why would you invite children of all

91 beliefs and none? Do you know? And it was just that understanding of equality that we needed to

92 understand, as opposed to the argument that we were driving one religion out.

93 **Yeah, and one of the parents mentioned in her interview that there was an agreement that there**

94 **would be provision made after school but inside the school building for Catholic children to**

95 **receive education in their faith?**

96 Yeah, and it was really explained very well to us that the children and their families who did wish to

97 continue with their sacraments, that this would be provided. And it was agreed with the parish as well

98 that this was going to be provided for these children. So, at the minute they are doing zoom classes

99 every week. So, they still have their faith formation there. Sacramental preparation through the parish.

100 So, they're still being provided for. And I think this was explained in depth. It's just some people just

101 didn't want to have that. They just didn't want that as a choice. They wanted it to remain within the

102 school day as opposed to it being outside of the school day. But the majority were wholeheartedly in

103 favour of this.

104 **Yeah, okay. And I suppose when it's up and running now, do you think that people who might**

105 **not have been sure about it can see now that this model actually does work as well?**

106 Yeah, it does. It works fantastically well.

107 **As the principal, how did you feel about the school reconfiguring? Because the principal is**

108 **probably the person who ends up carrying most of the weight of the change. So how did you**

109 **personally feel about it?**

110   Honestly, excited. Really excited about this. We always had children who weren't of the Catholic faith

111   in the school, and this was really important. Of course, they were never ostracised or singled out

112   because they weren't Catholic, of course not. But the ethos that was in the school, not written down on

113   paper, but the feel that was in the school prior to the reconfiguration was always a feel of equality.

114   But now we had it officially. Now it's on paper, that every one of my children inside in here is equal,

115   and that's hugely important for me, for them to know that. Every one of them is just the same in my

116   eyes. It doesn't have to do with religion, whether you have a religion or not, that never came into it.

117   But it's official now, and the parents know that and the children know that whoever their next to is

118   equal to them completely. In all angles and across the whole education that they receive, they are all

119   the same. They're just as important as each other.

120   **Okay, we might take a small step back, from what I have read and heard, the final decision**

121   **about reconfiguration often hinges on the decision of the local Bishop, who of course is the**

122   **patron of the school. Now I know from speaking to the Parish Priest here that the Bishop was**

123   **supportive of what you were doing. Did you personally have any interaction about the**

124   **reconfiguration with the Bishop as patron?**

125   Yeah. So, our local Parish Priest was the Chairperson on the Board of Management. So any

126   communication between the Board and the Bishop it was fluid because we had that mediator there as

127   well. So that was a really good help for us. It was very positive. Um, we actually got on very well

128   with that whole process. The Bishop was supportive of this decision. He could understand why we

129   wanted this, and he was very conscious of wanting to ensure that parents who did want to continue

130   with Catholic religious education were provided for as well, you know, that they weren't going to be

131   left out. It wasn't going to be non-denominational it was going to be multi-denominational. So he just

132   wanted to make sure that the ball wasn't dropped in that sense, which was great because we didn't

133   want to drop it either. We wanted to continue this. This is really important for some of the families in

134   the school, it is super important for them. So, it was really important to have his support in that sense

135   as well. Actually, [a member of the Bishop's office] came down to one of the meetings as well. To

136   have the conversation with the community as well. Yeah. So there was good communication there.

137   Um, we weren't the only school at the time that was reconfiguring, no. There was another one as well.

138 So, [school name removed] were kind of undergoing a similar process as such at the same time as us

139 as well. So, there were two Community National Schools that transferred patronage at the same time

140 and I think because of that there was always good communication between the ETB and the Bishop's

141 office as well.

142 **Okay, so it does sound like everybody was on good terms and that it worked well. Because, there**

143 **have been examples where this process has not worked.**

144 Yeah. Yeah. In the majority, everything went quite smoothly. As I said earlier, of course, there was

145 people against the transfer. They didn't have direct connections with the school other than being

146 community members. But, um, in the majority, stakeholders like our parents and our future parents

147 were also invited up if they wanted to vote as well. So, it was really about looking into the future as

148 well. Is this something that you'd be open to and interested in? And would it entice you or would it

149 put you off as well? Do you know that was really important, too, to know that. So, we had a really big

150 turnout the night of the parents vote, actually, much bigger than the current parents that we had. So, it

151 was really uplifting to see perspective parents coming in the door and saying actually this is

152 something that we would be interested in and no, it does not turn us away, but in fact, it's quite the

153 opposite.

154 **I know from reading the documents around reconfiguration, that if staff members aren't happy**

155 **to remain in the school. There is an option for redeployment. Did anybody in your school decide**

156 **to take that option?**

157 Yeah, we did have a staff member who decided to take that option. Yeah, and I think that it's

158 important that that option is there for people and part of the process because you want everybody in

159 the school to be happy. So, the option is there, and it should be there. I think it's important.

160 **Why do you think the CNS model was chosen as opposed to other models?**

161 Actually, we didn't consider going to anyone but ETB. I think for us it was important to have that

162 inclusivity as opposed to having no religion. We wanted to be open to all children and that equality of

163 it as well. I know Educate Together is very equality based as well, of course. But it was something

164 that I thought would be important for us because it is a Catholic community we're in as well. Religion

165 is important for a lot of families, equally it's of no importance to other families, as in they just they're

166   not religious and non-practising. So it was important to not cut out religion altogether. And actually,

167   by changing to a CNS it was likely that we would be encouraging more of a diversity of religions into

168   the school. Like, we're currently working on the family project in GMGY and it's all about what kind

169   of traditions and beliefs do you have in your home. And it's really nice to draw that into the classroom

170   and for the children to explain and have the opportunity to talk about what they do at home, and I

171   thought that was an important part of it as well. That they can talk about their own home lives. Like

172   we have Children from a lot of different backgrounds. No family is going to be the same as well. So,

173   it was really beneficial to us and for the children to be able to have the opportunity to talk about what

174   it is that's important to them. What values they have, even what routines or traditions they have. Do

175   they pray at night-time? Is this Catholic prayer? Are they orthodox? Often when a new family comes

176   as well, it's not a question you ask. Are you Catholic? Yes, it's just it's just not a question. So, it's a

177   really beautiful time for the children to be able to learn from each other as well, and to share what

178   their home life is.

179   **When I was teaching myself, you'd learn so much as a teacher. I just remember sitting back and**

180   **taking it all in and learning so much about the children in my class.**

181   Yeah, that's it, and I was even looking at my own two children. They are in my class as well. And I

182   was like, God, how are we going to do this? What are we going to be putting down on that? But it's

183   good for me as opposed to just handing out worksheets and going right 'Off you go'. It's really nice,

184   you know, that you can reflect yourself as a parent and kind of go, 'What is it that we actually do that

185   might be different to the family next door?' Do you know? So, it's good to kind of draw on your own

186   experience as well.

187   **My favourite one I ever got in was around traditions, and this little boy was non-religious and in**

188   **his project it said that they do family cinema night every Friday, and that was their tradition.**

189   **They loved it, you know, they were so proud.**

190   Well I was lying in bed last thinking about my own two [children] as to what we're going to put in.

191   And I was like, what is different about us? What do we do that's different? My mom is Swedish, and

192   every Christmas we celebrate Christmas on Christmas Eve. And like, the other Children wouldn't

193   know that. So yeah, so I must have a chat with my lads. And they think this is just the norm. They

194   think this is what people do, because that's what we do. So, um, yeah, yeah, I love the tradition side of

195   it and celebrations. But then for other Children it could be Eid, it just depends on what background

196   they have. So I'm really interested. Actually, they have to bring them next Wednesday to me, and I'm

197   really interested in seeing what comes back.

198   **Okay so tell me, were there any immediate changes on the first day? That kind of signified, this**

199   **is a new school or was it the case that you re-opened and it still had the same feeling?**

200   There was no big massive upheaval at all. What comes to mind actually is that we wanted a new

201   school crest, and so I went about during the summer with a parent from another CNS school. The

202   principal there put me in touch with a fantastic parent up there, and she designed it for us. So our

203   school crest now had our new school name and we kept our [symbol removed for anonymisation]

204   because that was really important to us down here. We're right next to [name of area removed] and I

205   didn't want to change our symbol. That's our symbol and the children love it. [sentence removed for

206   anonymisation] I wanted to draw in the colours of the Community National School and the vibrancy

207   of that and the [symbol removed for anonymisation] being a symbol of equality as well. So, this was

208   massive for us. So day one, everyone came in with their beautiful new school jumpers and it was just

209   fantastic. It was so uplifting. It really, really was. It was beautiful. Yeah, it was fab and it was for the

210   children as well. This was a big thing for them. They love it. They absolutely love their jumpers like,

211   but, um there was no major massive upheaval. The actual official transfer of patronage was only a

212   week before we opened up as well. So, um, there was a lot of radio interviews and newspaper articles.

213   So, from my side of it, it was manic. Um, but from the actual school, the children wouldn't have

214   noticed. I was like, a duck at that point. I was just calm on the exterior and paddling below the water.

215   Just trying to get the doors open and have a nice positive first few days. And at that point, I hadn't

216   been made principal yet. I hadn't interviewed for the principal post yet, so I was still acting principal

217   and I had a sub in as well, then, um, who did a great job covering until we then got our permanent

218   second teacher. And he's fantastic. So there was a lot going on in the background, but, actually, being

219   inside in school was lovely, nice and calm, exciting, fun, energetic, but a nice air of calmness about it

220   as well.

221 Brilliant. I like the word up-lifting. So, there was obviously was something special happening, I

222 suppose.

223 There was. And you could see with the parents as well. They were uplifted by the process now being

224 completed. You know, there was a lot of waiting and you're kind of on tender hooks a little bit until

225 the process is actually complete. So, at last it was like, now we can keep going, do you know? It's like

226 everything is on pause until that point.

227 And did the reconfiguration have the desired effect. Did you manage to increase your enrolment

228 numbers?

229 Yes, we are now bottom heavy. It's unbelievable. I have seven children so far and seven coming into

230 me in September. It has absolutely had the desired effect. It's brought so much attention to us as well.

231 Um, social media attention to the media in general. We've had radio interviews, TV interviews,

232 newspaper articles. It's just it's made people talk and actually discuss who we are and put us on the

233 map. And look we know everyone is not going to talk positively. Of course they're not. But look,

234 you're not going to please everyone all of the time, but you'll please most of the people most of the

235 time. So you can try and bring everyone along with you and hope that everyone does come along with

236 you, and keep it as positive as possible. We are very positive inside in here. We're a very energetic

237 group and it's really nice now to be able to showcase that as well and to scream and shout a bit about

238 how fantastic the school is. And it is. It's great, like and the kids love it. The kids absolutely love

239 coming into school.

240 Oh, it's great to hear because I'm in a rural area here and the school, the school is the lifeblood

241 of the community. And the prospect of it closing is quite heart breaking. But it sounds like you

242 can be positive about the future now?

243 Very much so. Like it's been regenerated and kind of rejuvenated, and this school was going to close

244 otherwise. There was no two ways about it. There was no drive there and very little enrolments and

245 just nothing fresh, nothing new, nothing that was going to make us different to other schools that were

246 bigger and that would be an enticing feature for parents. People would be thinking 'Oh, sure, there's

247 no one in there'. Do you know? And it's very hard then for those parents to choose you. Whereas now

248 we have increased numbers. We have quite a lot of junior and senior infants now at this point which is

249 just brilliant. It would be amazing to get some older children in the door as well. Of course, it would.

250 But it's really important for us to be grateful for the fact that we're growing from the bottom upwards,

251 and we need to kind of continue with that trend as well. We'd love to get some into the senior room as

252 well. It would be fantastic. Um, but we can see the great importance there is there that we're growing

253 from the bottom. To sustain the school and to keep it going and to sustain the second teacher in the

254 school. We have a retention number that we have to keep of 13. So, we're looking at September so far

255 with 18, which is just amazing. Amazing.

256 **Okay, we might change tack a small bit now, and we will go back to GMGY if that's all right,**

257 **because part of my thesis does explore what it was like to move from teaching in a Catholic**

258 **school to teaching in a CNS and looking at the similarities and differences. I'm interested to**

259 **hear how you managed this change from one approach to the next. Did you find that change**

260 **difficult or were you worried about it, or did it just kind of happen?**

261 Yeah, I was worried about it because I was afraid that I wasn't going to do it correctly. But actually,

262 there was not a whole pile to worry about in the long run. Now we do receive training from the ETB

263 as well in the teaching of GMGY. So, we just completed our strand four training on religions and

264 beliefs, both myself and the other teacher attended that over zoom. So [ETB CPD trainer name

265 removed], I don't know if you know her, but she's absolutely wonderful. So, she sends out event

266 calendars for each term so that we have the different celebrations and dates just to mark them as well

267 so that we can actually choose then what it is we want to focus in on as well. So, the idea is that we

268 cover all the strands then with these webinars as well. So we've focused in anyway, on 'Religion and

269 beliefs' this term. Just to hone in on that small bit and just to kind of expand our own knowledge on

270 that. Um, teaching GMGY is quite different I suppose, in comparison to teaching 'Grow In Love' in

271 that when you're teaching 'Grow In Love', the facts are written in the book or on the board. That's

272 what you're teaching, and you're not varying from that. You're not giving personal opinion. You're not

273 throwing in your own stories unless they're extremely relevant to what it is exactly. You've just taught

274 the children, it's a programme in that sense. In that there's no kind of taking a different road. It is what

275 it is in front of you, and that's what you teach. Whereas with GMGY then it's a more fluid, and

276 opinion based to a point, in terms of the children, in that they can question and they do. And that's the

277   whole idea that they can ask questions, about different religions and beliefs, you know like around

278   customs, traditions and celebrations. It's kind of more research based as well. Do you know?

279   Everyone's learning together, and you might go into a lesson with one idea that okay, so we're going

280   to learn about this today, whether it's Ramadan or Diwali you know? And then you might take a

281   different road all together, depending on where the children bring you. So it's more child led as well

282   and it really models our ethos, it really tells you what a Community National School actually is about.

