

**School choice - a level playing field? A Case Study on how parents choose a Catholic post-primary school for their children in Midwest Ireland**

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## Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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## List of Abbreviations

ACCS Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools

AI Artificial Intelligence

AMCSS Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools

BOM Board of Management

CEIST Catholic Education- an Irish Schools Trust

CEP Catholic Education Partnership

COI Census of Ireland

CPSMA Catholic Primary Schools Management Association

CSPPA Catholic Secondary Schools Parent Association

CAO Central Applications Office

CSO Central Statistics Office

CSP Catholic Schools Partnership

DCU Dublin City University

DE Department of Education (Ireland)

DEA The des Places Educational Association

DES Department of Education and Skills (Ireland)

DEIS Delivery Equality of Opportunity in Schools

EAL English as a second or foreign language

ECHR European Convention on Human Rights

EFO Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989

ERST Edmund Rice Schools Trust

ESRI Economic and Social Research Unit

ETB Education and Training Board

ETBI Education and Training Board Ireland

ETS Educate Together Schools

GAA Gaelic Athletic Association

GCE Global Compact on Education

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation

GOI Government of Ireland

GUI *Growing Up in Ireland*

ICI Immigrant Council of Ireland

JMB Joint Managerial Body

NSEG New Schools Establishment Group

NPCPP National Parents Council Post-primary

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OPPS Online Patronage Process System

PISA Programme for International Student Assessment

PPSN Personal Public Service Number

PRCT Parental Role Construction Theory

PSET Parental Self -Efficacy Theory

RTA Reflexive Thematic Analysis

RCT Rational Choice Theory

SEN Special Educational Needs

SES Socioeconomic Status

SET Spiritan Education Trust

T.D. Teachta Dála (Member of the Irish Parliament)

TY Transition Year

UDHR Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UNCRC United Nations Convention/ Charter on the Rights of the Child

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

VEC- Vocational Education Committee

# Abstract

## **Parental School Choice: A Level Playing Field? A case study on how parents choose a Catholic post-primary school for their children in Midwest Ireland**

**Jude Murphy**

This study examines the factors that influence parents' choice of a Catholic post-primary school for their children in Midwest Ireland. It seeks to address the dearth of scholarship regarding parental school choice in an Irish context and to extend the work of national and international scholars. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, which were then coded and interrogated using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2022).

The research results revealed three key findings. First, they demonstrate that choosing a school relies on social and cultural capital, which is possessed in differing degrees by "New Irish" and Irish parents. Second, the study reveals that together with previously recognised factors in school choice, such as academics and transportation, sport plays an increasingly significant role in school choice. Third, parents choose a Catholic school for an education not necessarily a Catholic one.

This small-scale case study, though non-generalisable, contributes to the field by highlighting the experiences and views of parents when making school choices. It was observed that within this sample group, there were inequities in school choice experienced by New Irish parents owing to a lack of social and cultural capital. It points to the difficulties of parents when choosing schools in oversubscribed areas. The study offers evidence of the role of sport in parental school choice especially by Irish parents.

A consideration of the study would be that parents who wish for a Catholic education make their feelings known to the Catholic school they wish to attend and that parents who have difficulty with a school choice application consult school management and trustees. Furthermore, parents may also need to investigate and consider transport and logistical matters well in advance and lobby if necessary. It is suggested that parents make themselves aware and prepare their children for different methods of learning in post-primary school. Finally, school choice is a social matter where integration is a crucial issue that should be a consideration for all parents, as fostering diverse, inclusive environments can ultimately help create a more harmonious and equitable society.

# Chapter One Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction to the study

This thesis focuses on the largely under-researched area of parental school choice of a Catholic post-primary school in the Midwest of Ireland. Though there has been some research on the factors that influence parents to choose a school, the process of selecting schools in Ireland has largely been under-investigated (Hamilton and Guin, 2005). In Ireland, the process of school choice of Catholic post-primary schools has been investigated even less. Factors like academics, proximity, sport, etc., are elements to be considered by parents in the overall process of choice, which also includes where and how information is gathered and what is ultimately considered the best fit. This topic is of interest and relevance as the range of post-primary schools expands while the number of Catholic post-primary schools decreases (Government of Ireland, 2024a). Irish society has also undergone rapid social and cultural changes in recent years, which have a bearing on what sort of education parents want for their children. Using a qualitative design, a case study was undertaken with thirteen parents of children in First year in Catholic post-primary schools in Midwest Ireland. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, it was discovered that the choice process is not a level playing pitch for all parents, that the faith element of the school is not the immediate attraction, and that sport plays a significant role in parental choice.

## 1.2 Organisation of the chapter

The rationale for this study and its context will be outlined, along with a brief history of education in Ireland and the legislation surrounding school admission. An outline of Ireland's various post-primary school types will be introduced, with a special consideration of Catholic

schools. A Catholic school will be defined together with an explanation of the Catholic school of 2024. Enrolment and the central applications system (CAS) will be outlined. Finally, an introduction to the study's theoretical framework will be discussed.

### **1.3 Rationale for the study**

In Ireland, school choice refers to the ability of parents to choose the school they wish their child to attend. Though many studies and reforms in education have been proposed and implemented in Ireland and elsewhere over the last century, one that has come to the fore more recently is that of school choice. School choice has many social and political implications (Carpenter and Winters, 2015). In an Irish setting at the post-primary level, it has been studied by only a few (Kellaghan and Greaney, 1970; Grimes, 1984; Darmody, 2006; Cahill and Hall, 2014), with fewer still on the role of religion in school choice (Darmody and Smyth, 2018). Some would contend that the topic of school choice is not studied enough (Maranto and Shakeel, 2018) and that the way the topic is researched needs to be broadened to take account of the changed role of religious institutions given the changed family structure and growing immigration to Ireland. While the profile of Ireland has significantly altered, little focus is being placed on post-primary Catholic schools today as there is much emphasis on configuration or divestment at primary level. With increasingly diverse religions and ethnicities, it is highly probable that after 'reconfiguration', if it ever entirely occurs, attention may focus on faith schools at the post-primary level. Judging by the little appetite for reconfiguration, it may be helpful to determine the views of parents who choose Catholic post-primary schools for their children. Irish society is changing. A more educated workforce and increased economic growth have contributed to shifts in thought and practices. The socio-political makeup of the country has greatly changed with the introduction of divorce legislation (1995), same-sex marriage in 2015 and abortion in 2018. The number of people declaring themselves as non-religious is also increasing (6% in 2011, 10% in 2016 and 14% in the 2022

censuses). Little is known about parents' choice of Catholic post-primary schools in this changed landscape. Moreover, even less is known about immigrant parents enrolling children in religious schools of a faith different from their own (Agirdag, Driessen and Merry, 2017; Maranto and Shakeel, 2018). This study will enable Catholic schools and policymakers to better understand parental needs, predict enrolment, enhance recruitment efforts and plan more effectively for the future.

This research investigates how parents choose a Catholic Post-primary school for their children. This is examined under three research questions framed as follows:

- (1) What factors do parents consider when choosing a Catholic Post-primary school?
- (2) How do parents gather information about schools available to their children?
- (3) How do parents choose the school that best suits their child?

## 1.4 Researcher's Role

A new cohort of students begins their post-primary education each year, but little is known of the journey to that classroom. Parents are presented with many questions regarding where and how their children should be educated. Answers to those questions come in different forms. Arguably, making decisions can be difficult for the first-time parent, the poorly educated parent, the immigrant parent, and even the experienced parent. One could argue that choice makes choosing easier, but in some countries, choice is regarded as making the process more difficult, exacerbating such problems as segregation (Bhattacharya, 2023).

In this study, parents chose to send their children to a Catholic post-primary school. Parents continue to choose Catholic post-primary schools. While some students choose to opt out of R.E in schools (Circular 13/2018 from Minister Bruton to Community schools), or parents may allow their children to exempt themselves from Religious Education last class in the evening or first in the morning at post-primary level (Meehan, 2024), parents continue to present their

children for Baptism, First Holy Communion and Confirmation in Catholic churches. This researcher would like to discover the rationale behind those parents' school choices at post-primary level. The researcher is aware that having made these observations it informs her position about the research and, without due care, could expose the research to bias. Consequently, she has outlined in Chapter 3 her descriptive research paradigm together with her epistemological and ontological assumptions. She has also outlined her theoretical framework of constructivism. She has taken steps to hold her underlying assumptions to account and to protect the trustworthiness of the qualitative inquiry she has undertaken through a range of measures, which she also details in Chapter 3 and which are recommended by the academy (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p.59; Lincoln and Guba, 2013).

