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Although Ireland has experienced significant inward migration in recent years, the sustained growth of immigration dates from the late 1990s. Schools in this country have played a key role in the integration of immigrant students. Despite an abundance of research internationally in the area of education and integration, how the ethos of a school underpins approaches to the integration of migrant students remains unexplored.

This article focuses on how the Catholic ethos of one second level school influences its approach to providing support to young migrants. It emerges from the work of Transnational Collaboration on Bullying, Migration and Integration at School Level (TRIBES), a project focused on migrant experiences of school bullying across the European continent. TRIBES is a European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) action, with six working groups across 33 European countries. Ireland is part of a working group focusing on the policies and practices schools adopt to deal with integration of immigrant pupils. While working through the data, researchers noted that two schools in different countries (Malta and Ireland) cited ethos as a significant influence on their approach to integrating migrant students. Moreover, these were the only schools with a denominational (Catholic) ethos. Researchers decided to investigate this further by means of a small-scale case study on the actual influence of ethos on the integration of migrant students. It does not investigate government-led policies around language and academic support, which should be visible in every school with migrant students, regardless of ethos. In Ireland, the case study school self-identified as having a Catholic ethos in the tradition of Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters.

Catholic school ethos and migrant students

Generally, ethos is considered as the formal values, beliefs and practices that emanate from a mission statement, and/or the informal atmosphere arising from everyday elements within a school,¹ including images and symbols, as well as goals and expectations. In a Catholic school, such formal and informal aspects should emanate from that faith tradition. At the same time, there is little static about school ethos. Manchester and Bragg state that a school often has a distinctive ethos, influenced by the founding intention and developing over time to form an identity that makes that school unique.² The ethos of a school evolves, depending on that school’s own history and context.

Johnson proposes that schools which follow a “pluralistic ethos” are more equitable, purposeful and culturally responsive.³ On the other hand, Catholic social thought teaches that Catholic schools should be responsive, welcoming communities, inclusive of all, especially those who are most in need. Care for the vulnerable and hospitality towards the stranger is an ancient and recurring theme in Catholicism, stretching back to the oldest biblical texts. The creation stories of Genesis insist that everyone is made in the image and likeness of God - no

¹ D. Faas, B. Sokolowska & M. Darmody. ‘Everybody is available to them’: support measures for migrant students in Irish secondary schools’. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 63(4), 2015, p. 447–466.

² H. Manchester & S. Bragg. ‘School ethos and spatial turn: “Capacious” Approaches to research and practice’. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 19(10) 2013, p. 818–827.

³ L. S. Johnson. ‘The diversity imperative: Building a culturally responsive school ethos’. *Intercultural Education*, 14:(1) 2003, p. 17.

exceptions. We hear in the Book of Exodus the imperative that ‘you shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (Ex 22:21). The Christian Scriptures clarify the implications: ‘For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”’ (Gal 5:14). These words of Jesus compel people to recognise Christ himself in all people, especially the abandoned or excluded (cf. Mt 25:40.45).

In recent times, Pope Francis (henceforth, Francis) has been at the forefront of developing Catholic social teaching on care for migrants. Francis’ first pastoral visit outside Rome after his election in March 2013 was to the tiny island of Lampedusa, one of the nearest gateways to Europe for Africans fleeing poverty and conflict, to highlight the plight of refugees worldwide. It has been a central concern of his papacy, articulated clearly in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. Here he proposes that by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, humanity can reawaken the universal aspiration to a single family. ‘Let us dream, then, as a single human family . . . as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice.’⁴ When hearts are open, sensitive to the difficulties of people outside our own nucleus, we come to experience others as part of the human family.

Schools can help realise this vision by creating what Francis terms a ‘culture of encounter’ that is rooted in the dignity of all people, who share a common humanity.⁵ A true ‘encounter’ is not just with people who think alike, but with those from outside one’s own circle, with those who are different. The presence of different cultures in schools is a source of mutual enrichment for everyone. His development of Catholic social teaching in this regards amounts to a call to cultural responsiveness, not just as a way to meet the needs of students, but as a source of human transformation. Building inclusive community where that type of experience is possible is a central theme of his papacy and of Catholic social teaching. A corresponding theme is the call to serve others, above all those who are victims of poverty and injustice of any kind. These should be key characteristics of Catholic schools. In short, the responsibility to migrants is clear and essential for schools which claim a Catholic ethos.

The case study

Inclusion and care as ideas and ways of living are integral to other faith traditions and worldviews, and to many systems of education. It is not the objective of the wider TRIBES project or of this paper to compare or contrast schools (denominational or otherwise) in this respect. The specific aim here is to investigate if and how the case study school, St Clare’s Secondary School (henceforth St Clare’s)⁶, fulfils this obligation. Located in the heart of an urban area, it has a Catholic ethos in the tradition of the Presentation Sisters and is now part of the lay trust Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST).