283   So, the curriculum book that we have is actually quite small in size in that there's not a massive

284   amount of content there. Now there's a huge amount of content online varying from worksheets to

285   videos and stories. The videos are actually brilliant, for us in particular in that there's a strand called

286   Thinking Time. I'm sure you're aware of this, but the Thinking Time strand has been really beneficial

287   to us. ██

288   ███████████████████████████████████. So, it's really nice. The silent videos are

289   actually really lovely, because it's not telling the children what's happening, they are processing it

290   themselves, and they're putting their own thoughts and doing their own reasoning. And they come up

291   with their own ideas. They might watch the video and they might kind of see the more obvious signs

292   that are in it. But when you actually delve in a bit deeper and then you can actually see them thinking

293   about things critically, you know one child thought that the character was being jealous, but the other

294   child actually thought that he was trying to defend himself. They are learning that they'll have

295   different viewpoints on things as well, and it really allows for that open communication and open

296   conversation about all aspects of life really.

297   **So, to be fair, even though you were worried at the start, would you say that your confidence**

298   **was grown with it as you've used it?**

299   Yeah, very much so. And I wasn't worried about the curriculum. I was worried about myself and

300   about my ability to teach it and areas that I would have been lacking in, do you know, information

301   wise in that I questioned myself saying 'Would I be up to speed enough to be able to answer the

302   children's questions'. So, it wasn't the programme. The programme is fantastic. It's absolutely

303   brilliant. It's really well laid out. Very child led and child orientated. So it definitely was not the

304   programme. It was my own ability to teach it.

305 **And is it strange to be in that space? You know, because obviously, as you mentioned the**

306 **philosophy for Children, part 'Thinking Time', there's also obviously a values education strand**

307 **as well that looks at things like equality and rights and responsibilities. Is that something that**

308 **would have been a focus in the school prior to reconfiguring, or was that something new?**

309 Um, it's new in that it's kind of more official now. Um, I myself when I taught would have had that as

310 a kind of…I was going to say core value but that seems to be kind of a term that the ETB uses. Um, it

311 would have been something that would have been very important to me personally, and for my

312 children because I have three sons who have attended the school, two are still here. So, it's really

313 important for me that my own children and the children in the school did have good values and that

314 they saw the importance of respecting themselves and other people's values as well. So that was very

315 important to me, but it wouldn't have necessarily been an official line as such.

316 **Yeah, I suppose if you're a teacher that maybe doesn't have an interest in that area, there's no**

317 **escaping it now, as it's a central part of the GMGY curriculum?**

318 No, there's not. It's right in front of you and that is a good think. I mean GMGY is what life is about.

319 It's leading into secondary school and it's leading to adulthood. It's about being open and seeing that

320 there are all sorts of people in every community and every area in life that they will go into. And it's

321 about the children knowing and understanding and actually, fully believing that they must respect

322 everyone else's background. I just always found that very important. Children need to know that, even

323 going as far as secondary school, that everyone's not coming from the same background as you. It's

324 really, really important for you to actually know that just because you have a different background

325 that doesn't make yours any more important or any less important than your neighbour's or the person

326 sitting next to you? That is how the world is. The world is multi-denominational and multi-cultural.

327 There is a big, massive community out there, and the hope is that by the time the children have

328 reached sixth class that they are so well prepared to go out into that community and to have a belief in

329 themselves as well as respecting others. And I think the curriculum enables them to respect

330 themselves as well, and to believe in themselves and what they are capable of. You want them to be

331 proud of themselves and proud of each other as well. The children in this school are very kind

332 children, very, very warm and kind children and they always were. And what I love is that they are

333 always willing to listen to someone else and to learn about other people. I don't know if it's an

334 exceptional thing. I've worked in many very nice schools. But there's something here that we need to

335 cherish and really need to nurture, and GMGY really helps that as well, and it drives it home.

336 **It's so lovely to hear someone describe their school like that and it's great to hear that GMGY is**

337 **supporting you in what you are trying to nurture there. Now I am conscious of time so I might**

338 **skip down a small bit, and we might talk about ethos. I'd like to get your take on what you**

339 **understand to be the ethos of a CNS and how that ethos is created.**

340 When I hear the word ethos I think of the two or three sentences that a school uses to describe

341 themselves. You know, your slogan, or moto or vision. But ethos to me is much more than that. It's

342 the feeling inside in the school, you can't write that. You can teach it to a certain extent. But it's more

343 about the day to day and living it. So if I and my staff don't have that shared feeling of what this

344 school is about and what it stands for and what it's trying to do then the children aren't going to have

345 it. So, for me it's something that is created inside the walls of the school and it spreads out to the

346 families and through the relationships the children make through the school with each other and with

347 their teachers.

348 **Okay, but there are certain things about your ethos that have to change when you reconfigure.**

349 **Certain non-negotiables that will be told to you by the ETB when you sign up to be a**

350 **Community National School. So for example, the CNS states that is equality-based. Does this**

351 **have an effect on your ethos? There's an assumption out there that equality may not be as overt**

352 **in a Catholic school, is that fair? Or was equality always to the fore in the school?**

353 Yeah, I'm not going to say it wasn't there, but it's more that it's explicitly stated now and it's clear and

354 it's definite and it's transparent. It is there in the foreground. And it's not to say that a Catholic school

355 can't very conscious of the equality of children and staff. It's not to say that, but in a Community

356 National School it is equality-based. It is going to be focused on equality and being conscious of

357 every member that it takes inside in that school. Whether it's myself or the youngest child in the

358 school. So, it's more up front and it is very, very clear that it is the ethos that your school follows. And

359 do you know, that's very beneficial to me. It's a very easy thing to explain. Let's say to a parent who's

360 coming up to find out about the school, you can say well we are a community national school and this

361   is the process that we follow? And yeah, it give you a kind of clarity that sometimes isn't always there

362   under a Catholic ethos. We are what it says on the tin and there's no need for your own interpretation

363   on that. It takes the ambiguity out of it I think.

364   **And as the principal does that help you? Because, I'm thinking about one of the areas that I**

365   **work on, which is Relationships and Sexuality Education. And I've had discussions with**

366   **principals who work in denominational schools, and they've said to me that sometimes they feel**

367   **like their hands are tied because of their denominational ethos. Does the multi-denominational**

368   **ethos of the school make you feel like you are on firmer ground when it comes to areas that**

369   **might be more controversial in a denominational school?**

370   Absolutely. Um, like all my children I want them to know no matter what their identity is they are

371   welcome here and will not be treated differently to anyone else. It's very clear in my role here that I

372   can do that whereas in a Catholic school no, I don't think that same encouragement is given there to

373   do that. But of course, I can't speak for all Catholic schools. I just think it's clearer what you can do

374   and say in a CNS. And if the line is blurred, you'd be a little bit wary of doing it. Even if you wanted

375   to push it a small bit, you'd be a little bit wary of doing it. Whereas the lines are very, very clear now.

376   **Okay so the last section kind of looks at the future at the school. And also, maybe we might just**

377   **have a chat about the wider policy of school reconfiguration and if it's going to be successful as**

378   **a national policy or if it really only works in certain situations. Um, but first of all, what are**

379   **your hopes for the future and what would you say to other schools who are in this position or**

380   **who are thinking about it?**

381   Okay, well, going on our own school. But I started smiling when you asked about my own school

382   because myself and the other teacher would often joke about 'when we build the West Wing'. You

383   know, we just want to grow. We just want to grow. We love our school. We love the way it is and we

384   also want to continue to get that vibrancy in the door as well. And I mean, it's brilliant because we

385   know next year we are going to be growing. We know with children coming the following year as

386   well. So it's really wonderful to know that we're going to be okay. It's such a relief in that sense. And

387   that was always what the end goal was, to keep the doors of this school open. And we are going to so

388   it's fantastic. Our school has a future now. Now, this summer, we're going to be giving the outside a

389 bit of a facelift. We are getting a whole new yard. We're going to be looking at fixing the area where

390 our little car park is, things like that. We're going to be re flooring the entire school inside. So, we're

391 looking at the building itself and the ETB have just been so supportive with that as well, and in

392 supporting how to do this as well. They just know how to use grants and how to apply for grants.

393 Everything like that. So, they've been brilliant in guiding us like that and really showing us the way to

394 go. I just want the school to remain a positive, uplifting and happy learning environment for our

395 children. The children smile in here, they are happy. They're very, very happy in our school building.

396 And we need to keep that going. We need to ensure that the children are comfortable and confident

397 and that they know that they're supported and wanted and loved inside in this school. So that has to be

398 at the forefront of everything, to make sure that they still feel that every day when they come in the

399 door. Um, as for other schools, I would very much encourage it. I would say that you need to consider

400 that there's going to be a change, from an admin side of things. The support is massive from the ETB

401 team. Absolutely enormous. But there's a huge increase in admin work for the Principal. So, if you are

402 teaching Principal, there's an awful lot of extra work that you're going to be doing and not to have the

403 blinkers on about that just to be aware of it. And I knew my workload was going to increase

404 massively, and it has. But I was willing to do that because we had to do it. Do you know? We had to

405 try this, and so far, thankfully, it's working. So it was the correct decision to go down this road. Um,

406 but for other schools, yeah, absolutely. Research it. Go out and see if it is what you want. Um, speak

407 to other schools. I have had Principals ringing me from schools around Ireland because they've seen

408 us on the news and heard us on the radio and are asking about the process and to know, is it really as

409 good as that it looks like from the outside. Wanting to know exactly how we went about it and the

410 length of time, who's involved. Things like that. So definitely to go and research it and speak to your

411 board of management. And your parents, speak to the parents. Keep them in the loop, keep them

412 informed every step of the whole process. There was no part of the process that parents wouldn't have

413 known about in our school.

414 **With the parent I spoke to, that was really striking throughout their entire interview. You**

415 **know, just how informed they were at every point.**

416   Yeah. And that was vital as well that it's all completely open and transparent. And that there are no

417   secrets at all. Do you know, make sure that everyone is aware and make it public knowledge. Like I

418   said, we had community meetings where everyone was invited. Everyone. It wasn't invite only,

419   anyone who wanted to be there could be there.

420   **So, is the change worth it despite the increased workload?**

421   Look, I have a Board of Management who are amazing! They are just fantastic. And when you join

422   the ETB you then have an extra layer of scaffolding around you. So, if you have a question, you're not

423   on your own. There's a scaffolding there. Prior to the change over the principal is in charge of the

424   entire running of the school and with quite little guidance as well. No matter how great a Board of

425   Management are, they are usually volunteers and they do not necessarily know the running of a

426   school. Whereas now I have an organisation behind me that does. And that's so important as well do

427   you know. You'd be hoping that you'd have no child protection issues, but if you did, you need to

428   have people who know exactly what we're dealing with here. You need to have confidentiality. You

429   know there's so many important aspects of it. But to have a strong Board of Management is vital. So,

430   we meet on Zoom and we're hoping possibly now that the last one might be face to face, depending on

431   COVID. The level of engagement I get now from my Board is amazing. They read the policies and

432   give me feedback in them, they have opinions and views and thoughts and ideas to bring to the table.

433   So now my Board of Management is really important to me. It's great to be able to pick up your phone

434   and to ring your Chairperson and for them to say, Do you know what? I'm going to go and research

435   that now, let me go and ring you back there and then a half an hour or whatever it is, and he'll go and

436   find out exactly what it is that you want to question or whatever it is. But there are definitely more

437   policies now than we would have had before. Every school has the standard policies, of course but,

438   now we have more you know. Like we just completed our acceptable use policy of the Internet.

439   Whereas when you were a one man band essentially before, you couldn't get through all that. There

440   was nobody handing you a document or emailing you and saying, Do you know what? Actually, we

441   see that there's a bit of a gap here. Or internal controls? Things like that. All of this is new to me

442   because of the ETB. So now I'm getting training, and we're doing meetings and putting plans in place

443   and things like that. There's an awful lot of work in it, an awful lot. There's no hiding from that. We

444 definitely need our principal release days. It's hard, no doubt about it. But I think if you're in a

445 positive place yourself, which I really am, it makes things a little bit easier to process and kind of plan

446 it out and to go 'right, Okay. What am I going to prioritise here?' It's busy. It's difficult getting your

447 head around all the new processes and new ways and procedures of doing things. Um, you have to

448 learn very quickly and on your feet. And at the end of the day, you're a teacher. You need to teach

449 children and you need to teach them well, because that's why your children are in your school. It

450 doesn't matter how many policies you have inside in your office. If you can't teach, you're not going

451 to have children coming in your door. So, it's super important to have them as your number one focus.

452 **My hat goes off to you, there is no denying that the role of a teaching principal is a really**

453 **challenging one.**

454 Ha! I am definitely a duck, at times, calm on above the surface, paddling frantically below the water.

455 But I think once you just ground yourself and go, it's not about you, there is a bigger picture here and

456 that picture is the kids. And of course, there's going to be things that are too much for you, and that

457 can feel overwhelming. The whole process itself at the start was quite overwhelming in that there's an

458 awful lot to take in. And, if everyone was on board, sure that would be great and you'd fly ahead. But

459 that's not realistic, there will always be some opposition to change, that's just natural. Like when you

460 make any major change in general in your life, you'll come up against some form of opposition. So, it

461 was difficult at times but it's definitely worth it.

462 **So is there anything you regret, or is there anything you miss about being a Catholic school?**

463 Is there anything I miss about it? No, no, there's not. God, how can I say that without sounding

464 completely blunt. Um, no, no. I feel that every single one of the children. The number one goal was

465 for it to be a positive and successful school for our children. So, I can't regret the change because

466 that's what it brought about, the positivity and the growth and the injection of hopefulness in the

467 school and the community. So no, I don't regret anything.