## 1.5 Context of the study

There are 343 Catholic post-primary schools in Ireland, with just under 49% of post-primary students attending Catholic ethos schools (Government of Ireland, 2024a, p.21). According to the latest census report 69% of the population of Ireland identified as Catholic (CSO, 2024). In the Midwest of Ireland, there are forty post-primary schools of a Catholic ethos from which parents can choose. This study chose to examine the processes and factors involved in parents in the Midwest choosing to send their children to such schools. This study was conducted over three counties in the Midwest of Ireland. It included parents with children in urban and rural schools. Parents may apply to any school they wish, but typically, there are admission policies to schools that preclude parents from applying (children of the area, brothers, sisters, and children of locally designated schools). The school choice process can create a complicated patchwork of processes for parents to navigate. While the study focuses on how parents choose a Catholic post-primary school for their child, in some cases, parents may have expressed a preference for a particular school, but the choice is often made for them

by the Common Application System (CAS), which operates in the Limerick area. In addition, a child may be assigned to a Catholic school through the CAS system, which may not have been actively chosen by the parents as a top preference. For instance, the parent may have chosen the school as one of their eleven schools from a choice of seventeen and that Catholic school may have been very low in their ranked choices. Parents who chose outside the CAS system chose Catholic schools. All parents in the study had a child attending a Catholic school by direct choice or assigned to them from their rankings.

School admission notices are posted on the individual schools' websites. The breakdown in applications of the previous year is only required to be published if the school was oversubscribed in the previous year. In some schools' annual admission notices, parents can see how many students have applied to a school and how many students have been accommodated. Though parents have a choice of the ranking of schools on the CAS system, once their application is submitted, that choice is taken from them as the school's assignment is decided by the schools. Those parents who choose a Catholic school outside this system will be either successful or unsuccessful. This is further discussed in Chapter Four.

## 1.6 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organised into five chapters. This chapter sets out the rationale of the research topic, problem and questions. It offers an insight into the history of post-primary education, the variety of Catholic post-primary schools and the Catholic post-primary school of 2024. It also outlines the legislative background of education in Ireland. The chapter explains the system of application to some post-primary schools in Midwest Ireland. Finally, it presents the theoretical background to the study. This thesis is divided into a further four chapters.

Chapter Two comprehensively analyses Irish and international literature on school choice. Chapter Three outlines and justifies the methodology used for this research. The participants

in the study are introduced, and the processes of how and why they were selected are explained. The chapter outlines the research design, the methods of data collection and the data analysis procedures used in the research. It also details the ethical considerations for the study. In Chapter Four, the key outcomes from the data are presented. Chapter 5 is the discussion chapter, which brings together the findings from all of the data collection sources. This allowed the identification of key themes, commonalities, and differences between the participants' perspectives. The findings are presented and discussed with reference to the conceptual framework employed. The contribution to knowledge made by the study is explored, providing a response to the research questions and exploring its implications. This chapter also presents the conclusions in response to the research questions. The implications of these findings are considered, and the study's limitations are outlined. Lastly, future considerations are addressed.

## 1.7 Historical origins of Catholic schools in Ireland

As far back as the 18th century, Ireland has had a dual secondary (post-primary) education system. Protestant schools received endowments as they were the faith schools allied to the ideals of the British conquering presence. In contrast, Catholic schools received no public funding (Coolahan, 2017). The Catholic Church disapproved of mixed multi-denominational secondary schools, so funding for them remained private (Coolahan, 2017). That funding, in comparison with endowments, was poor. Therefore, as Coolahan (2017) saw it, education was a private middle-class affair with basic literacy and numeracy regarded as adequate for the poor, labouring classes.

### ***1878 Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act***

The 1878 Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act set out to promote secondary secular education and provide an education for those who might not otherwise have advanced beyond national school. It introduced public exams and monetary prizes to successful students and paid

schools depending on their results. It was regarded as an “attempt to provide funding for extant post-primary schools in Ireland” (Walsh, 2024). Though Catholics comprised 77% of the population, only 50% of pupils attending these schools were Catholic. As Walsh (2024) points out, university education for Catholics was closely linked with secondary (post-primary) education. Therefore, only those who benefited from an intermediate education could consider tertiary education. In Coolahan’s (2017) opinion, secondary education in Ireland in the 1880s was not as well positioned as national school education as there was no formal training for teachers, no set salary scales for teachers, and no chair of education existed in an Irish university. Conditions for teachers improved considerably with the introduction of a registration council for teachers in 1918, incremental salaries paid by the State in 1924-25, and in 1937, teachers’ employment contracts with right of appeal were conceded.

After the establishment of the Free State in 1922, capitation grants were granted to pupils in ‘recognised’ schools, and salaries were paid to ‘recognised’ teachers. According to Coolahan (2017), there was ‘perennial opposition on the part of the churches in Ireland to state encroachment on secondary school management’ (p.43). Conversely, the State did not wish to give public funds to private buildings owned by the church ‘without accountability or representation on the management of the schools’ (p.43). Irish politicians understood that the church-controlled schooling (Whyte, 1971; Coolahan, 2017) and in many ways it suited the Government to have the church ‘manage’ education for the State. Commenting on the State of post-primary education post-1922, Coolahan comments, “It was very prudent in the context of an Ireland divided by Civil war not to antagonise such a powerful entity as the Catholic Church” (Coolahan, 2017, p59). Commenting on the arrangement Inglis (1998, p.77) points out that the providers of education and the State were happy to allow the ‘peaceful coexistence’ to develop. The Department of Education had limited control over the management of primary and secondary schools, which remained with the clergy of various denominations (Clarke, 2016).

The Department merely paid the salaries of teachers and controlled the curriculum and inspectorate. Technical schools did exist in big towns after the introduction of the Technical Instruction Act 1899. Now, however, after lobbying by various industrial and farming groups, the Government saw a need for a new system of technical education. Technical education was regarded as training for specific jobs and apprenticeships (Clarke, 2016).

### *Vocational Act*

The Vocational Education Act (1930) was introduced in Ireland in 1930 and thus began a binary system of education at second level. Under Section 31 of the Act, Vocational Education Committees (VECs) were established, and these were populated by locals involved in trades and manufacturing along with local politicians. The purpose of the schools set out in Memorandum V 40 by the Department of Education in 1942 was to:

Prepare boys and girls, who have to start early in life, for the occupations which are open to them. These occupations, in general, require some sort of manual skill, and continuation courses have, therefore, a corresponding practical bias.

(Hyland and Milne, 1992)

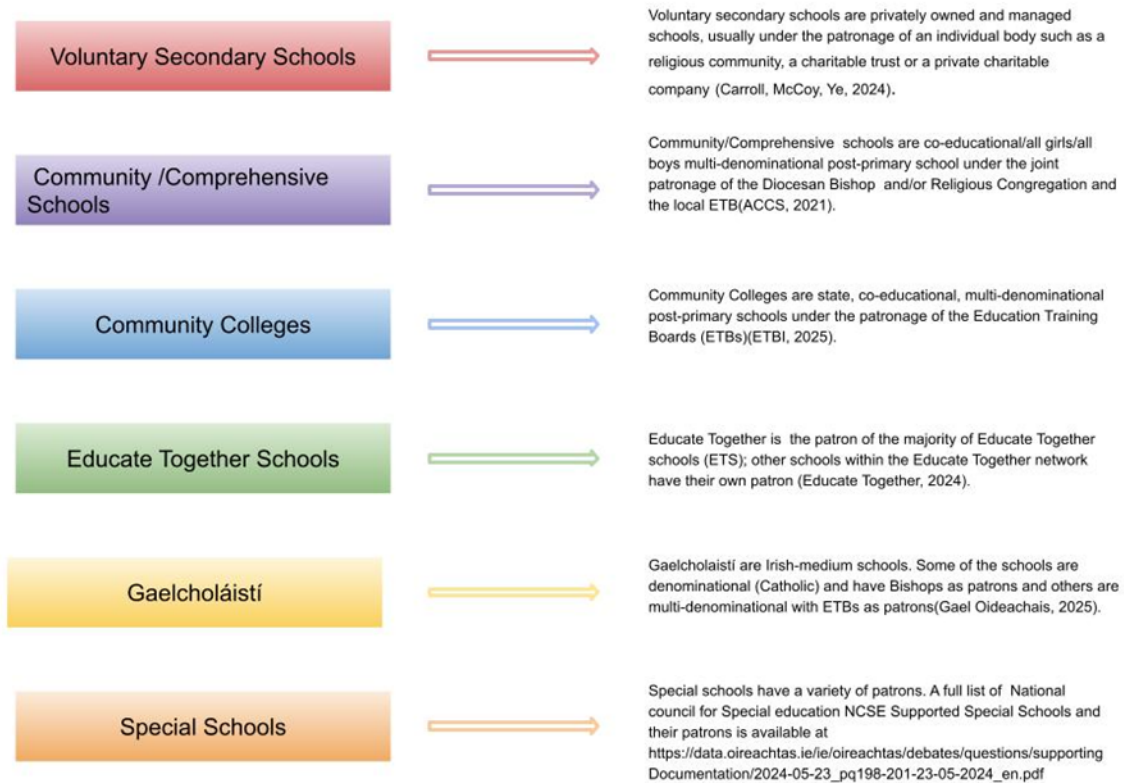
The Vocational Education Act (1930) represented the first significant attempt by the State to take ownership of educational provision at post-primary level and was met with considerable opposition by the Catholic Church, which controlled primary and post-primary schools (Clarke, 2011). Yet, as Kevin Williams (2005) points out, many vocational education principles were designed to be acceptable to the Church. The introduction to Memorandum V. 40, for instance, states that the general purpose of vocational (continuation) training is to ‘develop with the assistance of God’s grace, the whole man with all his faculties..... and by so doing attain the end designed for him by his creator’ (Hyland and Milne 1992, p.230). Under the insistence of

Archbishop McQuaid, the State agreed that these schools should have a Catholic ethos (Clarke, 2011). This represented a compromise between Church and State regarding vocational education. For the Catholic Church, education was a means of transmitting the Catholic cultural heritage (Clarke, 2011). As far as the Church was concerned, the only means of doing this was to staff the schools with clergy members, members of religious orders, or congregations (Tittley, 1983). The Catholic Church further secured recognition for education provision in the Irish Constitution *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (1937) (Clarke, 2011). The binary education system in Ireland led to pupils continuing to vocational education or, if they could afford it, post-primary schools.