St Clare’s is open to all religions. The student population (all girls) is approximately 300. Like 99% of second level schools in Ireland, it is non-fee-paying. By and large it caters for

⁴ Francis. *Fratelli Tutti*. 2020, #8. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

⁵ Francis. *Educating for Intercultural Dialogue*. 2013. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20131028_dialogo-interculturale_en.html.

⁶ Pseudonym

students of a low socio-economic index, with higher than average ethnic and religious diversity. From less than 1% in 2005, the proportion of immigrant students now stands at 40%. This school has DEIS⁷ status, meaning it is recognised and supported in caring for an educationally and economically disadvantaged population. With a mission statement that includes welcoming students in the tradition of the Presentation Order, St Clare’s hosts students from many different countries of origin including Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Poland, Lithuania, Brazil and latterly Ukraine. Some of the school literature is translated into 15 languages.

In depth, semi structured interviews were held with the school principal, English as an Additional Language (EAL) specialist teacher, and the mother of a family who had recently arrived as migrants to Ireland. These in-depth interviews explored practices to integrate migrant students at school level and the rationale behind these practices.

Table 3: Participant Profiles

	St Clare’s Secondary School	Anonymised designations
Principal	Irish, Catholic	Niamh
Teacher	Non- Irish, Non-Catholic	Monica
Parent	Indian, Hindu	Brinda

The study is limited by sample size. With such a small sample, research results cannot be generalised to a larger population. However, educational research is rarely generalisable as there are too many circumstantial variables constructing the findings. Rather, this is an exploratory study which seeks to explore a particular issue (in this case, how Catholic school ethos influences integration of migrant students) in an attempt to identify where further research might be focused.

Results

The results indicate that the integration strategies and practices adopted by St Clare’s are inspired by its founding religious order, which contributes to its particular expressions of ethos. The overarching approaches in this regard are: (1) establishing a community of care and inclusion, and (2) encouraging a whole school approach to integration.

(1) Establishing a community of care and inclusion

In its mission statement, St Clare’s describes itself as a community that welcomes students in the tradition of Nano Nagle, founder of the Presentation Order. The Principal, Niamh, situates the culture of inclusion and care squarely in this ethos. She sees Nano as an inspirational figure, who ‘transcends all religions’, from whom everyone can learn:

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

⁷ DEIS - Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: an initiative of the Irish government to recognise and support schools serving disadvantaged populations.

In faithfulness to Nano's vision 'we look outside ourselves to the needs that we have here in the school and look to cater for them' (Niamh). Monica (EAL teacher) explains that

'the school as a Catholic school is very inclusive . . . the ethos of the school is all about community. This really encourages and supports students to integrate. . . . The school works hard to build a sense of family and community.'

For instance, over the years, St Clare's has developed various initiatives to draw parents of NAMS into the school community and make them feel welcome. Niamh described how, as well as intercultural events, the school devises and delivers evening classes such as art and craft classes to function as social gatherings:

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

This was the experience of Brinda, who says that being Hindu was 'never an issue' for her or her daughters. In fact, it was helpful that the school was clear about its ethos and religious roots. It helped her to recognise shared religious values, which were very important:

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

Brinda and her family experienced a culture of inclusion embedded in 'the way they do things, their commitment to all students.' This sense of community may be a contributory factor in student attendance: in St Clare's, attendance of migrant students is regular and dependable. However, the reality of translating aspiration into action provides challenges, especially in the area of religious practice. For instance, the school struggles to provide adequate prayer spaces for Muslim students, an issue which emerged through the Student Council. Identifying and accommodating the needs and practices of students of other faiths and cultures can be challenging.

(2) Whole school approach

Participants assert that an inclusive community of care is possible only with a whole school approach. Both the principal and the EAL teacher situate their individual roles and responsibilities to integrate all students in the collective effort as a school - this is what makes successful integration possible. Niamh describes how 'we are always looking for ways to improve, always open to initiatives. We are always on the lookout for CPD [Continuous Professional Development].' St Clare's twenty-year history of reflective practice was evident here: over time it has developed a wide, varied extracurricular programme as a means of integration, largely run by staff volunteers. Monica ties the success of this strategy with the school ethos:

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

Brinda explains how ‘there are two EAL teachers but lots of other teachers are interested and help out.’ However, despite their efforts and openness to integrate migrant students and their families, both Niamh and Monica report mixed success. Niamh was frank in this regard, describing how the school had been doing well pre-Covid, but the momentum faltered when everything moved online. It has been very hard to re-energise that momentum. A second challenge is resources. With little discretionary spend, almost all extracurricular efforts and activities rely on the good will and volunteerism of staff. Time and resource pressure on teachers and on the school community can have a significant effect. Niamh explains that ‘it can be challenging for teachers to take on other work outside of their own specific subject areas or interests’. Relentless government-led ‘reform’ measures over the last number of years can have a cumulative fatiguing effect, with recruitment and retention of both teachers and principals now a significant challenge.