468 **Okay, moving on to the final section of the interview, we might look at the national policy of**

469 **reconfiguration. You said you made history, and actually I would say your school is somewhat**

470 **of an anomaly because you have succeeded where many others have failed. So I would love to**

471 **know if you think this process has the potential to work elsewhere?**

472   Yeah. I heard the headlines at the time. And all this was going on when we were in the middle of our

473   process, and it worried some parents and people in the community. They weren't sure what to believe

474   because the ETB was saying one thing and the papers were saying another. So that was difficult.

475   **So, the approach taken in Dublin was very different. The patron identified schools, rather than**

476   **the schools self-electing to reconfigure, as was the case here. Do you think that approach would**

477   **have worked here?**

478   We live in a traditional area here. I don't mean in a religious sense at all, but people here are very

479   traditional. It's kind of all based on how things always were, and they are opposed to change in

480   general. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's about protecting a way of life that is important to

481   people. It's just how it is. It's a small community and this is just how things are. So, if somebody came

482   in and told them this is what you're doing. No, no, no. Everyone would have been opposed to it

483   because there is something so special about your local school. It's where you'll have gone yourself

484   and where your children have gone and there is something in it that speaks to part of your identity.

485   The reason the process worked here is because people weren't dictated to, they were part of the

486   process and had a say in the decision making. If you think about it it's the exact same with the

487   children you teach, they react better if you discuss things with them and have a conversation as

488   opposed to you dictating to them and saying it is how it is because I say this is how it is. If they

489   actually feel like they're a part of the process they're more likely to genuinely come on board.

490   **Yes, I agree, but realistically, if you have to go through the lengthy process that you went**

491   **through here, with every school that wants to reconfigure then are the Government ever going**

492   **to meet their target of 400 schools by 2030?**

493   Personally, I think the only way that that could work is if every Catholic school in Ireland was made a

494   state school. Yeah, that it was just a blanket approach. This is what's happening. You're now all

495   directly under the Department of Education. I think that's the only way that that would work. I

496   mentioned that my mum is Swedish, so I come from that kind of a background where there was no

497   religious schools as such or there were very few religious schools in Sweden. So the Irish system, it

498   would have been extremely unusual in that sense. So, like for my mom, then to have her children

499   going to a Catholic school, which we did end up going to in Dublin. That was kind of strange for her,

500   in that she was kind of going 'Why would the church have any input on my Children's education?'

501   The two just didn't marry together at all, like? whereas it's probably the opposite for a lot of Irish

502   parents, it's nearly the accepted norm. It's that kind of a *meon aigne*. I can't think of the word as

503   Béarla.

504   **Ah, mindset?**

505   That's it. A mindset exactly in that this is just how it is and it's not questioned. You're almost being

506   damned for questioning something that's just the norm, you know, like 'Sure, why would you change

507   that? Hasn't it served us well'. But here we are showing people that there is another way.

Appendix M: The Story of Scoil na Carraige's Reconfiguration

In response to declining enrolments and the threat of school closure, a group of concerned

parents set up a number of community meetings in 2017. The purpose of these meetings were

to discuss solutions to the school's problem of falling enrolments:

> And a group of us were kind of saying, look, we are concerned for the school, concerned for the future of the school, and we kind of just looked into options about how we could increase the numbers in the school. So we had a few community meetings and, like, this was the question we asked at each one of the meetings. How can we increase the numbers in our school? And I suppose something that kept coming up with this model being offered by the ETB. (Máire, parent)

One solution that emerged was the idea of school reconfiguration. Máire reported that the

group recognised that all the other schools in the area were Catholic schools:

> All of the other schools in the area are all Catholic schools. […] So we kind of felt that if we took the route of changing to the ETB that we would be giving ourselves another selling point. A selling point that no other schools in the area had. (Máire, parent)

The group were confident that by changing to a multi-denominational CNS they would

become an attractive prospect for parents outside the catchment area who would be willing to

travel to enable their child to access an alternative to denominational education:

> I suppose they [parent group] thought that if it was a multi-denominational school […] that there may be people, um, of other religious or non-religious persuasions, you know, who will be attracted to it? […] And, it might attract some non-Catholics from outside that catchment area. (Fr O'Sullivan, Parish Priest)

In an effort to find out more about the process of reconfiguration, the group contacted the

local ETB. The ETB informed the group that the first step was to inform the current patron of

their desire to explore reconfiguration:

> We were invited to a meeting of local interested people in the community centre. […] The first thing we told them to do was to inform the current patron and advise them that we'd [ETB] been requested to come to a community meeting. We have very healthy relationships with the [name removed] Diocese. We informed them that we were going to that meeting, we were invited to a community meeting. They were fully briefed on the purpose of the meeting. (Catherine, Director of Schools in local ETB)

Permission to explore reconfiguration was sought by the parent group from the patron of the school: the Bishop. The Bishop agreed to support reconfiguration if the majority of the community supported the change. In consultation with the Bishop, the group, supported by the principal and the Chairperson of the BOM, decided to embark on a listening exercise. They identified the following groups which they would need to consult with: the board of management, the teachers and staff, the parents, and the wider community:

> In consultation with the Bishop, we decided then to embark on a listening exercise. And so we identified who we needed to talk to and listen to. First of all, there was the members of the Board of management. Then you had the teachers themselves. Then you had, uh, the parents, right? And then you had the whole community. (Fr O'Sullivan, Parish Priest)

The first group to be consulted were the BOM. During his interview, Fr O'Sullivan recalled bringing the proposal to each of the groups:

> I convened a meeting with the Board of Management. Put it before them. Look, this is the choice. Where do you stand? And a majority was in favour [of school reconfiguration]. […] Then there was a meeting of the staff […] and they voted too. I think it was, kind of 50/50 I think. Then there was the meeting of the parents in the school, which I chaired myself […] they all cast their secret ballots […] and they were all kind of in favour. Now we wanted the whole community, right, to be together, and then for the local ETB to come down and put forward what they were offering. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP)

A secret ballot was held at each of the meetings to determine if a majority were in favour of moving forward with the reconfiguration process. A meeting of the entire community was the final meeting to be held. The patron representatives described the community meeting which they attended. The local ETB presented to the community about the CNS model and answered questions. Following this, the ETB left the meeting and the member of the local Bishop's office was available to answer questions. A vote followed and Fr O'Sullivan reported that just under 70% of the community voted in favour of the change:

> I handed over to the local ETB and they had a PowerPoint presentation that lasted about 20 minutes. Then the people were able to put questions to the ETB. And after the questions were answered, we asked the ETB representatives to leave the meeting. And then the [member of the local] Bishop's [office] took over, and he chaired the rest of the meeting. […] We handed out the ballots and then people

came forward put them into a box. And then he [member of the local Bishop's office] took that box away. And, as it turned out, there was over two-thirds in favour of changing. (Fr O'Sullivan, PP)

The most common reason cited by participants for this opposition to reconfiguration was the implications that it would have in relation to RE provision within the school. As will be discussed later, sacramental education was to the fore of these discussions and a concern on the part of parishioners as to what the reconfiguration of the school meant for the future of the local Church:

> The other big question was sacramental preparation for people because this is a school which it would still have at least 60% of the population who are Catholic in the school. (Catherine, Director of Schools in the local ETB)

The process of reconfiguration formally began in 2018 when the Board of Management (BOM) notified the Department of Education (DE) of their intention to reconfigure their ethos. The process was a long one, with the official transfer of patronage happening one week prior to the school reopening after the summer holidays in September 2019:

> I think the whole process took about a year and a half until we were officially transferred. Um, so the process was quite lengthy. […] it was to our benefit to have it completed before the new school year as well. So that was kind of one of our drivers as well. We thought it would be better to start the school year with our new patron. (Méabh, principal)

At the time of writing, the reconfiguration of the school had had a positive impact on enrolments (See Figure 3). However, the focus of this research was not the end product, but the process and lived experience of seven key stakeholders in the reconfiguration process of Scoil na Carraige.

Appendix N: Transcript excerpts to support the theme of 'Ethos'

Please note: Yellow highlighter used for quotations for theme of 'Ethos'

Oisín – Teacher

346 **Well look, your school is an example of what can be achieved in rural Ireland if there is a**

347 **community behind the change.**

348 Exactly and we are kind of showing that this area is progressive because of what we've done. I think

349 that's very important, that people are coming into the area that they can see that there's a diversity in

350 education. There's an option to not have your children sent to a Catholic school. And don't get me

351 wrong. The other schools around here are lovely, they're very nice schools. And while they are all

352 Catholic schools in name some of them are very Catholic and others aren't. They're diverse in their

353 own rite. But, yeah, we've given ourselves every opportunity to survive by making ourselves stand

354 out.

244 **I taught in a very big urban school with a lot of diversity, and it was my experience that the**

245 **parents who used to find the Family Project most challenging were often the Catholic parents. I**

246 **just found that some of the parents were used to Catholicism being taught a certain way in**

247 **school, so it was a challenge when it wasn't being done anymore.**

248 I think that was a worry with the changeover for some people, the fact that "they're not going to do

249 that [Catholic religious education] for us now" or help us with that.

8

250 **And I mean you always hear about the triad of home, school and parish having equal**

251 **responsibility for passing on the Catholic faith, was that your experience?**

252 The reality is that religion is often not a big thing in modern families. They're more interested in just

253 living their life. I think that's the bottom line in modern Ireland.

132 Are there aspects of the CNS ethos that stand out to you as being important? I'm just

133 wondering, after moving from one ethos to another, is there any part in particular that you

134 think, I like that?

135 I suppose it was just the just the core value of the CNS, that it's built on equality that every child's

136 identity is equally important and respected. We're not trying to hide children's identities. We're not

137 trying to gloss over the fact that they might have a different background from the child sitting next to

138 them. If they aren't receiving the sacraments nobody is putting them down the back of the church or

139 whatever or nobody's saying "well we need someone to look after him because his parents don't want

140 him to go to church for the Christmas mass" or whatever. I just think, children shouldn't have to deal

141 with that in school. It should be just there in school and on an equal footing with all their peers. No

142 more so than if they were in a workplace, in life, their religion will not come into it. And it's important

143 to learn that we are all different from each other, in loads of ways and that that is a good thing and I

144 think the CNS ethos encourages that. Whereas I think in a Catholic school the Catholic children can

145 easily feel that they are superior to those children who aren't Catholic. Because they see those other

146 children be left out and they know they are in the majority, and they shouldn't be taught that. I just

147 didn't like that. Whereas that was the most appealing thing to me about the CNS, the children are all

148 treated the same.

149 And you feel now that when children go in the door to your school that they are on an equal

150 footing?

151 They are. Yeah, because we're not doing faith formation. We're not doing religious instruction. Yeah,

152 we're learning about all different beliefs and the children are getting an education based around ethics.

47	Okay, that's fine, so when you started in your post did you feel confident going into teaching in
48	a multi-denominational school or were you a bit apprehensive because your experience had only
49	been in denominational education?
50	I suppose, I didn't really think twice about it to be honest. I was excited, in a way, the fact that this is
51	something new, something innovative for the area and I was a part of it. I suppose I wasn't really
52	apprehensive at all. You know it's the same curriculum. Just taking out the 2.5 hours a week of 'Grow
53	in Love' and you switch it with GMGY. So apart from GMGY it's the same thing. And I didn't mind
54	that because GMGY is a much nicer, friendlier and educational way to spend that time in my in my
55	view.

96	Going back to GMGY for a minute, was there was there CPD given to you to know how to teach
97	it?
98	Yeah so we are in the process of training at the minute with [ETBI representative name removed] in
99	ETBI. Yeah, so it's kind of ongoing. It's been delayed a bit with the lockdown. The training has had to
100	be done on Zoom. So we're doing different strands and it's very interesting. It's very beneficial to the
101	classroom. The kids find it interesting. No more than like when you'd be teaching geography and
102	about children who live in different parts of the world or teaching history and looking at the lives of
103	children in the past. It's like a history or geography lesson for them because they find it interesting,
104	and it's open. You know we look at the similarities and differences between different religions and
105	beliefs. At Christmas time we were also learning about Hanukkah, we were able to compare and
106	contrast with Christmas. Yeah, and we were just saying that a lot of these festivals in December came
107	from the same root. They came from the same place. Um, a lot of the Christian festivals in Ireland
108	came from Celtic traditions and so on and so forth. Just, it enables children to discuss and reflect and
109	compare and contrast. And, it's way more open to discussion.

56 We might delve a bit deeper into that piece and actually talk about the differences between the

57 two approaches. So obviously, in the Grow in Love, you're responsible for providing faith

58 formation inside the school day. Whereas, you're in a different position in the GMGY

59 curriculum, you're kind of taking more of a facilitatory role and your also expected to teach

60 beyond religion, for examples values education? So could you talk to me about your experience

61 of that?

62 Well we're still just rolling it out here to be honest, but at the same time the main difference I can see

63 is the fact that it's a way more open approach, it's just a way more open thing. The children are free to

64 discuss their family background with the family projects and, you know they're free. They're not

65 inhibited by their difference. I found in the Catholic school, if there was a there was a Church of

66 Ireland child in front of you. That would be something that we would not talk about. It was something

67 that would not be mentioned. We won't talk about that. We won't mention the fact that this child is

68 different. We just we won't focus at all on it. We'll just keep that quiet and we'll just focus on our

69 Grow In Love. And even that like, the Grow In Love programme, it was monotheist. We're not

70 allowed even talk about polytheistic religions. When you're talking about other religions you're only

71 allowed to focus on monotheist religions. There could be Hindu children in front of you, there could

72 be Children from a Buddhist background or anything like that, but they're not allowed to be

73 acknowledged. You can only look at Christianity and Islam and Judaism. And they're the only three

74 belief systems that are acknowledged. And I just think it's very insular. And, just the training that I

75 received for it when I was working in the Catholic school. And don't get me wrong, I was in a great

76 school. But the training we received from the diocese I was based in was just, it was kind really

77 digging their heels in, like in the sense that, Catholic schools have to do this. And there's a big barrier

78 being placed in front of you, really, as to what you can kind of share with children, what you can talk

79 to children about. I think it's counterproductive for children's development. Whereas I think children

80 that received a more balanced ethical education and learn about all the different religious that you

81 hear of are more open and welcoming to people of different backgrounds.