### ***Free Education***

The next major step in education in Ireland was the introduction of free education. In 1954, the Council of Education, in a study of the secondary school curriculum, remarked that free secondary education for all was ‘untenable’ and ‘utopian’ (Ó Catháin, 1954). Within 15 years, the then Minister for Education, Donogh O’Malley, proposed free post-primary education for all. At this point in history, most towns and cities in Ireland had voluntary secondary and vocational schools. By ‘voluntary’, it meant that they were not state schools as they had been established by religious congregations or generous benefactors, and they charged fees until the introduction of free second-level education in 1967. Most Catholic voluntary secondary schools joined the new free education system, though a minority of them chose not to do so and continued to charge fees. Almost 80,000 extra second-level education places were provided by religious schools. The religious congregations were pivotal to developing a progressive education system in what was a poor agrarian country (Mc Cormack, 2000). All these voluntary schools – the minority who charge/d fees and the vast majority who do/did not

– were/are denominational. With the introduction of the ‘free education scheme’ came a free bus transport system for those living more than three miles from their nearest school.



**Figure 1 Irish post-primary school models and their patronage**

### ***Comprehensive schools and Community schools***

Capital expenditure by the State on secondary schools started in 1964-5 with the introduction of schemes to help build schools whereby the State would pay 70% and the school would pay 30%. Though the state financed the building of some schools, the fact that they were built on the property of the religious order means they are essentially private entities partially funded by churches or congregations (Griffin, 2019). In May 1963, just before the introduction of free education, the Minister for Education and later President of Ireland, Dr. Patrick Hillery,

announced the building of a new type of school, the 'comprehensive school' which was to be established in areas where there was a lack of secondary school. They were to be co-educational, with a minimum of 150 students, with students of all abilities, and with transport provided. They were to be managed by a committee of three comprised of a Department of Education inspector, a representative of the local bishop, and a representative of the local vocational committee. The few established Protestant comprehensive schools differed in that they had more denominational representatives on their boards. The comprehensive school was largely superseded by the community school, which will be discussed presently. Meanwhile, by 1979, boarding school pupils only amounted to 5%. This was evidence of the departure of religious orders from boarding school education and signalled what was to come, i.e. the decline of the teaching religious personnel in faith primary and post-primary schools.

A major change occurred in October 1970 with the announcement of the establishment of community schools. According to Coolahan (2017), the community school was to 'provide free schooling of a comprehensive type to all in the catchment area without pupil selection procedures' (p.137). This was a significant educational development, as joint patrons/trustees were establishing co-educational schools with a comprehensive curriculum for the first time. Community schools are multi-denominational as they must provide for the religious education and formation of all pupils. The community schools are run by ad hoc management committees composed of two ETB (Education and Training Board) (formerly VEC) representatives, two diocesan representatives and two parents. The ETBs are responsible for a local contribution of about 10% of the capital costs of the community schools, and the State pays the rest plus the current expenditure. A variant of the community school is the community college, which differs in that it is solely under the control of the ETB and the Department of Education (see Figure 1). The ETBs are today the other main providers of post-primary education in Ireland, along with the voluntary, community and comprehensive schools. The ETBs run state schools under the

non-denominational structure of a local ETB but provide religious education and formation in accordance with parental choice. Many of these schools have local Bishops as Trustees.

From the 1980s onwards, the ETBs established community colleges. The local ETBs have an arrangement with the Catholic bishop of the diocese and/or a religious congregation concerning their participation in the organisation and management of the college. However, in recent years, ETBs have opened community colleges without agreement with the local bishop. These colleges are referred to as non-designated, whereas designated community colleges have a model agreement with the local bishop and/or a religious congregation. Foras Pátrúnachta and Educate Together have established new voluntary post-primary schools (Gaeloideachais, 2020). Today, there are 727 post-primary schools made up of 385 voluntary secondary schools (McCoy, Carroll and Ye, 2024), 252 ETB (ETBI, 2024) schools, including community colleges and ninety-seven community/comprehensive schools (ACCS, 2024) in the Republic of Ireland.

### ***Educate Together Schools (ETS)***

Educate Together primary schools were first established in 1978 with a particular focus on a multi-denominational ethos (ETS, 2024). They offered a core religious education programme which was supplemented by after-hours denominational instruction provided by parents. The Educate Together lobby campaigned for ten years for sanction from the Department of Education and Skills to open post-primary schools. In 2007, Educate Together made its first formal applications to the Department of Education to open post-primary schools and sought recognition as a second-level patron. The Minister of Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn, formally recognised Educate Together as a post-primary patron at the 2011 Annual General Meeting in Gorey, Co. Wexford. In 2014, the first Educate Together post-primary schools opened (Educate Together Secondary School in Hansfield, Dublin 15, Ballymakenny College in Drogheda, and Kishoge Community College in Adamstown, Co Dublin). The

fundamental legal concept of ETS patronage is that the school board is legally bound to operate a school that delivers equality of access and esteem to all children irrespective of their social, cultural and religious backgrounds (Educate Together Schools, 2024). Today, there are twenty post-primary Educate Together schools in Ireland.

### ***Faith Schools***

Faith schools are denominational schools, and Catholic schools are one type of faith school. One Jewish, one Methodist and twenty-five Church of Ireland post-primary schools operate in Ireland. One might be forgiven thinking that Catholic schools are for Catholic students, just like most students attending minority faith schools would be of that denomination. However, this is not always the case. For example, the Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students of Different Beliefs in Catholic Secondary Schools published in 2019 by the Joint Managerial Board and the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (JMB/AMCSS) adapted the title of their 2010 guidelines to emphasise the inclusivity of Catholic schools. John Curtis, the General Secretary of JMB/AMCSS, stated that its purpose, reiterating the words of Pope Francis, was to ‘strive to ensure that Catholic schools are truly open to all’ (p.2). The Government has acknowledged the work of Catholic religious congregations in providing post-primary education: “Religious orders and indeed individual Catholic lay persons were crucial in giving life chances to thousands over many decades and must be fully acknowledged” (Ó Foghlú, 2016). Many members of these congregations gave of their time voluntarily and exercised services in schools for which they were not remunerated, services which have either disappeared today or are remunerated posts in schools.

Faith schools are also referred to as Voluntary post-primary schools (McCoy, Carroll and Ye, 2024). These schools are privately owned and managed, usually under the patronage of an individual body, such as a religious community, a charitable trust, or a private charitable

company. They comprise roughly half of the Irish second-level sector, both in terms of the number of schools and the number of students attending them. Several voluntary schools are fee-paying. There have been criticisms of educational inequality being perpetuated by fee-paying schools, the majority of which are faith schools (Cahill, 2020). Most students cannot avail themselves of the resources of such schools, which, to a great extent, are provided through fees. None of the children of parents in this study attend fee-paying schools. The Irish Government has addressed the lack of resources for students through the Delivery Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) in schools throughout Ireland.

### ***DEIS schools***

In 2005, the Department of Education established DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) in Ireland. DEIS schools are dedicated to addressing the educational requirements of children and young individuals from disadvantaged communities, from preschool to secondary education. There are one hundred and ninety-four post-primary DEIS schools in Ireland. There are equal numbers of DEIS and fee-paying schools in Ireland (13%) (McCoy, Carroll and Ye, 2024). Many of the first faith schools, such as the Presentation sisters in Ireland, were established to cater to the poor (Raftery, Delaney and Nowlan Roebuck, 2019). Today, this service is provided by the Department of Education, but as Coolahan (2017, p224) has remarked, “schemes to improve educational opportunity have tended to have little impact on social inequality issues, which are deeply embedded in societal structure”. Many of society’s problems cannot be alleviated by schools, and these broader issues need to be addressed at a political level. DEIS schools are a step in the right direction towards addressing inequality. Still, material wealth lends itself to educational advantage, and in many cases, it provides the social and cultural capital to inform parents' choices (Gupta, 2022; Nelis *et al.*, 2021; Lareau, 2018; Reay,1998).