A sub-theme of whole school approach is that the sense of responsibility for migrant students and their families is not confined to school activities. Brinda reported the willingness of some school personnel – individually and collectively – to ‘go the extra mile’ - particularly for families like hers, who might not be familiar with organisational and administrative set-ups beyond the school system. She spoke of situations where the principal/teachers provide guidance on cultural mediation and bureaucratic procedures, and give their time voluntarily, for instance with filling in forms and negotiating websites. Paradoxically, both Niamh and Monica identified parental involvement as an area for improvement. For instance, despite their considerable efforts, parental involvement especially in formal bodies such as the Parents’ Association and Board of Management remains low.

Conclusions

Ethos is a strong theme in the findings and all participants reference the ethos of the school as a motivation for fostering a culture of inclusion and a caring community. With a large migrant population which has grown over two decades, St Clare’s has developed practices such as evening classes for parents, some of which are non-language dependent so that language ability is not a condition of participation. Another successful approach is the school’s strategically developed extracurricular programme, largely due to the goodwill and volunteerism of staff. St Clare’s encourages all pupils to take part, and celebrates all types of achievements and events. In this way, students have opportunities not only to develop their interests and talents, but also to mix and make friends within a safe environment.

Although the themes of human dignity, culture of encounter and the call to serve are resonant here, it is the connection with the founding religious order rather than the contemporary Catholic Church that is the articulated primary inspiration. St Clare’s intentionally tells the story of Nano Nagle: it is her work, her vision, and the work and vision of the community she founded, that provides the primary source of encouragement for their integration of *all* students. Niamh is very clear that Nano’s appeal is universal. She can be a source of inspiration for everyone, teacher, parent, pupil, regardless of faith tradition or country of origin. It is the figure of Nano, and her outreach to the poor and vulnerable, rather than for instance recourse to the call to serve in Catholic social teaching, that provides the primary inspiration for the school’s attitudes and practices. The biblical imperatives used by Pope Francis, and indeed the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, are missing from the language and conceptual frameworks used by the participants. This resonates with the insights of

Manchester & Bragg that the distinctive ethos of a school is often influenced by the founding intention developing over time; this identity makes that school unique.⁸ The tracing of roots in this regard, rather than in the Catholic tradition, especially the Gospels, may be of interest to Catholic patrons.

On the other hand, it is evident that first principles of Catholic social teaching such as a welcoming the stranger, building community, and care for the vulnerable are intentionally applied and given expression in this schools. The experience of Brinda, the Indian Hindu parent, is interesting here. Her description of the school feeling like a family, that in finding St Clare's she had found a family, and of the connections the school gave her with her host country and other parents, echoes the hope of 'a single human family' so prevalent in *Fratelli Tutti*.⁹ Findings indicate that the challenge of Catholic social teaching is being addressed in this school with courage and compassion. This is particularly true of the school principal, who is very conscious and articulate about the Presentation tradition she has inherited, very confident about its universality and relevance for today, very clear about how it can and must be applied. Moreover, she has the backing of the school staff, most of whom, like her, are prepared to 'go the extra mile.' While the school struggles with aspects such as accommodating various faith practices and parental involvement, social inclusion is a priority and the community is committed to inclusive practices. This defies Johnson's proposal that schools which follow a "pluralistic ethos" are more equitable, purposeful and culturally responsive.¹⁰ Findings suggest that Catholic education contributes to universal human values and therefore to a democratic society. This may be of interest to those concerned in the debate of publically funded denominational schools.

As an exploratory study to identify areas of further research, this project throws up more questions than it answers, for instance, is the inspiration of Nano Nagle particular to this (Presentation) school? Is a similar ethos at work in schools serving more affluent populations? How does ethos influence other aspects of school life (besides integration of migrant students)? Are there areas where ethos has a negative influence? What might the student voice add? What might be learned from practices and inspirations in multi-faith, multi-denominational, non-denominational and secular schools? A next step might include similar studies on a broader scale, to increase validity and address some of these questions.

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⁸ H. Manchester & S. Bragg. 2013.

⁹ Francis. 2020.

¹⁰ L. S. Johnson. 2003, p. 17

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