230	**And do you find that there's a level of interest from the parents around GMGY?**
231	Well we haven't done the family project yet. We're kind of in the middle of that. So we haven't
232	engaged with them too much yet regarding GMGY. Obviously they've heard about it and it's been
233	discussed with them. They're very open to it. I think the culture of the school that would have been
234	here before that was created by the principal was one that was open and that has carried through. The
235	main priority here is to make sure the children are happy in school. That is the main thing. There's no
236	shouting or screaming in this school. The children are looked after very well here. There is an easy
237	going atmosphere for children to learn in. So I suppose, the parents were happy with that before and
238	they're happy with it now. Um, as we move forward and learn more ourselves we will need to engage
239	them more and bring GMGY home to them. I think the Family Project is great because, it gets them
240	discussing and it puts the focus where it should be. It's in the home and it encourages parents to have
241	those discussions with their children. Faith and passing on a faith should be home based. And the
242	family project does put the onus on parents to have those discussions at home, and then they can bring
243	it in and share it in school, if they want to.

178	**Do you feel like you have power to make the ethos your own? Something that I am looking at is**
179	**the question as to whether an ethos is imposed on the school when they change over or whether**
180	**there's space for them to make their own of it. So how do you feel about that? Have you been**
181	**given space to make your own of it or were you just told, this is what you have to do?**
182	No, I never felt like that, like it was imposed. I suppose we're still training, really, to be honest with
183	you, but, um, we're kind of finding our way with it, but there's nothing imposed on us. No, I wouldn't
184	say that. And there is scope for us to form your own identity as a CNS. Once you kind of align with
185	the core principles of it. I don't feel that there's anything being imposed on me. Like we are still
186	finding our feet with it, but at the same time, even with GMGY, it's a way easier thing to teach. You
187	feel, or well I feel you feel way more open to teaching it. You'd be less likely to pick up the Alive-O
188	or the 'Grow in Love' if you had a half an hour to spare, whereas GMGY is something that you'd
189	actually like teaching. It's interesting, the kids engage with it meaningfully.

117   **And so when you were thinking about changing to the ETB model, was there anything in**

118   **particular that attracted you to them? Because there are other options out there for multi-**

119   **denominational education. I'm just curious as to why you chose this particular model or was**

120   **that just the only option on the table?**

121

122   I suppose the aspect we liked about the CNS was the multi-denominational part. And it was really

123   clear that the CNS were open to all religions and none, you know. With some of the other models, I

124   suppose, and they seem to be more non-religious, you know, whereas this one was like, welcoming to

125   everybody and it would celebrate everybody's beliefs. Like I think, as I said, for my children that's

126   what I want. I want them to respect everybody else's religion, you know, and respect everybody else

127   and to actually understand that everyone doesn't believe the same thing. And that's okay. And it's fine

128   for different people to believe different things. We can still all live together happily.

129

166   **You mentioned your children earlier on. Do you think they have been noticed the difference?**

167   **Has it impacted on them in any particular way? Or has life just continued as normal?**

168   I suppose life has continued as normal, other than the fact that we have religion one hour a week after

169   school. Now, um, that's the only major difference we saw. And then I suppose, um, they would have

170   noted as well that there is children in the schools that are not religious. And like, I suppose, in the

171   past, when they were doing their religion in school, those children would have had to kind of sit back

172   a bit, you know? And like, I think they did comment at some stage about how those children don't

173   have to sit back anymore.

174

28   **It does. And I suppose it kind of leads nicely into the next one. I attended Catholic school all my**

29   **life, and so I know well what it is, but it would be great if I could get your perspective on what**

30   **makes a Catholic school and a Catholic ethos? What is particular to it. I want to be able to give**

31   **a real sense of what a person should expect if they walked into a Catholic school in Ireland?**

32   Mhm, Mhm. Mhm. I mean, first of all that, we talk about a Catholic ethos, you know. And look, I

33   mean, our schools have changed as time has moved on. Like they're Catholic, in a very, very loose

34   sense of the world. You know what I mean? I mean, certainly a focus comes around the preparation

35   for sacraments; First Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation. They are big events. What I

36   would say, you know, um in a place like this, the church is at the heart of the community. You know

37   what I mean? And the school is at the heart of the community, so they are both connected. And yeah,

38   the school was Catholic and had a catholic ethos and that meant that it held the old kind of traditional

39   values, etcetera. Maybe you won't find that actually, in big urban areas, but that was the case here.

40   You know, say coming up to Christmas. They would perform lovely Christmas concerts and coming

41   up to Easter… The principal is a gifted teacher, and she can play music so she can. I think she plays

42   the fiddle, and she plays the organ. She's a lovely singer. And the school would always do lovely is

43   the concerts as well in the Church, you know?

44

Fr O'Sullivan – Parish Priest

1   **Just if you tell me about the school and your relationship to it before it reconfigured.**

2   Yeah, yes, very simply Okay. I was appointed down here 3 and a half years ago, you know, to this

3   parish. And of course I was very happy about that because it's a rural area and a beautiful landscape.

4   And, um, I would always say that the local school is a very, very important part of the ministry for the

5   local priest. Just going in, showing a presence, you know, never asking them whether they go to

6   church or anything like that, but just getting to know them and then allowing them to get to know me,

7   as a normally person, you know, who I am, what I am interested in, like ███████████ and

8   all of those things. And I have an excellent, um, relationship there with this school. Plus also the fact

9   that I inherited from my predecessor that I was chairperson of the Board of Management. Now, that is

10   something that I would have been as happy not to have to tell you the truth, because sometimes, you

11   know, when your chairperson and you are the Parish Priest, your position can be kind of

12   compromised, you know? Yes, but I had a great relationship, you know, with the teachers, and with

13   the Children as well. So much so, that most of them would have been going to church, I'd say. And,

14   um and nearly all of those who were who in the 5ᵗʰ and 6ᵗʰ classes, who were Catholics, they all

15   became mass-servers, you know, and just loved it. There's a whole lovely, lovely relationship, you

16   know, that you get to have when you work with a school, and it's great that you can encourage them

17   [the children] and talk to them about their lives. I would have come in to them [the children], uh, with

18   my bicycle and all dressed up in my cycling gear and spoken to them about the importance of outdoor

19   activity. You know, and that here was I, in my late sixties at the time, you know? And they have the

20   whole world before them. But when they go home not to be sitting in front of the television at the

21   computer but to be enjoying outdoor activity, you know? And they [the children] would all know me,

22   you know, as a priest who was very much there with people, and, of course, the school. So it kind of I

23   suppose. I don't know. Does that kind of answer your first question?

253	**For years in Ireland there's been a tradition where the school has maybe carried a lot of the**
254	**responsibility for passing on the faith. Would that be fair to say?**
255	Absolutely, absolutely, you know, yeah, I agree one hundred percent. And that's why, I was very
256	happy, you know, with what happened in this school because it puts the emphasis back on the parents,
257	back on the home. Because like I said, if it doesn't happen in the home is not going to happen at all.
258	When I worked in the local big town, I mean, for confirmation you would have full churches, huge
259	classes, some schools had three tiers, so maybe 90 children for confirmation there. And then, the
260	following Sunday, after the confirmation, you wouldn't get three or four children. And that's it.
261	They're gone. I mean, when people are confirmed, that's it. Bye bye to the church, you know? So I
262	don't know if I told you the story, this is the lovely story, you will laugh. About this priest, you know,
263	he had terrible trouble with the bats and how to get rid of the bats from the roof of the church. He
264	tried everything. Everything, you name it. Then an old man came up to him and said, "Father I'll tell
265	you now, if who want to get rid of them confirm them".

Fr Barrett – member of the office of the Bishop

291	**And is that criticism not in some way fair? Because I hear the argument that a Catholic school**
292	**is inclusive, but at the end of the day, there will be children left out on things like sacramental**
293	**preparation. What's your response to that argument?**
294	Yes, there will. Catholic schools, I think should be more Catholic. Then if parents-- Parental choice
295	has to be the first thing. If parents want them to go to a Catholic school, that's fine. Then if parents
296	want them to be taken out from the sacraments or religion then the parents have to decide how they're
297	going to do that.
298	**At the minute, do you think the Catholic ethos is being diluted somewhat to make it appear**
299	**more inclusive?**
300	I think it is. Yes. I think we're trying to be all things to all people, and it doesn't work. I think we
301	should be clear in saying that we're Catholic, and that's it and if that is not for you then perhaps a non-
302	faith school would be better for you.

141 **Do you think it's because Catholicism is the majority religion in the country? Is that why they**

142 **feel that it's all right to treat it a certain way.**

143 Yes. Let's say in Malahide you have maybe a 5% practice rate. How does Catholicism suddenly

144 become the majority religion? What exactly does a majority religion mean in the 2020s? Catholicism

145 in the traditional practice rate would be quite low. Nominally of course there will be all Catholics

146 because they have been baptized, married and buried in the church, but there probably wouldn't be the

147 church today as practicing Catholics at all.

148 **What's the answer to that? Would you prefer to see a situation where you'd have a smaller**

149 **number of Catholic schools that would have more children who are actually practicing?**

150 Well yes, you could have a smaller number. I suppose the bottom line is we have too many schools

151 anyway. In [name of county removed], we have ███ schools. Two- and three-teacher schools are

152 hardly viable. You could get rid of nearly 30 or 40 of them overnight. Again, the local community

153 would be up in arms over that.

154	**It would be an incredibly unpopular decision to make for the Department of Education.**
155	They want the bishops to make the decision, or the hierarchy or the Catholic Church or whoever this
156	being is that they think is out there that is running the schools. The local board run the school, really.
157	The main part of the patron is usually the patron appoints the board after they get the names in from
158	the local community. If there's a dispute suddenly, then the Department are very quick to say, "It's the
159	Patron's problem, not ours".
160	I suppose, the other issue then that I would have is they talk about multi-denominational schools. I
161	don't know what that means because they are not multi-denominational. Multi-denominational is
162	different denominations of Christianity. Non-faith schools and faith schools would be the definition I
163	would find most suitable. It'd be a better definition because a multidenominational school wouldn't
164	allow any atheists in. The ETB program is known as Goodness Me, Goodness You! but it's generally
165	known in the country as Godless me, Godless you. And that is because God and faith does not come
166	into it at all.

Catherine – Director of Schools, local ETB

136   **I'm assuming that's a non-negotiable when you go to these talks.**

137   Absolutely, non-negotiable. Absolutely. If there's any semblance of faith formation happening during

138   the school day, then that's not multi-denominational. So, we did explain as well, the Goodness Me,

139   Goodness You! curriculum which you know well yourself. I suppose we're at pains to explain how

140   part of that, I suppose one of the modules is about learning about and from all religions, beliefs, and

141   non-religious beliefs, and how important it is that everybody gets an opportunity to express who they

142   are and their own belief.

214   **And then in relation to challenges, have you come across many challenges where schools have**

215   **decided to reconfigure? Have there been barriers or have there been schools maybe that haven't**

216   **reconfigured that showed an interest, but it fell through?**

217   Yes. There was two that we'll say pursued it with us a few years ago. One was a small school in an

218   area of the county where when we looked at the figures, there was very little need for diversity in that

219   area. The school approached us because I'd say there was another school up the road doing much

220   better than them for whatever reason. They were losing numbers and they thought, "If we put a new

221   banner over the door, that might work for us". There was no great depth of thought and to be honest

222   with you, when we looked and we came back to them as much as we really would love another school

223   in this district because we had no school in that district in [name of area removed], we just said to

224   them, "Look, it's a fully Catholic school. From all our information, the parents wanted Catholic

225   education." That was the starting point. Then there was no point whatsoever in us going in with a

226   multi-denominational approach. We're only fooling ourselves and fooling you, so we didn't pursue

227   that one.

53   We might just focus on that idea of the community meeting because all of the participants I've

54   spoken to have brought it up and they all felt that was a seminal moment in their decision-

55   making around reconfiguration. You were present at the [school name removed] one. If you can

56   give me an idea of the sense of occasion that was there or how important that phase is in the

57   process.

58   It's a very exciting time. Now, there were numerous meetings. I was at the initial one. Now there was

59   voting and all that kind of stuff that I wasn't at later on. I remember at that time, the fact that it drew

60   such a crowd from the community I think is important, that it was, as I said, beyond just school

61   community, it was a sense of excitement, anticipation, doubt. Although the mood was very positive in

62   the community, there were some people who felt that the transfer of patronage was a transfer away

63   from tradition, away from Catholicism. There was a nervousness that this would bring about a change

64   that some people in the community felt wasn't needed and that they were eager to keep the Catholic

65   tradition going in the school. Overall, I have to say, and even the parents that were at that meeting

66   would have felt that they had already a lot in common with the CNS ethos that we would have sold. I

67   make that very clear at presentations. We outline the core values underpinning our ethos, like

68   excellence, education, care, community, some of those, and they were very evident in the school

69   already. Those kinds of community aspect of it was so clear that they strive very much to be an

70   inclusive school. We also have to highlight there are differences between us. I suppose, naming those

71   were the complex part of that meeting. That's where the most conversation happened around the

72   differences because they accepted and were proud of the similarities, what is around the differences

73   that people I think either said, "I'm excited about those differences," or "Those differences don't sit

74   well with me."

75   Can you just elaborate on what those differences were in your mind?

76   Yes, I suppose for me, I would have said things like excellence in education, that we will support you

77   in that, but I'm sure that's already happening, and inspectors will hold you accountable for that. There

78   are other support structures, PDST and so on to help you with that. Care, community I presume is

79   evident. The biggest differences were around being multi-denominational, and equality based as we

80   understand it, rather than Catholic. That there is an equality element to it which as we would have

81   said, I'm sure as teachers, and as a school, that you are as equality-based and inclusive as possible, but

82   that there are structural things in a denominational school that aren't inequality based. For example,

83   the fact that they have a Patron's curriculum and ethos that really do cater for one group and exclude

84   others, rather than one that assumes an equality of esteem for all. That would be a transformative shift

85   in the thinking of a school. Obviously, the patron's curriculum moving from the 'Grow in Love'

86   program to the 'Goodness Me, Goodness You!' curriculum was another seminal shift because it's two

87   and a half hours a week of their time. Not only is it a curriculum, but I suppose it's imbued with the

88   values of the ethos. It will take a lot for the school community to get their heads around that.