### ***The Question of Patronage***

In the context of Irish education, Catholic patronage is supported by the State as evidenced by Article 42.2 of the Constitution:

The State acknowledges that the family is the primary and natural educator of the child and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical, and social education of their children.

Bunreacht na hÉireann (1937)

Over recent decades, Irish society has undergone rapid social, cultural, and educational changes. Due to greater inward migration, Ireland's cultural identity and schools have changed significantly (Foley, Faas and Darmody, 2024). There is a greater diversity of beliefs and a more multicultural, multi-ethnic society (Appendix B and C CSO 2024a). Ireland has witnessed a fast-evolving secularisation evidenced by such events as same-sex marriage (2015) and abortion referenda (2018), where over 62% of voters called for a change to the constitution (Elections Ireland, 2024). Glendenning (2012) describes the Irish education landscape as a Church-State cooperative, and in many ways, as previously discussed, it is. However, though the State may pay teachers' salaries and provide capitation grants for students, the question of patronage of Catholic schools, especially at primary school level, has been opened to scrutiny and increased attention in recent years.

### ***Forum on Patronage and Pluralism***

Renehan and Williams (2015) refer to patronage as the 'Church's historical control and management' of Catholic schools. One initiative by the Government to address this 'control

and management' was the Forum (henceforth referred to as the Forum) on Patronage and Pluralism (Coolahan, Hussey, Kilfeather, 2012). The purpose of the Forum was to allow an open debate on the change of patronage of primary schools, in essence, to give parents a greater diversity of choice at primary school level. Interestingly, one of the arguments levelled against patronage was the discriminatory nature of the denominational system towards minority ethnic students who may have felt excluded in schools due to their minority faith beliefs (Higgins Ní Cinnéide, 2007). From the perspective of parental choice of a Catholic post-primary school, the Forum supports the need for the DES to ensure that schools' ethea are inclusive of all beliefs.

### ***Trusteeships***

Professor John Coolahan (Chair of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism), commenting on the decline of religious personnel and the subsequent establishment of Trusts, stated :

I think the churches have been very careful and, from their point of view, very wise in ensuring there are frameworks in place to carry forward a great deal of the responsibility previously held by large numbers of nuns, brothers and priests. The ongoing situation will be different, however, given how much society has been changing in terms of population and religious belief.

(Traynor, 2015).

Catholic school provision has been in the trusteeship of Catholic parishes and religious congregations, the owners of schools, for over 170 years (Reynolds, 2024). However, in recent years, with decreased religious vocations, many trusts are now run in partnership with lay people and are giving rise to new Trusts or Trust Boards (Reynolds, 2024). Griffin (2018) notes that the establishment of Trusteeships was not an easy task involving training, financial support and the establishment of legal frameworks. The Trusts were established to ensure the continued provision of Catholic education. The Trust Boards and Trusts promote the same philosophy of

education as the religious congregations did. These trusts are Le Chéile Schools Trust, the Spiritan Education Trust (SET), Loreto Trust Board, CEIST (Catholic Education- an Irish Schools Trust), and ERST. A few schools operate as single trusts and support each other as a network outside the larger trusts. A spirit of partnership has evolved between the Trusts and schools (Feehan, 2023). As a consequence of demands for schools to defer ethea, an independent New Schools Establishment Group (NSEG) has been set up to oversee the patronage of any new post-primary schools (Department of Education 2020). The NSEG examines the opinions of the various stakeholders with an interest in the patronage of a new school and reports its decisions to the Minister for Education. The post-primary patronage process has begun for new post-primary schools whereby in 2021, one of the four new post-primary schools built is a Catholic school under the patronage of Le Chéile.

### ***New Schools Establishment Group***

With the establishment of the NSEG, Catholic schools and others will have to compete for the patronage of new schools through an Online Patronage Process System (OPPS). Parents can then access and vote on the OPPS and the appropriate survey for their area (Oireachtas, 2024). It is a step towards parents being able to choose the patronage of school and the medium through which they wish their children to be taught. Parents may vote for the school type using their children's Personal Public Service Number (PPSN). Ostensibly, the Government is promoting school choice in Ireland by allowing parents to voice their views regarding the patronage of new post-primary schools. In 2016 (DES) 'broadening the choice of schools available each year in line with the target of 400 multi/nondenominational schools by 2030' was the aim of the Department of Education (p.3). This aim was re-echoed with 'there will be more school choice' (DES, 2019, P.35), and an indicator of success was to be the establishment of a 'number of multi-denominational post-primary schools' (p.39). The number of post-

primary schools has been rising gradually for the last number of years, going from a low of 700 in 2013 to 723 in 2019 to 727 in 2022 (GOI, 2024a). This growth has been led by multi-denominational schools, which have increased by 11.5% in the last eleven years from 321 in 2012 to 358 in 2023. Catholic schools decreased by 4.7% in the same period, from 361 to 343 (GOI, 2024a). Though parents now can choose the type of school they wish in an area, parental choice may be restricted by the bill proposed by Labour T.D. Aodhán Ó Ríordáin (Ó Ríordáin, 2022) calling for the elimination of single-sex schools. As many Catholic post-primary schools that have not amalgamated are single-sex schools (Department of Education, 2022c), this would essentially narrow the choice for parents who wished to have their children educated in a single-sex or single-sex Catholic school.

### ***Education (Admission to Schools) Act, 2018***

The main legislation governing schools today is the Education Act (1998), the Education Welfare Acts 2000/2004 and the Education (Admission to Schools) Act (2018). In Ireland, parents can choose their child's school. However, an admissions policy by the school may prevent the child from receiving a place if the school is oversubscribed and the child may not fulfil the criteria the school has established to control its numbers (Department of Education, 2021). The main responsibility of the Department of Education is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking school places in the area. Parents can choose which school to apply to and where the school has places available the pupil should be admitted. Under the provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, all schools in Ireland are required to have drafted admissions policies in line with the Act. Schools must establish and maintain an admissions policy that provides maximum accessibility to the school and ensures that principles of equality are respected. The selection process must be non-discriminatory and must be applied fairly with respect to all applicants. The

Government admits that this may result in some pupils not obtaining a place in the school of their first choice (Department of Education, 2021b)(See Appendix A). Beyond Irish law is the influence of the European Convention on Human Rights (1947), which Ireland has been a party to since 1953. The educational provision states that ‘no person shall be denied the right to education’ (Article 2 of the First Protocol), and the State shall respect parents’ convictions whether they are based on religious or philosophical standpoints. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) highlights the freedom to manifest ‘religion or belief’ (Article 18).

It is also notable that some aspects relate to religion and parental choice in The Education (Admission to Schools Act), 2018, which have a bearing on the notion of parental Catholic school choice. The so-called “baptism barrier” for Catholic schools has been removed. The Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 prohibits schools from giving enrolment priority to baptised children in cases where they are over-subscribed (DES, 2018). Schools are permitted to allocate twenty-five per cent of places for the children or grandchildren of past pupils if they are oversubscribed. This move has been criticised as being discriminatory towards children of immigrant backgrounds, Traveller children and the children of parents with disabilities who may not have attended secondary school (Oireachtas, 2022). However, the defence of such an allocation is that it “arose from a concern for continuity of family experience and for the primacy of parental choice as protected in the Constitution” (Redmond, 2022). This would appear to be fair towards those who wish to carry on a family tradition but unfair to newcomers.

There are certain legal obligations regarding school admission policies, especially in the case of oversubscribed schools. In the case of school admissions, it is the responsibility of the management of all schools to implement an admissions policy by the Education Act of 1998 and the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018. Under the provisions of the Act,

school admission policies are approved by the school patrons. The schools are required to publish their admissions policies on their websites. A school's board of management must publish an annual admission notice on the school's website (and must also be available on written request) before accepting applications for a given year. The admission notice must inform parents how to get a copy of the school's admission policy, how to get an application form for admission, the dates when the school will start and stop receiving applications, the date the parent will be informed of the school's decision and the date by which the parent must accept a place. If a school is not over-subscribed, the school should continue to accept all applicants even after the deadline. The admission policy should also state that the school will accommodate the admission of children with a disability or other special educational needs (citizensinformation.ie). Schools have discretion about their admission criteria and how they are applied. The criteria and the order of priority are also at the school's discretion. However, in schools that are oversubscribed, i.e., schools where there are more applicants than places, a selection process is necessary. The selection process and the enrolment policy on which it is based should be non-discriminatory. They must be applied fairly with respect to all applicants (Appendix A). This may result in some students not receiving a place in their school of first choice. Should a student be refused a place in a school, Section 29 of the Education Act, 1998 provides for an appeal. Where the decision to refuse admission is due to the school being oversubscribed, a review of the decision by the school's board of management must first be sought. Following a review, a parent may appeal to an independent appeals committee appointed to consider appeals. The role of the Section 29 appeals committee is to examine the application for enrolment and consider if it was correctly processed by the school in accordance with the school's enrolment policy. Through its Educational Welfare Officers, the Educational Welfare Services of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) is the statutory agency that can assist parents with trouble securing a place for their children. In this current study, the subscription

level of the schools the participants' children attend can be seen in Appendix U. Appendix I names the CAS schools in the study region and indicates their subscription levels.