Appendix O: Transcript excerpts to support the theme of 'School choice'

Please note: Green highlighter used for quotes for theme of 'School choice'

Oisín – Teacher

195 I suppose if you impose something on people, they're less likely to do it or like it really. The 'Grow in
196 Love' programme is very much imposed on teachers in a Catholic school, and it's overloaded
197 completely on top of an already overloaded national curriculum. I made that point during the training
198 I went to for 'Grow in Love'. The facilitator was trying to say that we should be doing paperwork and
199 that we need to show the Cigire [inspector] that Catholic education is important, but the majority of
200 teachers in there more or less said that we don't feel that Catholic instruction is important. We are
201 young teachers. We're just teaching and trying to teach the curriculum. We don't feel the Catholic
202 instruction is important, and it just happens to be that we're employed by Catholic schools because
203 they're in the majority. The vast majority of young teachers would not feel the way the facilitator feels
204 about religious education. So it was very much imposed. It was very much forced on teachers, and she
205 tried to say that it was a core subject. She was hammering that home, that religion was a core subject.
206 It was very frustrating. People very angry with her, actually, because she tried to liken religious
207 education to Maths, Irish and English. Which is ridiculous.

254 We are kind of moving towards the wider discussion of the national policy of school
255 reconfiguration. Like, you're an anomaly, really, because you're one of the only Catholic schools
256 that has successfully achieved a live transfer of patronage. But when you look at the bigger
257 picture school reconfiguration hasn't taken off. So the Government have said that they want to
258 have 400 multi-denominational schools by 2030. But they've had 11 reconfigurations in the last
259 decade. Like we've talked about how Ireland's changing and modern families are different? But
260 yet there is just this reluctant, to change the education system. And why do you think that is?
261 Because, I suppose, it's just seen as the kids are going to school, and the teachers are teaching them,
262 and that's the way it is. And that's that. I'd say the majority of people are just indifferent to it. Aloof.
263 They're not really that bothered by it. I mean, the Church aren't as involved in recent years in a lot of
264 Catholic schools. Unless they need to be like they. If there's some kind of an issue. But in a lot of
265 cases they're a bit removed from the day to day schooling. It depends on the priest and the parish. It
266 depends on the bishop and the diocese. It's a very slow process you're talking about. There's a lot of
267 bureaucracy, for example the finances, who owns the land. The transfer of finances is a major issue.
268 The Church are very, very slow to let the finances go, even though it's not church money. It's money
269 that has been given by the State to the schools. We've had that issue here, money is outstanding. And
270 I'm sure it will be handed over eventually but it has been a complicated process I think. I think the
271 reluctance is as well is that it's the Church's property as well. It's a property thing. It's a power thing
272 for the Church. And I think that there just isn't the will there to do it either.

312 Do you think it would have worked in the school if, say, somebody came in two years ago and

313 said "Right, your school has been identified as one that will be changing its ethos". Do you think

314 that would have worked here?

315 Am I don't know. I think you kind of have to give the community a choice. The community voted on

316 it here, and it was kind of like, look, this is a way we can save the school. This is the way that the

317 school can attract numbers, especially with people moving into the area that are used to having

318 options or choice of where their children go. This gives parents an option for something different. We

319 have a bus coming from [name of neighbouring area removed] now because there's people interested

320 in their child attending a multidenominational school and they're coming from [name of another area

321 removed]. They're coming from all over the place because, they like the fact that we are a community

322 national school. ████████████████████████████

323 ████████████████████████████ And it's appealing to a

324 lot of young parents.

355 Yes, well, my last question for you is what advice you would give to another school thinking

356 about reconfiguring. Would you recommend it?

357 Er, yeah, it's an interesting journey. You'd have to be sure that you have the potential to grow, like

358 you don't want to stale. I'd recommend the change. It's a great thing to do for the school. It changes

359 the whole environment. Changes, for the kids as well. It's created an open learning environment. The

12

360 children, they're kind of outward thinking, their outward looking. They're reflecting on themselves

361 and reflecting on others. Difference is being celebrated here. So yeah, I would recommend it. I would

362 recommend it, but obviously there's a lot of work involved with. You're not guaranteed to succeed,

363 especially in rural Ireland, like it's always going to be a struggle for us to keep me here as the second

364 teacher. We're taking a lot of pupils in next year, but we'll have a fight for the following September

365 again. It'll always be that challenge. But I suppose you kind of have to just rise to that.

Maire – Parent

193   I find it refreshing to hear that confidence from a parent. You know, you were confident

194   enough to say "I'm a Catholic. I'm confident enough to pass it on to my children" because you

195   don't always get that. In my own opinion and experience there can sometimes be a bit of an over

196   reliance from parents on the school to do that. And when it comes to reconfiguration that

197   throws up a few problems because of a fear of not having that provided by the school.

198

199   You can't be afraid of it and you have to go with progress as well. Um, and I suppose the way we

200   looked at as well, it's kind of like, well, you know, if we didn't go down the route of changing to the

201   ETB now, well, chances are some other school in our area would probably go down the route of ETB

202   in the next five years, and then it would have been a lost opportunity for us. Our numbers would have

203   still been falling. And then chances are our doors would have closed. When we were in the process of

204   changing to the ETB as well, I think there was a school in County Clare that came on the news one

205   evening and they were locking the door for the final time. And we were kind of saying that could have

206   been us. The community was so adamant that it wasn't going to happen. And I suppose the ETB for us

207   was the best way forward, or it appeared to be the best way forward. Like, I suppose we were taking a

208   chance on it. And it's funny, like we're two years in now and like, thank God, it seems to be positive.

209   It seems to be, uh, what we wanted it to be. And I'd say, please God in five years' time, we will have a

210   thriving school there like we did in the past.

211

53   **I do. But I suppose my next question is, when you have that situation where you have a strong**

54   **relationship between the Church, the school and the home. How does school reconfiguration**

55   **come to be on the table?**

56

1

57   Yeah, it's very simple, you know, the area that the school is based in, you've seen the pictures. It's not

58   It's not a big area, you know. And like, I suppose similar to all areas in this part of the county, there is

59   a declining population. Just because there are no jobs, you know. And so when I came here the

60   numbers in the school were fluctuating around ███ pupils. And, obviously, um, they [the

61   community] could see that, they, uh how will I put it? The community. Well, first of all, we're

62   concerned about the declining of the numbers, you know? Yes. They wanted their schools, they

63   wanted this school. They didn't want to let the school die, you know, just because of lack of numbers.

64   And that was really a possibility, you know. So I suppose they thought that if it was a multi-

65   denominational school, like, you know, a community national school, that there may be people, um,

66   of other religious or non-religious persuasions, you know, who will be attracted to it? Because, a

67   community national school, well it would be able to acknowledge people who are non-Catholic. And,

68   it might attract some non-Catholics from outside that catchment area. They would be enticed by that

69   because it can be very stressful and anxious for some parents, you know, for their children. You

70   know, for example, there were two children in a Catholic school in a neighbouring village whose

71   parents decided to move them to the school when it changed to a community national school. Their

72   parents weren't happy for their children to be there [in the Catholic school] while religion was

73   happening. And we respect that of course, but they would prefer them not to be in the church or

74   listening to it [religious education] in the classroom, just doing nothing or doing something else, while

75   the others are being taught religion. So we knew there were people that were looking for something

312 There was a case. I don't know if you've seen it now, but near Malahide in Dublin, a number of

313 schools in that area were approached about reconfiguring. And there was huge backlash from

314 parents and from the staff of those schools. There was all sorts of misinformation out there.

315 "Christmas was cancelled" was the headline in some papers. And it was just such a shame to

316 see, the amount of distrust that was there and fear. I think people probably trust the Catholic

317 Church to do education well.

318

319 I don't know. To be honest I haven't thought about it, you see people have been accustomed to this

320 mentality all their lives, right? This is the only model that they know so suddenly, you know, change.

321 Oh, why? Change, they fear it. It's this unknown that they have, this misperception that they have

322 about these communities national schools. People need to be educated and informed about what

323 community national schools really are and there's nothing about being anti-Catholic or anti-Christian

324 or anti-religious. No.

325

17   to generation. That really stuck with me. So, you could tell me about your own role in relation

18   to [name of case study school removed] or even I know there's been other schools in your county

19   that have reconfigured, so if you want to talk to me about what your role in that is?

20   One school had no teacher, no pupils and no parents. The school closed on the 31st of August because

21   it ran out of everything, and on the 1st of September it started as a local Community National School.

22   It wasn't really a re-configuration in that sense, in that we're just leasing the building to them. There

23   was no transfer of teachers or pupils or anything like that so really, it's only two schools that have do a

24   live reconfiguration. They call it live transfer when you're talking about pupils, teachers et cetera, et

25   cetera as well as leasing the building. [pause] Really and truly the schools were failing.

1

26   Yes, they were in trouble with numbers.

27   They were going to close. Out of the ███ pupils we have in national schools in this county, we

28   gave over ██ pupils. To say that we had a huge divestment program wouldn't be right, it wasn't really

29   that. It was either close or try something a bit different. They said, "Look this is our final throw of the

30   dice. We'd love to keep the local schools there if we could".

31   We said, "Look, if the community are interested in that, we won't stand in your way. It's your school."

32   "What do the locals think?" You know and the locals [name of case study school] …Let's say it was

33   quite divisive. There were two sides to it, obviously. One wanted to keep the Catholic school, the

34   parish school and the other ones-- the others were willing to try something different because they

35   thought it was going to close if it was kept going as a Catholic school. They talked to the ETB, and

36   they had parish meetings, and the ETB and myself went down and had a meeting with the two of us

37   there. Actually, the hall was packed, standing room only. Even out in the hall, outside the hall, there

38   were people standing. It was an amazing community. They all turned up and they asked as many

39   questions as they wanted to. I was given the lovely job of chairing it.

40   What they had to keep on the agenda was the discussion of the school. You couldn't stand up and say,

41   "Well our school will be fine if people like ye on the other side would just send your children here."

42   Parents were not sending their children to the school. They were sending them out of the area. But all

43   the children from the area, always when they go to secondary school, they go to the ETB school.

448 That's very clear. I think I found some documentation where they wanted to have the 400

449 schools by 2030 through what they called a zero investments model.

450 They're going to have to organize buses for the schools. They're going to have to organize to pay for

451 the board of the management, and they'll get a higher rate of capitation and all these things and yet

452 they to expect to break even? I don't know. It doesn't add up. It doesn't add up. And because they have

453 no policies and no idea of what's happening, it's time-consuming. And if you think about the numbers

454 of this. Its three schools but really, it's █ pupils in total. So, they might be able to say we divested

455 three school in [name of county removed] but when you actually look at how many families that

456 actually impacted, it's a very small number. Then you have to go to the local papers, the local radio

457 ringing up, "What's happening?" and you would have to make statements that are factually correct but

19

458 still saying nothing. [chuckles] It all takes time, but there's nothing. There's no help from the

459 department really, at the end of the day. They like the idea of this.

1 What are the defining features of a Catholic primary school in Ireland? The reason I ask this is

2 because sometimes the understanding Catholic schools varies internationally.

3 The main feature of a Catholic primary school is that it's a parish school and it's closely connected to

4 the parish and that makes it a very localized entity. It isn't a Department of Education school, and the

5 Catholic Church is too big an entity, too wide, too broad, too vague-- most schools are parish schools

6 and they're following the tenets of the Catholic faith and the program for the Catholic Education,

7 agreed by the Catholic Church is taught in the school. Jesus Christ is a central part obviously of the

8 school and the teachings of the Catholic Church. I think one of the most defining features is that both

9 the local parish and the school are very closely tied together.

318 **It'd be fair to say that, it hasn't been completely smooth sailing. From speaking to the ETB, they**
319 **would have said, "Oh, it's been very positive." But it does sound like there have been some**
320 **teething issues.**

321 Oh, there is, yes. We get on very well with the ETB. We have regular meetings with them, and I know
322 [name of ETB director of schools removed]. We get on well but at the end of the day, their ethos is
323 coming from higher up the line as well. So, who is making the decisions is probably the biggest
324 question in any school. That's why the Community National School, it isn't the community, whereas
325 in the Parish National School, it tends to be the local parishioners that are on the board.

326 No one else will go on the board except those that are interested in the school, the local school, local
327 community. The priest, for the time anyway, is usually on the board, but that probably won't be
328 happening the next time, I'd say the priest will leave the boards. Traditionally we were the Chair
329 always, which was a crazy thing. That was a big-time commitment, but when there was a lot of
330 priests, there were no issues. As the number of priests is getting smaller, I don't think being on the
331 board will be the important thing, but it will just, "You'll be chaplain to the school and involved in the
332 school in that way." The chairperson will be nominated by the parish, which is what happens at the
333 moment. There's only two parish priests in chair now in **[name of county removed]** out of 150

334 schools. We've given up the chair for the last two boards and the parish priest nominates the Parish
335 Councilor, the parish priest and parish council nominates one or two people for the board and then
336 they consult maybe with the-- Usually they have a good relationship with the principal, they talk to
337 the principal say, "Would they make a good chair?" and they would say oh yes they would be grand.
338 The Chair and one other person is nominated by the patron officially. It's not the bishop there, picking
339 300 people to sit on boards. It's the local parish that do that. The Bishop rubber stamps it more than
340 anything else. Of course, if there is a huge dispute and it has been through the grievance process, it
341 goes to the Bishop eventually, or his office. And they try and solve the whole issue before it all hits
342 the fan.

53 Of course, they were saying, "If we give away our school, will you close our church?" That was a big

54 issue for them as well. I said, "No. You won't have a priest probably when Father [name removed]

55 retires. I said, "you probably wouldn't be getting a Parish Priest" I said, "but as long as you can

56 support your church and keep it up, I said it will be there. If you can't maintain it or can't insure it, and

57 can't do everything, then the church-- well that's your decision. It has nothing to do with the school."

58 We separated that and they were happy enough with that. They were quite happy then. It was

59 basically a case that they wanted assurances on those kinds of things. That was my role. It wasn't up

60 to the parents, obviously. It had to be the parish community. The parish council, the parish community

61 because the existing parents of ▌ wouldn't decide anything, only the present ones. The past ones

62 and the future ones are also really important. The parish had to agree as well so you had the board of

63 management, the teachers, the parish all had to agree before they had a vote. They were all in

64 agreement, a substantial number agreed to try this as the last resort, they were determined to keep the

65 school open. The trouble is the population isn't there. Transferring to the ETB isn't going to create

66 more babies in the area and I said that at the meeting.

113   **It seems to be a very localized process that changes depending on the context and the people**

114   **involved so it's just how do you actually do that at a national level?**

115   Yes. It's very difficult. I suppose that's why it comes into this, it's a parish school. The Bishop has no

116   say in that school. Who's going to decide which school is going to go if a parish has four schools?

117   Who's going to decide? It came up at a meeting, a public meeting and the local county councilors

118   were saying that "Look we have to divest, we have to divest." The parish priest said, "Right, you're

119   the local councilors. Tell me which school do you want to divest." They wouldn't answer him because

120   they knew they'd lose votes in all that area if they answered him. The department won't make the

121   decision and the Bishop isn't going to make the decision. The Bishop becomes patron because the

122   local community have asked him to be patron. That's where the big stall or the roadblock is in that no

123   one will make the decision. Sure, we seen it in Malahide, it was the big thing there. They were saying,

124   "Oh, Christmas should be cancelled." The celebration of Christmas will be canceled. What they meant

125   by the celebration of Christmas is school plays, Nativity plays and carol services. They are only done

126   once every three years in non-faith schools. They celebrate Eid one year; they celebrate a Pagan

127   festival another year and then celebrate Christmas. They do parts of Christmas from an educational

128   point of view. Of course, the media took it up, it was all there would be no Christmas, Santa was

129   canceled which wasn't the case.

275 Okay and what if the Department came out and said, "Right. We want this school," would that
276 be well received by the Bishops either?

277 Would it be well-received by the local community? It's the local community that would have to be
278 convinced and that they would have to deal with, not the bishops.

279 Yes. That's the last question, really. Progress to date has just been so slow. Why is that?

280 Because why should the Bishops have to lead on this? It's a burden trying to get a board of
281 management for a parish and things. If that's what parishes want to do, why would the bishops say,
282 "Well, we don't want you, really"?

283 It's grand if you've got a very vocal crowd-- and there's a Dublin issue, maybe the East, well mainly
284 Dublin. I mean the Baptismal barrier only ever was an issue in a small number of schools in the
285 Dublin area. Every other school in the country takes every pupil they get whatever denomination they

286 are. Because there's no issue. There was one person that to me said, "Look, I'd have to put up a sign
287 outside my school--" it's a very big Catholic school. He says, "We are a Catholic school, based in the
288 community and we educate everyone together." Then the ETB and Educate Together were up in arms
289 and just going mad.

290 And is that criticism not in some way fair? Because I hear the argument that a Catholic school
291 is inclusive, but at the end of the day, there will be children left out on things like sacramental
292 preparation. What's your response to that argument?

293 Yes, there will. Catholic schools, I think should be more Catholic. Then if parents-- Parental choice
294 has to be the first thing. If parents want them to go to a Catholic school, that's fine. Then if parents
295 want them to be taken out from the sacraments or religion then the parents have to decide how they're
296 going to do that.

Catherine – Director of Schools in local ETB

248 It does seem to have fallen off the agenda and that's probably not helping things. I know a lot of

249 the schools in your county would have been early movers or the ones that self-selected to move

250 over as opposed to say I know in Malahide; I think it was two years ago there was schools where

251 the patron tried to identify schools themselves and it backfired. Do you think that approach

252 would ever work in this area, where it wasn't the school's own decision to change but rather,

253 they were being told by their Catholic patron, "Right, you've been identified. Can you change

254 over?"

10

Interview Transcript PR3

255 I think that one immediate step that would be important, I don't think it would be wise for the Catholic

256 Church to identify their own schools. I don't think that would be wise, but I do think there's one

257 missing step there that would be very helpful and that is that schools would be informed of the model.

258 That would be a department approved activity or approved action that we would provide information

259 for anyone who wanted to come to a meeting about Community National Schools and that we could

260 write to all schools in our county, or the department would and say the ETB would provide

261 information on this online or however at a meeting once a year. And perhaps that would be a way to

262 get those numbers moving. I think there should be at least a once-a-year information session online in

263 every district or in every ETB district where we would get a recommendation to anyone who wanted

264 to come and hear about Community National Schools. You'd be advising boards of management and

265 principals of the National Schools of that.

288 **It's quite slow in education to actually see change though, do you know? There's a lot of public**

289 **outrage over the likes of health when it's discussed. I find personally there's a bit more apathy**

290 **in relation to education and I just wonder why that is, I suppose.**

291 There are a few things that are controversial because people have just accepted it the way it is over the

292 years, and they didn't see that there was an alternative and most people still wouldn't be aware of the

293 alternative. It does take a bit of work on behalf of the community to make a change in your local

294 community. It takes effort and action from people locally and it takes courage because you're standing

295 up to very, very strong traditional institutions. The people who came to us in [place name removed]

296 you know, their school was closed for a year because of issues and it took a lot of courage for them

297 because they were a very quiet and unassuming group of people, they faded into the background as

298 soon as the school started but it took a lot of courage for them to organise a public meeting and say,

299 "Let's do something about this." It took a lot of the same with [place name removed] because it was a

300 little bit more, I suppose, tense in that community and it took a lot of courage for, again, the local

301 community to come out and actually make, take the action, organise the meetings, get people together.

302 Make sure the people turned up for the meeting, make sure that everybody knew about it, get fliers

303 out there. That's a lot of work for the local community to do that. They must be very dissatisfied or

304 worried about the future of their school before they will go to those lengths. And people aren't

305 dissatisfied enough. They say sure "Look, we will keep going with what we have" or they haven't

306 thought about it really and then maybe, as I said, they're not aware there is an alternative. There

307 actually is an alternative that's very close to us.

317 **You've had such a positive experience with your diocese where there seems to be a real**

318 **willingness there and an appreciation of the community's wishes. If that wasn't the case, it**

319 **probably wouldn't have worked?**

320 It wouldn't because we'd be forever having-- like the Bishop has continuously said in [name of county

321 removed] he will act on the will of the people and the clergy is saying they want change. He won't

322 stand in the way and that is a very Christian and democratic approach. It's truly Christian. "We'll

323 accept what people are asking for and we're listening to them and we're supporting them," and I think

324 that should be commended. On the other hand, I can understand how if I was a patron, I wouldn't want

325 to lose my schools either. If I look at today's schools, we have 11 schools now. I don't want to lose

326 any of those as a patron. I can understand that position because I'm the current patron, but I think the

327 current patron needs to look at why it needs to be in school patronage because, are you there for the

328 education or are you there for the religious doctrine, really? I think, what I would look for from the

329 Catholic Church is that they would reflect on that and look at why are we in education and should we

330 be reviewing that and looking at where that fits in the community?

John – ETBI	

96   My understanding was that the main motivator behind the change in the case study school was

97   to entice new enrolments to keep the doors of the school open, as opposed to say what maybe the

98   reconfiguration process was originally envisaged to be for, where's there's diversity and there's

99   a real need. I wonder what you think about that? Do you think that rationale is problematic, or

100 is it just positive that is going to be more multi-denominational students?

101 Yes. In our existing schools, I'm delighted that all of them are parts of CNS family because they're all

102 fantastic, but I suppose the big shock for me in my role has been that I presumed in the

103 reconfiguration space that I would be spending most of my time in urban areas, in Dublin, Cork,

104 Galway, at Limerick, in areas where there were big populations and schools, where there was

4

105 genuinely religious and belief diversity, multiculturalism, and so on. That the principals and board of

106 management identified an issue and said, "Look, does this ethos really match our school population?

107 We're constantly told that the whole idea of plurality of provision in Ireland is to meet the needs of a

108 more pluralist Ireland. Yet, the vast majority of schools that have reconfigured aren't that

109 demographically heterogeneous. It's been mostly in small rural schools. [Name of school removed]

110 was the first live school transfer, other schools had been closed completely in quite rural areas. It has

111 absolutely surprised me that that has been the case. Now, we need to be very careful strategically as

112 ETBs how we proceed in this area because the demographics indicate that primary schools have

113 reached a peak, their numbers are going down over the next number of years.

253   **We've looked at consultation and negotiation as a community between patrons. Between ETBI**

254   **or ETBs and the Catholic Church, would there be a lot of negotiations that take place between**

255   **yourselves in order to get to the point of a reconfiguration?**

256   That's very much context-dependent in terms of the locality. That has varied from location to location.

257   Generally, you'll find that if the-- Now we're very clear that we will not go near a school unless their

258   existing patron has given permission for another patron to come in because obviously if there was

259   another patron rocking up to one of our Community National Schools was trying to take it over, it

260   would just not be appropriate. We check in with the school, we check with the patron, and go, "Look,

261   we have been requested to do a presentation." I'd say that one very respectfully. Generally, if the

262   school community expresses their desire to move, I haven't yet met a bishop. Actually, I've only

263   experienced once where Bishop has refused that, but in the main, the Bishop will go with the desire of

264   the school community, and they should be acknowledged for that they do respond to the desire of the

265   school of community. We saw the example in Malahide Portmarnock, where there was an attempt to

266   have a conversation and that backfired hugely. Now I think there's a huge reluctance for bishops to

267   engage with their own schools about reconfiguration based on that.

190 **Okay. That's fair enough. The case study school was an early mover school, they self-selected to**
191 **reconfigure, that I suppose it was an added clause into the whole reconfiguration process. Prior**
192 **to that, the idea was that the patron, the current or denominational patron, would select a**
193 **school from the area and say, "Will you consider reconfiguration based on maybe levels of**
194 **diversity or whatnot?" That obviously never got off the ground or wasn't very successful. Is**
195 **there any issue with that? That idea of should it be a school's choice, or should the patron be**
196 **encouraging schools to make the change?**

197 It's a really complex question, Jacinta, because the 'early movers' was an add on, but it's been the only
198 show in town so far. That's good in terms of, but it's always important not to coerce anybody into
199 anything, but I genuinely have come to the view that the 2030 which I previously thought was
200 unambitious is not going to happen. It will not be achieved as long as it's down to communities to
201 self-select or the existing patron to pick one. I think that there has been lots of public declarations
202 from particularly the Catholic church because they hold the majority of the schools of their
203 willingness to divest. They genuinely face problems in convincing school communities to change
204 because people are used to what they're used to. People don't like change. They fear that a change in
205 ethos might mean a change in teacher, principal that they like and know. I think as long as we're
206 trying to, I think something more far more radical needs to happen to bring about meaningful change
207 in Ireland. That could be through a national conversation about our current educational system. For
208 example, there's a huge debate now around the national maternity hospital, the States' ownership over

209 the hospital, Catholic ownership of the hospital, yet people haven't made the connection across to
210 education. It seems that the public seem to have a very strong opinion on church control over babies
211 and infants. Yet from 4 to 18, it seems to not transfer to that level. I think that a national conversation
212 that can only be brought about it through maybe, I don't know what citizens' assembly or to have a big
213 conversation about the patronage system I think has to happen for people to even be aware of the fact
214 that the Irish education system is unique and anomalous to other education systems across the world. I
215 don't think Irish people know that, that's our norm. For example, when I was trained to be a teacher, I
216 never questioned that it was always going to be part of my role to faith-form the next generation. It
217 was just something that I had no idea until I moved abroad and saw other school systems and then
218 came back and went, "Oh, that's not part of everybody's role as a teacher." It doesn't just go hand in
219 hand with teaching. That's a very Irish thing. I don't think that people understand that. Even teachers, I
220 meet them all the time in teacher training colleges. Because they've gone through a Catholic education
221 system and that's their norms that they have been told all their lives, they haven't questioned just yet
222 either.

Appendix P: Transcript excerpts to support the theme of 'Identity'

Please note: Grey highlighter used for quotes for theme of 'Identity'

Oisín – Teacher
332   **So, when I was looking at the CSO data for the area it did show some inward migration, so**
333   **there are obviously people moving there. I wonder will the option of multi-denominational**
334   **education help with that?**
335   Yeah, and there are diverse range of people living in this area now. And I'm not just on about people
336   who are culturally diverse or religiously diverse, but people from all walks of life with different
337   outlooks and values. And that brings a real richness to the area, it brings people with different
338   outlooks and I think our little school will get people thinking. [Name of county removed] is like that.
339   It's diverse place, like you have people who are very traditional and conservative,› and you have
340   people who are less so and then you have people who are a bit out there too. We have a real mix of
341   people on the [name of area removed] and that makes the [name of area removed] very interesting.
153   **And is it fair to say that as a teacher you can be fully open about who you are? When you**
154   **worked in a denominational school, did you feel like you had to toe the line and be seen to**
155   **uphold the school's values?**
156   I'm not exactly a practising Catholic. Neither would I say that I am an atheist or anything like that,
157   but, um, I wouldn't be practicing, and I suppose when I worked in a Catholic school, or when I was
158   going for a job interview, I'd be kind of…. I wouldn't have tried to hide it as such but at the same time
159   I wouldn't have been telling everyone. The last school I was in there was a lot of young teachers, the

16	**Okay and what made you decide that this is a school I want to work in? When you saw the job**
17	**come up, was the fact that it was a multi-denominational school an attractive selling point? Bear**
18	**in mind I'm totally aware that when you live in rural Ireland, you often don't have the luxury of**
19	**choice and it's just a job in the right location.**
20	At the end of the day, it was it was a permanent job in [location name removed]. My wife and I had
21	just moved down from [name of location removed] and it was a permanent job. They're not easy to
22	come by in this area at all. So that was the big factor. But the fact that there was something different
23	or special happening here with the reconfiguration and that it's a Community National School was
24	also quite exciting. Personally, I really believe that the religion, as it's currently taught, like with faith
25	formation, should be taken out of the schools. I think that every school should be multi-
26	denominational. Every child should be on an equal footing when they walk in the door regardless of
27	their beliefs. There shouldn't be one religion that is prioritised. It should be just multi-denominational
28	where children learn about all religions and beliefs and ethical education. That's my belief. So because
29	of that it would have appealed to me to go for this job. Yes, definitely.