In this study, all parents received a Catholic school that they nominated in their CAS form or a school to which they applied directly. Some may have got their first choice on the CAS application others their eleventh choice. Of the seventeen schools on the CAS form, 10 are declared oversubscribed, 1 is presumed to be undersubscribed as all applications were accepted, and the subscription levels of 6 schools are unknown. Interestingly, all the children of New Irish participants attend DEIS schools. None of the children of Irish participants attend a DEIS school. Parents were classified as urban or rural depending on the location of their home, as outlined in Appendix U.

## 1.8 Definition of a Catholic School

The focus of this study is to investigate how parents choose a Catholic post-primary school for their children. Inevitably, this will also reveal why parents choose a Catholic school. Before embarking on such a study, defining what a Catholic school is may be helpful. The Catholic school has been defined in many ways, but what distinguishes it is 'that its concept of the human person is rooted in the teaching of Jesus Christ as embodied in the Catholic faith community' (Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP), 2019, p.8). Ten years previously, CSP, the umbrella group providing support for all the partners in Catholic schools in the Republic of Ireland, defined its vision of Irish Catholic schools as

a living expression of a long and varied education tradition inspired by Christ's life. Such schools emphasise the dignity of the human person as a child of God called to work with other persons in creating an inclusive community in service of the common good, where knowledge is sought and respected while faith is nurtured and challenged.

(CSP, 2011)

Therefore, a Catholic school's leading characteristic is that it focuses on respect, community and faith formation (CEP, 2022). How individual Catholic schools see themselves will vary depending on their history and ‘the ‘socio-demographic realities’ of the communities they serve (CSP, 2015, p.20). Therefore, not all Catholic schools are the same. Byrne and Devine (2018), in their mixed methods study of one hundred and ten designated Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Dublin, suggest that they are not all the same and that there is a continuum of Catholicity. They identified three categories of school on this continuum- ‘Faith -visible’ schools (those who put Catholicism at the forefront of their identity), ‘uncertain’ schools (who see no great difference between themselves and non-Catholic schools) and ‘transitional’ schools, (though Catholic, place a greater emphasis on academics than on a distinctive identity). Just as there are a variety of Catholic schools, there are also different types of Catholic identities (Inglis, 2017), which Ó Corráin summarises 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.

(Ó Corráin, 2018, p. 740)

There is agreement, however, on what a Catholic school stands for. Pope Francis (2014) alludes to Catholic schools in a broad sense in a Plenary session of the Congregation for Catholic Education:

Catholic educational institutions offer everyone an education aimed at the integral development of the person that responds to right of all

people to have access to knowledge and understanding. But they are equally called to offer to all the entire Christian message, respecting fully the freedom of all and the proper methods of each specific scholastic environment -namely, that Jesus Christ is the meaning of life, of the cosmos, and of history.

(Francis, 2014).

Pope Francis suggests that the Catholic school is where the whole child is educated, thus enabling them to engage with the world through the eyes of faith.

Similarly, Franchi (2015) in his review of De Thomasis' *Dynamics of Catholic Education: Letting the Catholic School be a school* refers to the word 'dynamics' in the title, asserting that the Catholic School should 'be a place of growth, development, intellectual exploration, and fellowship' that it is not 'static'. Franchi (2015) also states 'A Catholic school with many occasions for worship but with mediocre academic programs would not be fulfilling its mission'. Franchi (2015) further emphasises the principal role of a school, that of education. However, the pursuit of education in a Catholic school is not without its challenges. Augusta Muthigani (former President of OIEC/ International Office of Catholic Education), referenced by Cattaro, Richard and Wodon (2021) outlined the eight main challenges facing Catholic schools. These are (1) the decline in the depth of faith and values; (2) an inadequate number of clergy and religious serving in schools; (3) a changing scenario for teaching personnel; (4) a changing face of families; (5) ethical and religious pluralism; (6) inadequate child safety mechanism; (7) lack of research, data and documentation; and finally (8) the need for Catholic schools to reach the socio-economically marginalised. Having studied these challenges, she believes that Catholic schools must publicise their story of providing holistic quality education "without apology" (Cattaro, Richard and Wodon, 2021). She insists that Catholic schools need to emphasise what they have achieved globally, the values they have inculcated in millions of citizens, and their beneficial socio-economic impact on societies (Cattaro, Richard and Wodon, 2021). Such emphasis is evidence of Muthigani's awareness that Catholic education is now

regarded as a commodity that needs to be developed. Muthigani also stresses that educators in Catholic schools must be trained more to engage in the public space on issues that affect Catholic education. The recently published GRACE report also concurs with this view (O’Connell *et al.*, 2024). The Catholic Church, in its educational mission, appears to be aware of itself and what it needs to do to maintain its mission. Commitments for the next four years were made by educators at the *Educatio Si* World Congress of the International Office of Catholic Education (OIEC in French) in 2019, one of which was to practise inclusion within and outside the school and to adapt their educational structures to the needs of the most forgotten young people of the world (Cattaro, Richard and Wodon (2021). In essence, a Catholic school strives to inculcate inclusion, to be tolerant of all, to provide a sense of community, to provide faith formation and, of course, to academically prepare its students. Catholic schools are world-renowned for academic excellence, for encouraging a civic spirit and for encouraging respect for the dignity of all, especially the marginalised (Tiernan, 2018). Arguably, the Catholic school, today, is operating in a different reality to previous generations, with many schools now populated by non-Catholics, cultural Catholics and a diversity of staff who may not be Catholic or clerics. They are challenged today to express their characteristic spirit through the lens of the Catholic faith.

Groome (2021, pp. ix-x) stresses that in the ‘secular age’ (Taylor, 2007), the Catholic school of today needs to be grounded in spirituality and to educate ‘from’ and ‘for’ faith as it has for many centuries. Groome believes that the Catholic school educates ‘from’ a faith perspective by calling upon the universal values of Catholicism to provide a spirituality for its curriculum and ethos. Equally, it educates ‘for’ faith by proposing Christian faith in ways that all students, irrespective of their backgrounds, can learn from it for their lives.

## 1.9 The Catholic School in 2024

Catholic schools exist in a changing global social landscape (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019). Catholic schools in Ireland today are operating in a world where ‘Catholic teaching appears irrelevant or unappealing and outdated to many people’, and yet parents choose to have their children educated in them (Kieran, 2016, p. 280). The secular and religious life are competing, but Rymarz *et al.* (2019) contend that Catholic schools can exist if they offer something different or extra. Perhaps one of the attractions of a Catholic school today is the teaching of Religious Education (RE) from a faith-based perspective (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019). Pope Francis stresses that an education in the fullness of humanity should be the defining feature of a Catholic school (Pope Francis, 2015). In his parental address to the association of Catholic School parents in Italy, he stated:

Make your contribution generously so that Catholic schools never become a “fall-back” solution or an insignificant alternative among the various educational institutions. Collaborate in order that Catholic education may have the *face of that new humanism* which emerged from the Ecclesial Convention in Florence. Strive to ensure that Catholic schools *are truly open to all*.

(Francis, 2015).

In Pope Francis’ opinion, speaking about a Catholic education is equivalent to speaking about the human about humanism (Pope Francis, 2015). Similarly, this has been reiterated by the Bishops of Ireland (Deenihan, 2022). Some of the key documents informing Catholic education in Ireland today are the Grace Reports and the Global Compact on Education (GCE). According to the wishes of Pope Francis, the Catholic school in 2024 endeavours to educate towards the seven commitments of the GCE - to make students the centre of every educational programme, to listen to the voices of the young, to encourage the full participation of females in education; to consider the home and family as the primary educators; to educate, accept and

be open to the vulnerable and marginalised; to find new ways of understanding economy and politics and finally to safeguard our natural and human environment (Francis, 2019). According to the Catholic Education Partnership (CEP), Catholic schools, by virtue of their faith-based approach and their emphasis on moral and ethical formation, are well equipped to deliver on these commitments. Moral and spiritual formation is an integral part of the curriculum in Catholic schools. This is appreciated by not only Catholic parents but also by people of other religions and none who wish to have their children educated in Catholic schools (CSP, 2019). The *raison d'être* of the Catholic school is the nurturing of humanity.

According to Groome (2002), parents want their children in Catholic schools because they are places that are grounded in ancient life-giving spirituality, and this is essentially what parents want for their children. He argues that parents want to be the primary educators of their children, that Catholic schools offer that familial atmosphere, and that they can do this by being involved in the school. The Catholic school, in a sense, becomes an extension of the home with academic standards. Many researchers believe that one of the first indicators of the Catholicity of any Catholic school should be the quality of academic experience it gives to students (Franchi, 2015; Cattaro, Richard and Wodon, 2021; Tiernan, 2018).