82   **And just to be devil's advocate, some people would say right, you know, you're teaching in the**

83   **middle of a rural area with very little diversity, sure those children don't need to know about**

84   **different religions and all that. What do you say to those people? Because that argument is often**

85   **thrown about.**

86   Actually, as far as I know that was an issue when the changeover was being considered. People were

87   afraid that by changing from a Catholic ethos that God was going to be taken out of the school. But

88   the parish were to step up and provide religion classes outside of school. But, a lot of the kids in our

89   school, their parents wouldn't be religious and don't align themselves with any church. And there's

90   people of different faiths from different nationalities. So while the majority faith is Catholic, we

91   actually have a lot who wouldn't be practicing or are non-religious. But, um, yeah, I suppose that

92   argument was there, but I just think that, there is children from Russia, Germany, England in our

93   school. Inside, in [neighbouring area name removed] there's people from India and China and

94   Thailand and different nationalities. So it's not something that we should be closed off from. As an

95   argument it just doesn't stand up.

175 **It's amazing what Children pick up on, you know. And has attending religion outside of school**

176 **been an upheaval or are the enthusiastic about it?**

177

178 No, they're happy out there. Happy out doing it. Like, and they're like, it's over Zoom at the minute. I

179 suppose they're happy out to be at home. And, you know, they're very engaged with it. Like the lovely

180 religious stories that they have now. And we go to mass on Sunday as well. Well we've been kind of

181 tuning in online with my parents and stuff as well during lockdown. So, like, I would be one of those

182 parents that would be adamant that my children will do their communion and do their religion and go

183 to mass on Sunday up until they're 18, and then after that, they can go and make their own choices.

184 But like, it is very important to me. That's why I suppose you know, when we were in discussions

185 about changing the ethos, like, people were probably surprised when I was enthusiastic about the

186 change. Because they were saying, "well, sure, and you, your Catholic, and like you want your

187 children to do this and that". And I was saying, yeah, and they will do it and if I have to, I'll be the

188 one to organise the classes for them outside of school, you know? Yeah, I kind of feel like if you want

189 your children to do something, make it happen for them, you know, And the bigger picture for me

190 was, as I said before, the future of the school, and to make sure that the school was there for

191 generations to come.

192

66 **Yeah, very good. And it sounds like, you know, you've gotten the best of both worlds?**

67

68 Yeah, but do you know, we bring our children to football and we bring our children to basketball and

69 we bring them to music and drama and dancing. So it's kind of like, well, this is one extra thing. If

70 you want your child to have Catholic faith formation, you know, you have to bring them to religion.

71 And it was like, well, you bring them to everything else that's important to you. If this is important to

72 you, then you bring your child to this as well. And you know I suppose in a way it will actually make

73 parents… [pause]. A lot of parents, religion, it's like a token gesture to make communion and to make

74 confirmation. You're doing it because everyone else is doing it. But, like if you actually have to think

75 about, well, why are you actually doing it? And if you have to bring your children to religion

76 specifically, well, you know, maybe it actually increases your own faith as well. And yeah, you know,

77 if you are making that choice it might actually make your children have a deeper belief in it as well.

78

217   That's great. And actually, I've looked at a few schools that have changed over and across the

218   board where there's been a small school it seems to have given them that boost that that they've

219   needed? Because I am in a small rural community too and the local school is a lifeline. If you

220   don't have your school in your local village it's a terrible tragedy.

7

221

222   Yeah, Yeah. Oh, my God. It is absolutely. Like when our numbers were at ▇▇▇▇ Oh, my God.

223   Like the thought of it would break your heart. Like for our community, if our schools did close, like,

224   half of our children would probably go to [place name omitted] and the other half of our children

225   would probably go to [place name omitted]. So, like, the children from here would actually lose their

226   identity. Like if you had a child and your next door neighbour had a child and they were going to

227   different schools, there's a chance that they would hardly even be friends with each other, you know.

228   Because you depend on that local school to make those bonds and connections, don't you? And to

229   develop your connection to your area. Like when you go away to college or to work or whatever. Like

230   you still have the bond or a connection to the people that you grew up with and went to school with

231   and like, they're kind of your clan, do you know?

232

339

45   **But I'm sure it was hard to let go of that tradition of Catholic education because it sounds like**

46   **it was really well established in the area.**

47

48   Yeah, well, I think what made it not as difficult as what you would think it would be was the fact that

49   the people who were involved in it were adamant that we wouldn't be losing our Catholic education.

50   We stipulated from the very start that it wasn't about religion. It was about ensuring the viability of

51   the school in the future, and in all the discussions that took place, we emphasised that we wanted the

52   religion made available in the school after school hours for the children that wanted to continue their

53   Catholic education, you know?

1

54   So we were not losing the religion. We're actually keeping it after school in the school building,

55   outside of school hours. Your children are actually going to be getting a different model with the

56   Goodness Me, Goodness You! curriculum. And on top of that, they're also going to still get their

57   Catholic education outside of school. So we were adamant that we weren't going to lose the religion,

58   that we were going to make it available there for the people that wanted to continue having faith

59   formation for their children and we kind of said as well, if we do attract people from other religions

60   then we would actively encourage that those other religions would also be catered for outside of

61   school hours, but in the school building. So that was like, really important to us because, like the vast

62   majority of the parents there are still Catholic. And you know what? Like we were adamant that we

63   wanted the school to continue, but we were also adamant that we wanted the religion to continue, but

64   just that it would follow a different model.

65

130 Very good, it's lovely to hear that. I think it's so important as well. I'm a teacher myself as well

131 and I taught in a really diverse area for many years, but I am from the countryside and

132 sometimes when I say that I think it's important for children to learn about things like that, I

133 often hear the argument, "Oh, sure they don't need to know about other religions because we

134 don't have much diversity in our area". And my argument was always well, your child probably

135 isn't going to live in this rural area forever because, like, unfortunately job prospects are

136 usually elsewhere. So I agree with you. I think it's really, really important.

137

4

138 Yeah, absolutely. Because especially like, society is changing, whether people like or not, it's

139 changing. And like, as you say, our children are not going to live in rural Ireland, probably for the rest

140 of their life. Like best case scenario, like they will get educated here, they will move out. Then they

141 would experience the world and then when they decide to have their families, they will come back

142 and rare them here again. But like we want to prepare them for the real world. And I think tolerance is

143 such a huge thing, you know, and that you actually, like, have to learn to live in harmony in society.

144

141   Even if the Board of Management were in favour, and the parents were in favour, it didn't matter. We

142   needed the community to get behind it. Because that school has been there for maybe ███ years or

143   even more. And many of those people have contributed, maybe, uh, financially and otherwise, and

144   have been part and parcel of it. So they also have a say, you know, in in deciding whether the school

145   is going to remain Catholic or become a community national school. And so, I began the meeting and

146   I welcomed everybody. I've never seen such a huge crowd. It was packed and it was great. And I

147   handed over to the local ETB and they had a PowerPoint presentation that lasted about 20 minutes.

148   Then the people were able to put questions to the ETB. And after the questions were answered, we

149   asked the ETB representatives to leave the meeting. And then the bishop's secretary took over, and he

150   chaired the rest of the meeting. And he did an excellent job. He did an excellent, excellent job. There

151   was, uh, we handed out the ballots and then people came forward put them into a box. And then he

152   [the Bishop's secretary] took that box away. And, as it turned out, there was over two-thirds in favour

153   of changing. Now, that meeting was so productive. One of the very anti-move people, you know, who

154   wanted it to be Catholic by all means and had been very belligerent about it. And he said, after that

155   meeting "I don't care now what way it turns out, because I understand everything" you know. Which

156   was great. He phoned me the following morning, you know, and he says "now I am very happy,

157   because the local ETB put forward everything". The whole community were informed and were

158   involved. And it was really their decision. And then, the bishop had no problem in supporting it

159   because it was the wishes of over two thirds of the community. So that listening process worked very,

160   very well.

161

1   **Just if you tell me about the school and your relationship to it before it reconfigured.**

2   Yeah, yes, very simply Okay. I was appointed down here 3 and a half years ago, you know, to this

3   parish. And of course I was very happy about that because it's a rural area and a beautiful landscape.

4   And, um, I would always say that the local school is a very, very important part of the ministry for the

5   local priest. Just going in, showing a presence, you know, never asking them whether they go to

6   church or anything like that, but just getting to know them and then allowing them to get to know me,

7   as a normally person, you know, who I am, what I am interested in, like ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ and

8   all of those things. And I have an excellent, um, relationship there with this school. Plus also the fact

9   that I inherited from my predecessor that I was chairperson of the Board of Management. Now, that is

10 something that I would have been as happy not to have to tell you the truth, because sometimes, you

11 know, when your chairperson and you are the Parish Priest, your position can be kind of

12 compromised, you know? Yes, but I had a great relationship, you know, with the teachers, and with

13 the Children as well. So much so, that most of them would have been going to church, I'd say. And,

14 um and nearly all of those who were who in the 5th and 6th classes, who were Catholics, they all

15 became mass-servers, you know, and just loved it. There's a whole lovely, lovely relationship, you

16 know, that you get to have when you work with a school, and it's great that you can encourage them

17 [the children] and talk to them about their lives. I would have come in to them [the children], uh, with

18 my bicycle and all dressed up in my cycling gear and spoken to them about the importance of outdoor

19 activity. You know, and that here was I, in my late sixties at the time, you know? And they have the

20 whole world before them. But when they go home not to be sitting in front of the television at the

21 computer but to be enjoying outdoor activity, you know? And they [the children] would all know me,

22 you know, as a priest who was very much there with people, and, of course, the school. So it kind of I

23 suppose. I don't know. Does that kind of answer your first question?

253 **For years in Ireland there's been a tradition where the school has maybe carried a lot of the**

254 **responsibility for passing on the faith. Would that be fair to say?**

255 Absolutely, absolutely, you know, yeah, I agree one hundred percent. And that's why, I was very

256 happy, you know, with what happened in this school because it puts the emphasis back on the parents,

257 back on the home. Because like I said, if it doesn't happen in the home is not going to happen at all.

258 When I worked in the local big town, I mean, for confirmation you would have full churches, huge

259 classes, some schools had three tiers, so maybe 90 children for confirmation there. And then, the

260 following Sunday, after the confirmation, you wouldn't get three or four children. And that's it.

261 They're gone. I mean, when people are confirmed, that's it. Bye bye to the church, you know? So I

262 don't know if I told you the story, this is the lovely story, you will laugh. About this priest, you know,

263 he had terrible trouble with the bats and how to get rid of the bats from the roof of the church. He

264 tried everything. Everything, you name it. Then an old man came up to him and said, "Father I'll tell

265 you now, if who want to get rid of them confirm them".

266

26   Yes, they were in trouble with numbers.

27   They were going to close. Out of the ███████ pupils we have in national schools in this county, we

28   gave over ███ pupils. To say that we had a huge divestment program wouldn't be right, it wasn't really

29   that. It was either close or try something a bit different. They said, "Look this is our final throw of the

30   dice. We'd love to keep the local schools there if we could".

31   We said, "Look, if the community are interested in that, we won't stand in your way. It's your school."

32   "What do the locals think?" You know and the locals [name of case study school] …Let's say it was

33   quite divisive. There were two sides to it, obviously. One wanted to keep the Catholic school, the

34   parish school and the other ones-- the others were willing to try something different because they

35   thought it was going to close if it was kept going as a Catholic school. They talked to the ETB, and

36   they had parish meetings, and the ETB and myself went down and had a meeting with the two of us

37   there. Actually, the hall was packed, standing room only. Even out in the hall, outside the hall, there

38   were people standing. It was an amazing community. They all turned up and they asked as many

39   questions as they wanted to. I was given the lovely job of chairing it.

40   What they had to keep on the agenda was the discussion of the school. You couldn't stand up and say,

41   "Well our school will be fine if people like ye on the other side would just send your children here."

42   Parents were not sending their children to the school. They were sending them out of the area. But all

43   the children from the area, always when they go to secondary school, they go to the ETB school.

44   Okay so there's a connection there already.

45   There's a huge connection. So, the ETB isn't this new thing that's all coming in out of nowhere. The

46   secondary school in [name of local town removed], which is for the whole area is ETB and therefore

47   that's a huge part of it. It wasn't kind of being given over to some crowd in Dublin. They were given

48   to the crowd that were running [name of local secondary school removed].

49   Right, so there was still that kind of local knowledge.

345

1   **What are the defining features of a Catholic primary school in Ireland? The reason I ask this is**

2   **because sometimes the understanding Catholic schools varies internationally.**

3   The main feature of a Catholic primary school is that it's a parish school and it's closely connected to

4   the parish and that makes it a very localized entity. It isn't a Department of Education school, and the

5   Catholic Church is too big an entity, too wide, too broad, too vague-- most schools are parish schools

6   and they're following the tenets of the Catholic faith and the program for the Catholic Education,

7   agreed by the Catholic Church is taught in the school. Jesus Christ is a central part obviously of the

8   school and the teachings of the Catholic Church. I think one of the most defining features is that both

9   the local parish and the school are very closely tied together.