A study entitled *Articulating a New Positioning of Catholic Education in Ireland* (commissioned by the CPSMA, CEP, and AMCSS and conducted by the consulting firm Genesis in 2019 to get an up-to-date and comprehensive picture of public perceptions of the Catholic Church “brand” and the factors determining choice of Catholic school), showed that the three most valued aspects of Catholic education by parents were respect, community and faith formation (CPSMA/CSP/AMSCC, 2019). The report is significant in the context of this study as it refers to the different types of Catholics in Ireland. Among these Catholics were some who chose to send their children to Catholic post-primary schools. The more significant

part of the study group (66%) believed that Christian values were important for the moral formation of their children but were also critical of ‘negative institutional instruction from the church’ (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). However, 1/3 of parents stated a preference for a school with some kind of religious ethos. This is also echoed by McCoy, Carroll and Ye’s study (2024). In Griffin’s (2022) opinion, the results of the report ‘underpin the necessity for choice and a diverse educational landscape in the interest of [our] young people’. At primary school level, most would agree with this point (McGraw, 2023).

Just as the Catholic school is underpinned by these characteristics, some factors shape the identity of each school in each country and contribute to the Catholic school’s overall effectiveness (Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993). These are a constrained academic structure, a communal school organisation and an inspirational ideology. Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993) observe that Catholic schools have clear boundaries for membership in a set of traditions and mores that reflect its mission and purpose. They describe Catholic schools as having shared organisational beliefs, a set of shared activities including a core academic curriculum, extensive extra-curricular involvement, and religious activities and the formal organisation of the community with distinctive aspects of the principal, chaplain and teachers. Others consider the Catholic school’s uniqueness because it is a religious community within an academic community (McDermott, 1997).

One challenge that all post-primary Catholic schools in a post-modern era share, according to Groome (2021) is that of the religious education curriculum, especially with the growing diversity of students and teachers. Ireland’s lack of standards, support and oversight for senior cycle religious education needs to be addressed (Doherty *et al.*, 2024). Groome (2021) suggests that the faith of Catholic students can still be nurtured as well as the spiritual life of all. He contends that Catholic schools can teach a faith tradition whereby Catholic students can learn *about* it, learn *from* it and learn *into* their identity. In such a diverse school

community of the 21st century, it is possible for Catholic schools to become rooted in their faith while at the same time helping those from other traditions to discover and live out their traditions, religious or otherwise.

### ***The Catholic post-primary school in Ireland***

The publication of the GCE (2019) has greatly impacted what and how the Catholic post-primary school should be. In 2023, the Catholic Education Partnership (CEP) signed up as a participating body in the compact whose guiding principles and values inform the work of Catholic schools in Ireland. At the launch of the GCE, Pope Francis stressed that every effort should be made to have a more inclusive, open education that includes ‘patient listening, constructive dialogue and better mutual understanding’ (Francis, 2019). Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, a former Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, sees the GCE as ‘leading us to rediscover the beauty of humanism inspired by the Gospel’ (Versaldi, 2022). As Catholic post-primary schools in Ireland become more populated by diverse staff and students, the pact will act as a guide to educate and spiritually form citizens capable of living in a fast-changing world.

In its quest to provide a Catholic education in 2025 and beyond, Catholic schools in Ireland can continue to draw on several principles to support their ethos. Catholic schools can continue the work of Jesus, the teacher; they can recognise that they are part of a living tradition which respects both faith and reason; they can integrate RE in the curriculum while providing opportunities for Catechesis and give expression to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council while also educating towards intercultural dialogue (CSP, 2015, p.20). The Irish Catholic post-primary school continues to put the student at the centre of its educational role by nurturing the gifts of every student and awakening their spirituality. Fundamental to Catholic education is ‘an ethos of care for the individual, faith formation and education of the

whole person' (CCMS, 2021, p.2). Catholic post-primary schools promote core gospel values of faith, hope and love, equip students with the values that help them contribute to society and the common good, and nurture a deep compassion and justice for all. Groome (2021) sees this nurturing of critical social consciousness as acting towards God's reign, the results of which are often seen in the many charitable pursuits with which students become involved. At the heart of Catholic schools is the person. They exist primarily to bring students into contact with a God who loves but does not seek anything in return (Meehan, 2014). Meehan (2014) emphasises that Catholic education is a holistic one, not just preparing students for exams or the dictates of the market but a true education that 'humanises rather than instrumentalises' the individual (Meehan, 2014, p. ) Equally, the Irish Catholic post-primary school 'focuses on the value of the individual, shared values that promote community and the universal vocation to holiness (CCMS, 2021, p.5). For a Catholic school to be truly faithful to Jesus, it should welcome and include all (Groome, 2021). In a Catholic school, students of other faiths are encouraged and supported to grow in the knowledge and traditions of their religious practices (Conway, 2024; Mullally, 2019). Support of families of other faiths and beliefs is also encouraged (CSP, 2016). Recent studies confirm that Irish voluntary post-primary schools, of which 90% are Catholic, welcome all, although in some cases, fee-paying schools can exclude those who cannot afford them (Carroll, McCoy, Ye, 2024). The Genesis study revealed that parents in Ireland see Catholic schools as places that instil values rooted in respect, community, and giving, teach children right from wrong, and uphold social inclusion (CPMSA/CSP/AMSCC, 2019). The study also found that the advantages that a Catholic ethos can bring to a school are 'foundational' and 'developmental' in terms of morality and ethics. However, the role of principals is crucial to leading the identity and ethos of schools in Ireland, and there is a certain concern about the succession of committed and practising Catholic principals (O'Connell *et al.*, 2024). Already, 85% of post-primary principals agree that parents

of incoming students are formally introduced to the schools' Catholic ethos (O'Connell *et al.*,2024). But will this figure decline if principals do not receive the necessary training to run Catholic post-primary schools? Doherty *et al.* (2024) emphasise that more training is necessary (Doherty *et al.*,2024). Additionally, there is a notable decline in commitment to Catholic ethos among younger teachers, as revealed in the recently published GRACE report (O'Connell *et al.*,2024). Nevertheless, in terms of parental choice, the Genesis report finds that 79% of parents get their preferred school, and lack of choice has nothing to do with religion. It also suggests that parents choose Catholic schools because of faith, that they strengthen resilience, and that there is an appreciation of the transcendent that they believe helps their children (CPMSA/CSP/AMSCC, 2019). Though there is much to do regarding training personnel within Catholic schools, the many recommendations of the GRACE report (O'Connell *et al.*, 2024), if adhered to, will support the Irish Catholic post-primary school into the future.

Therefore, it is very difficult to definitively describe the Catholic school of today. As will be elucidated in Chapter Two, parental choice of Catholic school may be influenced by many factors, which in turn affects enrolment in schools.

## 1.10 Enrolment and a centralised application system (CAS)

Two quite different application systems are at work in the region of this study. One is where parents apply directly to a school of their choice, and the second method operates in the Limerick region, where parents apply their preferences through a centralised system(See Appendix D). The Limerick area of the Midwest has exercised a centralised application system for post-primary schools of all types for several years, and it was introduced in Ennis (another town in the Midwest Ireland) schools in 2022. The central application system (CAS) was implemented because some students did not receive a post-primary place. Under the centralised enrolment system, parents must submit only a single application form, on which they specify

up to eleven choices from among seventeen schools in the city and suburbs. Application submissions and announcements of places across all schools occur on a common timeline with a single date for each step in the process. Alongside a centralised enrolment process, some districts in the U.S. have built robust information systems, including interactive websites where parents can explore their school options, and all student-school matches are made through a single, agreed-upon algorithm (Denice and Gross, 2016). Ireland has no such robust information system or an interactive website where parents can explore their school options. Each school has a website where information about the school can be sought. Information is published in English. Such systems of application do have their limitations. In the Limerick region, for example, if a parent wishes to send their son to a single-sex school, they only have a choice of four, yet the form requires them to submit eleven choices. If a parent wishes to send their daughter to a single-sex Catholic school again, they only have four choices. Schools can choose the students they want from those who have chosen their school as their first choice, with the remaining students returning to the centralised system. Such a system could be considered limiting for parents. This current study does not have parents who used the Ennis centralised system. Plans are in motion to extend the centralised system to other areas of Ireland (O'Kelly, 2024).

### 1.11 Choice as a concept

Rational choice, parental efficacy, parental role construction theories, and Bourdieu's theories of capital, together with the literature and the researcher's experience, constitute the theoretical framework for this study. It is important to note that in illuminating the choice processes of parents, that choice is subjective. Additionally, no two parents are the same and have varying access to and possession of financial, social and cultural capital. Equally, material possessions like houses, cars and finances for extra-curricular activities are not distributed

evenly amongst parents of differing social and ethnic backgrounds. People of different ethnicities may have limited language skills in the country of their school choice; they may have different values than others and, therefore, will make different choices. This study employs a few choice theories as a lens through which to explore parents' choices.