52   **Yes, okay. I understand.**

53   Of course, they were saying, "If we give away our school, will you close our church?" That was a big

54   issue for them as well. I said, "No. You won't have a priest probably when Father [name removed]

55   retires. I said, "you probably wouldn't be getting a Parish Priest" I said, "but as long as you can

56   support your church and keep it up, I said it will be there. If you can't maintain it or can't insure it, and

57   can't do everything, then the church-- well that's your decision. It has nothing to do with the school."

58   We separated that and they were happy enough with that. They were quite happy then. It was

59   basically a case that they wanted assurances on those kinds of things. That was my role. It wasn't up

60   to the parents, obviously. It had to be the parish community. The parish council, the parish community

61   because the existing parents of ████ wouldn't decide anything, only the present ones. The past ones

62   and the future ones are also really important. The parish had to agree as well so you had the board of

63   management, the teachers, the parish all had to agree before they had a vote. They were all in

64   agreement, a substantial number agreed to try this as the last resort, they were determined to keep the

65   school open. The trouble is the population isn't there. Transferring to the ETB isn't going to create

66   more babies in the area and I said that at the meeting.

346

361 **What would you say if I said that if there were less Catholic schools, and more Community**

362 **National Schools, where parents would have to take responsibility for their child's religion, you**

363 **might actually have less children making their sacraments but the ones you do have would**

364 **actually be practicing their faith?**

365 Yes. It's interesting. Like it will be interesting to see in the three schools that have divested now, what

366 will happen when they suddenly realize, "Oh, I haven't bothered going to the classes for religion and I

367 want to make my communion"? They're told, "You can't. We don't know who you are." That's when

368 there will be issues and then the local parish is going to become the big baddie for refusing

369 communion to this little child. Despite the fact that they haven't been practicing. You see if you go to

370 a non-Catholic school, or non-faith school you're going to have to do religious education in another

371 way and really is saying we read the book...is that enough? You know you have to do a bit more than

372 that. It's a huge issue and it'll be a huge issue for the Church to let people decide that they don't-- If

373 they don't want to be practicing Catholics or they don't want their children to be Catholic, that's fine.

374 But then I know one parent, she met with the parish priest about her child making communion and

375 wasn't happy when she was told she would have to pay for classes and the parish priest said to her, "If

376 you decide to send your children to a non-Catholic school that's fine, but there's plenty of Catholic

377 schools for them to go to if you want to. If you make the decision, then you have to pay for this and

378 you have to do religion classes." Who pays for them? Is it the parents who pay for them? Who pays

379 for the catechist to do the religion classes?

53   **We might just focus on that idea of the community meeting because all of the participants I've**

54   **spoken to have brought it up and they all felt that was a seminal moment in their decision-**

55   **making around reconfiguration. You were present at the [school name removed] one. If you can**

56   **give me an idea of the sense of occasion that was there or how important that phase is in the**

57   **process.**

58   It's a very exciting time. Now, there were numerous meetings. I was at the initial one. Now there was

59   voting and all that kind of stuff that I wasn't at later on. I remember at that time, the fact that it drew

60   such a crowd from the community I think is important, that it was, as I said, beyond just school

61   community, it was a sense of excitement, anticipation, doubt. Although the mood was very positive in

62   the community, there were some people who felt that the transfer of patronage was a transfer away

63   from tradition, away from Catholicism. There was a nervousness that this would bring about a change

64   that some people in the community felt wasn't needed and that they were eager to keep the Catholic

65   tradition going in the school. Overall, I have to say, and even the parents that were at that meeting

66   would have felt that they had already a lot in common with the CNS ethos that we would have sold. I

67   make that very clear at presentations. We outline the core values underpinning our ethos, like

68   excellence, education, care, community, some of those, and they were very evident in the school

69   already. Those kinds of community aspect of it was so clear that they strive very much to be an

70   inclusive school. We also have to highlight there are differences between us. I suppose, naming those

71   were the complex part of that meeting. That's where the most conversation happened around the

72   differences because they accepted and were proud of the similarities, what is around the differences

73   that people I think either said, "I'm excited about those differences," or, "Those differences don't sit

74   well with me."

27   ETBs nationally in that process. My role would have been an invitation from the Board of Managers

28   of the school, along with the Chief Executive and the Director of Schools in the ETB to go out to

29   school communities. Once the Board of Management has got permission from their own patron, they

30   invite the ETB and ETBI out to present on what it is a Community National School is. For example,

31   in the school where you were doing your study, we would have gone down and met, not just the

32   school community, but the entire community. In fact, the initial meeting wasn't held in the school, it

33   was held in the community center so that it was far broader. Which I thought was really interesting. In

34   a few cases, it's not just been a conversation about this with the school community, it's been the entire

35   community because everybody seemed to be interested in the patrons of the school. We would have

36   gone down. My specific role would have been to talk about the CNS ethos, 'Goodness me, Goodness

37   you!', the differences between what I understood, because I've taught in a Catholic school before, so

38   my understanding of those differences and similarities obviously, between the two school types. Then

39   also to explain the changes of governance structures from the Catholic structures to the ETB

40   structures which are quite significant, particularly for the Principal. We would have looked at it in two

41   parts, at ethos, and as part of the ethos is the patron's program, our curriculum, and the governance

42   side as well. We'd have explained all that. I suppose my other role as well would have been in the

43   absence of any formal process developed by the department of education in terms of how schools

44   might go about doing this if they were to self-select under the 'early movers'. There was no process to

45   advise schools on how to go about initiating the conversation with the community, approaching their

46   own patron and so on. I developed a pack and called the '*Becoming a Community National School: A*

47   *Step-by-step Guide*', which outlined a path or process, very much inspired by the process of Northern

48   Ireland for integrated schools, which is on a legislative footing. In the North, there's very much a very

49   clear way about going about it and that's all on a legislative footing. We don't have that here in the

50   Republic. I suppose taking the best from that process, we devised our own process that schools could-

51   - it was only a suggestion that they could follow, at least to give them some sort of roadmap that they

52   could follow. That was another big part of my role in reconfiguration.

Appendix Q: Initial letter to the principal to gauge interest in participating in the study

Dear X,

I hope this letter finds you well in these strange times. My name is Jacinta Regan. Originally from Roscommon, I now live in Belmullet, County Mayo. I am a teacher in a Community National School and at this time I am seconded to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment as an Education Officer. I worked on the team that developed the *Goodness Me, Goodness You!* curriculum so I am very interested in Community National Schools.

I am currently doing my Doctorate in Education. As part of my research, I hope that I will be able to investigate the experiences of schools that have reconfigured to a Community National School. I am particularly interested in School X as it was one of the first live transfer from a Catholic school into a Community National School. I've been following your school's story for the past two years and it's a very interesting story!

I am writing to you to ask if you would be interested in participating in my research or not. The study aims to explore the experiences of stakeholders involved in the reconfiguration process. I want to do a case study about your school.

As a result of the coronavirus, all research will be conducted online through Zoom. The study would require you and your deputy principal to take part in one semi-structured interview. The interview would last about an hour. If it were possible, I would do a telephone interview with a few parents from your school for a shorter period. I hope to conduct the interviews in March 2021 at a time and date that suits you. Due to the coronavirus restrictions, I will not be able to visit the school. Instead, I will send a digital camera to the school and ask you to photograph some of the school environment reflecting the change in ethos. The research will be published in English, so interviews will be conducted in English.

On a broader level, I hope that I will be able to interview X and X from ETBI, X from X ETB, and the X and X as former patrons. I'll be in touch with those people in the coming weeks, but I wanted to talk to you first to see if that's something you want to participate in or not.

I hope ETBI will use my research to guide resource development for schools that reconfigure in the future. I am acutely aware that this has been a very challenging year for schools, and I would not like to add to these challenges at all. I hope you think about participating in my study. I think your school's story is a very important one and I would love to hear more about it. This is an initial informal email to see if you are interested in participating in the research or not. If you are interested or would like further information, I can send you sample interview questions and a formal outline of the study. This is my phone number: X. This is my email address: X

Le meas,

Jacinta Regan

Appendix R: Example of coding data using 'The Problem-Solution Approach'

R: So were there a lot of people who weren't supportive of the change?

So ok, you would have about maybe a third who weren't happy with the idea. So then, in consultation with the Bishop, we decided then to embark on a listening *(Storyline)* exercise. And so we identified who we needed to talk to and listen to. First of all, there was the members of the Board of management. Then you had the teachers themselves. Then you had, uh, the parents, right? And then you had the whole community. So first of all, I convened a meeting with the Board of Management. Put it before them. Look, this is the choice. Where do you stand? And again, a majority *(Democracy?)* was in favour [of school reconfiguration]. Now before we started out this exercise, the Bishop was very, very clear that, he didn't want a Brexit situation, you know, for 51, against 49, you know. He said that it had to be an overwhelming majority. You know what I mean? We decided that it was by secret ballot, then, at each of the meetings. And I got one of the priests from the neighbouring parish to come in and count the votes, so that everything was above board. Then there was a meeting of the staff. The staff met themselves again. One of the priests came in, and they voted too. I think it was, kind of 50/50 I think... Then there was the meeting. The meeting of the parents in the school, which I chaired myself, and again when the priest came in and they all cast their secret ballots, you know. And I had voting papers made out and they were stamped and they were all kind of in favour. Now we wanted the whole community, right, to be together, and then for the local ETB to come down and put forward what they were offering. Because, you know, people have this kind of *(ETBs as anti-catholic)* jaundiced view that the local ETB are kind of anti-Catholic, anti-Christian, a kind of a strange group out there, you know, which is absolute rubbish, you know?

R: I suppose given the history of the VEC sector you can see where that might have come from.

P1: So for that meeting, then, I said that I can't chair it. So actually, the ▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮ came down to chair it. And well, I have never seen such a huge crowd, everyone in the community was there, you know? Because this is this is something *(School as Community)* that involved the whole community and the bishop said, and fair play to him, and we agreed that yeah, look, the whole community must know what is going on. Even if the Board of Management were in favour, and the parents were in favour, it didn't matter. We needed the community to get behind it. Because that school has been *(School belonging to local community)* there for maybe 100 years or even more. And many of those people have *(Tradition)*

351

Appendix S: Example of the development and evolution of codes during phase two

Left column (first transcript with handwritten annotations):

Interview with parent 1

PLEASE NOTE THAT ALL IDENTIFIABLE DATA (e.g. names of people/ places) HAS BEEN REMOVED FROM THE TRANSCRIPT

R: Could you tell me about your relationships with the school?

Yeah. So I have 3 children in the school, one in 6th class, one in 5th class and one in 1st class, and actually I'm from the area myself. So I went to that school as well. So yeah, born and bred here. And now I'm living there with my family, so yeah, I have a very close connection to the school. It's very close to my heart.

R: Oh, that's lovely. I think there's something very special, isn't there about your local school?

Yeah, there is. Yeah, all my family would have gone to that schools as well. And then, my father before me would have gone to the old school. You know, that's just up the road from it. We have generations that have gone through the place.

R: Very good. Very good. No better person to talk to about this so I suppose. Tell me a bit about the school before it reconfigured. So that I can get a sense of what the school was like before it changed over.

...we had. It was a school that had a Catholic ethos. We all did our Confirmation and our Communions and, we would have learned our religion during the day. And we would have gone to school and participated in school masses and, like then with my own children were there, it was kind of the same thing again. You know, we had the Catholic ethos and, you know, we would have had our school masses at the beginning of the year and yeah, look, it's always been a great school. I suppose the only issues we ever used to have really were with numbers, and I suppose they were always a worry. You know, would we have enough numbers to make sure that this was a viable school.

R: Okay, so it sounds like apart from the numbers issue, that people were quite happy with it as a Catholic school. So I mean, how do you arrive at the point then, where you make a decision to change ethos? Do you have any insight of how that came about?

Yeah, well, I suppose like I was involved in it, um, involved in the transition from a Catholic school to an ETB school. So I suppose really, it came about, because of numbers. We were just concerned that the numbers in the school were falling. They didn't appear to be any upcoming generations in the area, you know, younger children. And a group of us were kind of saying, look, we are concerned for the school, concerned for the future of the school, and we kind of just looked into options about how we could increase the numbers in the school. So we had a few community meetings and, like, this was the question we asked at each one

Handwritten margin notes (left): Rural Life · Belonging · Tradition · Local · generational · Catholic Ethos · Tradition · Rationale for change · parental choice · local leadership

1

Right column (second transcript with handwritten annotations):

Parent

1 Could you tell me about your relationships with the school?

2 Yeah. So I have [number of children removed] children in the school, one in [removed] class, one in

3 [class removed]* class and one in 1st class, and actually I'm from the area myself. So I went to that

4 school as well. So yeah, born and bred here. And now I'm living there with my family, so yeah, I have

5 a very close connection to the school. It's very close to my heart.

6

7 Oh, that's lovely. I think there's something very special, isn't there about your local school?

8 Yeah, there is. Yeah, all my family would have gone to that schools as well. And then, my father

9 before me would have gone to the old school. You know, that's just up the road from it. We have

10 generations that have gone through the place.

11

12 Tell me a bit about the school before it reconfigured. So that I can get a sense of what the school

13 was like before it changed over.

14

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19 them, I suppose the same opportunities that we had. It was a school that had a Catholic ethos. We all

20 did our Confirmation and our Communions and, we would have learned our religion during the day.

21 And we would have gone to school and participated in school masses and, like then with my own

22 children were there, it was kind of the same thing again. You know, we had the Catholic ethos and,

23 you know, we would have had our school masses at the beginning of the year and yeah, look, it's

24 always been a great school. I suppose the only issues we ever used to have really were with numbers,

25 and I suppose they were always a worry. You know, would we have enough numbers to make sure

26 that this was a viable school.

Handwritten margin notes (right): Rural identity + belonging — Cohen "webs of meaning" + connection — intergenerational / emotional connection to school · School as more than a local amenity – connection to past / local traditions · School choice · Connection to parents past experience · familiar · What is known · * Griffin (2019) · Hegemony? · Catholic ethos – traditional? / Linked to Sacraments · Connection to local Church · Rationale for change

1