### ***Rational choice theory (RCT)***

RCT is one of the most widely used theories in research to understand the school choice process (Wilson, 2016). RCT owes its origins to behavioural psychology and economics and is rooted in two basic principles- (1) RCT suggests that individuals act out of self-interest in making decisions (Herfeld, 2009) and (2) will weigh the outcomes and benefits against the cost of achieving them and thereby maximise total utility (Herrnstein, 1990). In the case of school choice for a child, parents will act in their child's best interests. The best interests of a child could be academic success, social engagement, sporting achievements or personal happiness. Chubb and Moe (1990) argue that parents seek the best school based on educational quality. This argument is supported by Lubienski and Lubienski (2014). Following Chubb and Moe (1990), Schneider, Teske and Marschall (2000) consider the process of parental school choice as (1) identification of a group of possible schools, (2) gathering information about them, and (3) making compromises. Bosetti (2007) used rational choice theory in her study of parental choice in multiple school types and suggests that other theories besides RCT could also explain the school choice process.

### ***Parental role construction theory (PRCT)***

School choice aims to empower parents to choose the school that they think best fits their child (Lovenheim and Walsh, 2017). To make that choice, parents have a specific subjective understanding of their role. PRCT can best be understood as parents' beliefs about

what they must do for their child educationally and the ensuing behaviour that then occurs to serve those beliefs (Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005). This may not always be based on empirical knowledge but on a feeling or perception. Parents see their role as one in which they will do the best they can for their child. Curry and Holter (2015) found in their studies that parents' construction of their role is often socially based. Social networks influence their perception of their role as well as the degree to which they think they can get involved in the school choice process (Curry and Holter, 2015; Altenhofen, Berends and White, 2016; Hill, 2016; Lobato, Bernelius and Kosunen, 2018; Fong, 2019). What one parent chooses for their child may greatly influence what their friends choose. Biddle (1986) understands parental role construction theory as a socially constructed set of duties, rights, obligations, and expected behaviours that correspond with particular positions in varied social contexts. Therefore, the parental role is socially constructed, and by extension, school choice is guided by the role parents believe they play in their children's lives.

### ***Parental Self-Efficacy Theory (PSET)***

PSET refers to parents' estimates of their abilities to influence their children and their children's environments in ways that lead to positive outcomes (Dumka *et al.*, 2010). The theory of self-efficacy originated with Albert Bandura, who defined an efficacy expectation as the 'conviction that one can successfully execute the behaviour required to produce an outcome' (Bandura, 1977, p.193). Bandura's (1997) theory is triadic and is the interaction of parents' self-efficacy cognitions, which are internal, parents' practices/ behaviour and the environment. Bandura also argued that the stronger one's sense of self-efficacy, the more effort one expend on achieving their goal. Strong self-efficacy is derived from repeated success. Regarding parental choice, parents with a strong sense of self-efficacy will be more likely to

believe that they can achieve the school of their choice for their child and will do everything within their power to make that happen. That sense of self-efficacy may be linked to the forms of capital to which one has access.

### ***Bourdieu's theory of capital***

Bourdieu's theories have been applied extensively to studies on school choice (Yoon, 2020). Though he did not study the modern phenomenon of school choice which exists today his work did focus on the relationships between social class and education (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1996). School choice studies have used Bourdieu's concepts to theorise the social influences on education (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1995; Reay, 2004; Van Zanten, 2013; Darmody and Smyth, 2018; Byrne and De Tona, 2019). His theoretical concepts of capital, habitus, and field are used to examine and illuminate the choice behaviours of parents.

Bourdieu refers to various forms of capital. In his 1986 paper, *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu suggests that cultural capital can exist in three forms:

... In the embodied State, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified State, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realisation of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalised State, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee.

(Bourdieu 1986, p. 242)

The concept of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) refers to the cultural resources that an individual possesses that advantage them when it comes to, in this case, school choice, and which corresponds to their family's class positions and aspirations. Social capital emanates from the resources, virtual or actual, that one possesses, and cultural capital is best understood

as informational capital or knowledge. According to Bourdieu's theory, different groups in society vary in their choice practices due to possessing different forms and amounts of capital. Parents who possess cultural capital will choose schools to ensure their children's accumulation of cultural capital, which will steer them towards upper-middle-class careers and lifestyles (Roda, 2017; Yoon, 2020). The school then becomes a key institution for class reproduction (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1996; Lynch and Moran, 2006; Yoon, 2020). In addition, parents wish their children to be schooled with children who are regarded as similar to themselves (Ball and Vincent, 1998). However, school choice can cause anxiety, particularly for middle-class parents concerned with social reproduction (Ball, 2003). Therefore, school choice is a social act involving parents interacting as choosers with varying degrees of cultural capital in a social context. As well as being agents living in a social context, parents are also influenced by their social context and their social position. Bourdieu argues that social capital is gained from the benefits of an individual's group participation (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital may be viewed as 1) the social relationship itself that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates and 2) the amount and quality of those resources. The ability to navigate the school choice arena reflects the social and cultural capital the parent possesses (Altenhofen, Berends and White, 2016). While parents are free to make choices, they are also constrained by the rules of society. Their choices are influenced by the concept of habitus.

Habitus is best understood as a way of being, or a predisposition. It is the underlying accumulation of the structures of life that become ingrained in how we react to the social world (Reay, 2004). The dispositions that constitute habitus are formed by earlier experiences and become internalised. Bourdieu describes these dispositions as: "durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions" (Bourdieu, 1990, p54). As individuals engage with different social structures, different dispositions are formed, internalised and absorbed into

earlier mental and corporeal dispositions. For Bourdieu, habitus is embodied and shapes individuals' beliefs about how they should behave and act, but Bourdieu does not suggest that they are automatons (Maton, 2008). An individual's opinions of their objective possibilities, and what they can achieve, condition their subjective disposition. In terms of parental choice, a parent who thinks their choices are limited because of, for example, their lack of social capital may behave in a manner that reduces their chances of success.

Operating within an individual's habitus is the concept of field. Fields are the structures of social rules, practices and power where habitus interacts, social spaces as it were. It is the relationship between field and habitus that provides the key to understanding practice or actions (Maton, 2008). For Bourdieu, each social field of practice can be viewed as a 'game' or a 'field of struggles' in which individuals strategically improvise in their struggle to achieve their goal (Maton, 2008). Bourdieu sees the individual as getting a feel for the game, adapting and mastering their action strategies as they adapt to the field. Over time, one form of capital can also be converted into another form. Social capital, for example, can be used to gain cultural capital or economic capital can be used to acquire cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986/2006).

From an economic perspective, one might consider Friedman's view of choice when looking at the neo-liberal idea of education as a marketplace. Friedman (1964/2002) suggested that markets are influenced by consumer choice. Those choices are influenced by the rational decisions that consumers make. Still, in making those choices, the consumer weighs up the assets and liabilities of their decisions. In terms of school choice, the parent/ consumer considers several factors such as academics, transport, the child, etc., and the benefits or disadvantages to the family before making their decision. The unconscious habitus and the capital that a parent possesses feed into their choices, which in their minds are rational choices suited to their roles as parents. Choice theory and Bourdieu's theory of capital can, therefore, be said to work concomitantly. This will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

## Summary

This chapter outlined the rationale for the study. The primary research question on how parents choose a Catholic post-primary school for their child was then outlined. The researcher's role and her constructivist approach were then summarised. Next, the history of Irish education from the 1878 Intermediate Education Act up to the present day was explored concerning the types of schools in existence today. The Catholic school of 2024 was addressed, as was the role of trusteeships in the management of Catholic schools in Ireland. The process of enrolment and the Central Application System (CAS) governing some schools in the Midwest area was then discussed. The concept of choice, the theoretical framework of Bourdieu and the theories of Parental choice, Rational choice and parental efficacy were subsequently introduced. The next chapter will introduce a review of the literature for this study.

# Chapter Two Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

Contributing to the extant literature, this review reveals the factors that influence parents' decisions to enter the choice field or marketplace. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for this literature review were initially broad in scope and included empirical and theoretical studies on school choice across academic literature, press articles, journal reports and social media both nationally and internationally. Other contexts were explored to establish a sense of the meaning of school choice. Findings suggested that school choice has different practices and policies both nationally and internationally (Raveaud and Van Zanten, 2007; Rowe and Windle, 2012; Lubienski and Yoon, 2017). Although an in-depth discussion from an international perspective is not possible in the context of this literature review, material from the US, Canada, Australia the UK and Northern Ireland on parental school choice has been explored, considered and used to contribute to an analysis and understanding of the phenomenon. However, literature **about** Ireland was prioritised. Articles and studies published in peer-reviewed journals account for much of the literature reviewed in this chapter. Material from the Irish Department of Education and Catholic Church publications and studies were also consulted.

The review of Irish literature on school choice concerning Catholic schools revealed a lacuna in the available material. Furthermore, the studies were carried out over different decades during which the Irish educational landscape has undergone significant changes some of which are the introduction of Educate Together schools, the proliferation of Gaelscoileanna, the dominance of ETB schools and the expansion of DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools (Department of Education, 2021b). Equally, the historic and symbiotic relationship between the Catholic Church and the Irish State has had its influence on

educational provision in Ireland. Arguably the influence of the Catholic church on Irish culture and education complicates the cultural and religious landscape of 21st-century Ireland (Anderson, Byrne and Cullen, 2016). Currently, primary schools in Ireland are in the throes of divestment, and debates regarding ecclesial involvement in education continue.

In conducting this literature review the key words/ descriptors chosen included ‘school choice’, ‘parental choice’, ‘enrolment’, ‘school enrolment’, ‘school application’, application to school ‘, school admission’, ‘post-primary school choice’, ‘parental preferences’, ‘school choice preference’, ‘school choice studies’. To carry out a thorough literature review and use the databases to full effect, identifying appropriate descriptors that were recognisable by indexers to categorise articles and documents was one of the primary steps (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). One of the databases frequently used in this study was ERIC, a free, online digital library of education research and information sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) of the U.S. Department of Education. The initial focus was on journals and texts relating to the topic. Some of the journals were the *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*, *Journal of Education Policy*, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *British Educational Research Journal*, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *Irish Educational Studies*, *Journal of School Choice*, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, *British Journal of Religious Education*, *Journal of Religious Education*, to name a few. ProQuest (<http://proquest.com>) a literature research program which is arguably one of the largest online repositories in the world was also used in the study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

EBSCO, a reputable library host which provides access to research databases and e-journals was used. Databases are useful for identifying journal articles and other publications on a particular topic within the subject areas covered by each database. One database within EBSCO is the American Psychological Association database (APA) which is the world's largest

resource devoted to peer-reviewed literature in behavioural science and mental health. The thesis database of DCU, Doras, was also accessed online. The European database RIAN was also consulted through DCU. The years chosen for the literature review were 2000-2024. As the literature review is an iterative process the researcher also consulted earlier studies. Legislation consulted for the thesis included the Education Act (1998) and the Education (Admission to Schools) Act, 2018, as were the mission statements of some Catholic schools.

## **2.2 Choice of school or school choice -Defining terms**

The concept of choice was briefly alluded to in Chapter One. This chapter begins with a clarification of the term ‘school choice’ and how it is understood in the international and national literature. This will serve to simplify the topic and to establish parameters as to how the term is utilised. Defining terminology helps to prevent any misinterpretations and helps to clarify any misunderstanding for the reader (Van Mil and Henman, 2016). Generally, choice refers to decision-making when presented with two or more options. School choice in the context of this study describes the right of parents to be able to choose where to send their children to school. Parents exercise school choice in Ireland through enrolment in state public schools, private schools, Catholic, Islamic, Church of Ireland, Jewish schools, DEIS schools, Irish language schools (Gaelscoileanna), non-denominational, multi-denominational, Comprehensive, Community and Educate Together schools.

In much of the literature the terms *schools of choice* and *choice of schools* appear. This study endeavoured to investigate the processes that parents exercised and endured in reaching their ultimate choice of post-primary school for their child. The term offered for this is *choice of schools*. ‘*Schools of choice*’ on the other hand is a term used widely in the literature and especially in the U.S. and deserves some discussion to differentiate it from school choice as it is understood in Ireland. It centres on school voucher plans which allow parents to redeem publicly funded vouchers in schools of their choice. Parents in the U.S exercise school choice

through enrolment in charter schools and private schools, through participation in school voucher programmes, and through school district open-enrolment programs. Vouchers are the most radical form of parental choice and are a key part of neoliberal education policies and are used in various forms in more than fourteen states in the U.S. and all over Chile (Ball, 2021). California public school districts have created intra- and inter- district public school choice policies, according to a 1993 state law, whereby a student may choose to attend a participating school outside the student's neighbourhood if space permits. Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), school districts must allow students to transfer out of consistently low-performing or persistently dangerous schools, as defined by the state (Edwards *et al.*, 2009). Such a situation is not strictly provided for in the Irish context.

Superficially, school choice in the U.S. seems to be an ideal solution to parental disgruntlement with schools, however it is not without its controversies. Economically and socially disadvantaged parents are less likely to move out of their area to apply to a school of choice (Lauen, 2007). 'Creaming' or cream-skimming (Ball, 2021) of the 'best' students from schools exacerbates segregation as the good students move away and the finances attributed to them for moving to a better school leave with them (Orfield and Wallace, 2008). In the U.S. school choice allows public education funds to travel with a child allowing them to attend the school that best serves their needs be that a public, private, charter or home school. Greater mobility has allowed parents to expand their scope of choice. The so-called marketplace for parental choice has grown, populations have grown, and the building of new schools has multiplied. The means by which parents can access information regarding school choice and how schools can advertise themselves, has evolved considerably also, thus making school choice for parents a labyrinthine experience (Berends, 2021).

Closer to Ireland, in other European countries, like the Netherlands for instance, parental preferences must be considered before establishing a new school as is now the case in Ireland. In choosing a school the most popular preferences of parents are religious affiliation, ethnic composition, geographical convenience and the quality of education provided (Kelly, 2007). Sweden, for instance, adopted a voucher policy programme in 1992 as part of its reforms to give more control of its schools to towns and cities. Parents can choose any public or private school, and the capitation grants follow them, as in Ireland. However, this move instigated an exponential growth in ‘free schools’, ironically named, as most are private and for profit and almost certainly not free (Ball, 2021; Rönnberg *et al.*, 2022).

In the U.K the term *school choice* describes parents' right to express preference for a school that they would most like for their child to attend (Burgess *et al.*, 2015). The definition is like what is understood in Ireland, but the process and range of schools differ. In Ireland, *school choice* refers to how parents can avail of schools if they meet the admission criteria, there are places available and they are willing to travel to whatever school they choose. In areas such as Midwest Ireland one can apply to various schools, individually or through a centralised system if living in the Limerick area or Ennis. A parent may choose a school but that does not mean that they will get a place. Equally, there are some restrictions to exercising that free choice, for example school transport issues can restrict low-income families from exercising that choice (Bradley and Taylor, 2002). Some parents may feel their choices are restricted. Additionally lower income families are less likely to have access to a car which would mean that they would travel far shorter distances to school (Wood, 2005). Therefore, the capacity to choose differs across different socio-economic groups as will be discussed presently. Employing the phrase *school choice* may suggest that parents have total choice whereas some would argue that choice is also exercised by schools when they choose to accept some students and not others (Jennings, 2010; Brown *et al.*, 2021). The system in Ireland is slightly different

in that the voucher system does not exist in Ireland. Parents do not get vouchers to go to other schools if they are not happy with them and neither is there the same variety of schools. However, choice does exist but as the literature suggests it can be a very classed and nuanced process.

## **2.3 The range of choosers**

Research has shown that parents make different choices depending on, for example, socioeconomic status and context (Hastings, Kane and Staiger, 2006; Schneider *et al.*, 2002; Teske and Schneider, 2001; Bell, 2009; Burgess *et al.*, 2015). Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) argue that there are three different types of choosers. The first are the privileged and skilled choosers i.e. those who have the knowledge and tendency to choose (sometimes described as possessing social or cultural capital). These choosers select schools based on their high quality of education, high levels of academic achievement or a strong emphasis on academic subjects. The second type of choosers are semi-skilled, those who are inclined to choose but are limited in their capacity to do so and usually base their selection on the school's reputation. The third group are those who are limited in their choice and low in inclination, in other words the disconnected choosers. Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz (1996) suggested that when social class is considered, the disconnected choosers were almost always working class, and the privileged choosers were almost always professionals. When parents from different backgrounds choose a school for group rather than individual reasons, segregation can result and the main reason for this is social class (Kelly, 2007; Denessen, Drissena, and Slegers, 2005).

Like Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995), in Ireland, Cahill and Hall (2014) identify three types of school chooser 'passive transitioners', 'active choosers' and 'second schoolers. In Cahill and Hall's study (2014) of school choice in an urban setting they found that supporting the school located in the community was seen to be important among parents of the area but sending their children to schools outside the community revealed the 'classed nature of school

choice' as they were the ones who could afford to leave the area. Both studies reveal the entwined and co-constructed nature of identity and social class and the effect that economic status can have on school choice. In the Irish study they have revealed that post-primary school choice in Ireland is influenced by neo-liberal processes whereby market principles of free choice and competition are highly influential (Lynch and Moran, 2006).

Freedom of choice in a marketised world should increase competition between the institutions providing the 'service'. Under this lens schools must provide an increase in quality or a characteristic that others do not offer to attract those parents to choose a school for their children (Bagley, 1996; Whitty and Edwards, 1998; Goldhaber, 2000). This can exert enormous pressures on schools but perhaps this is where the Catholic school due to its values, ethos or whatever parents term as desirable, offers something that is unique. Parents choosing a faith-based school can be viewed as a construct of consumption, goods or products e.g. Catholic schooling is 'purchased and invested in' (Leukert, 2022). Arguably parents who send their children to a Catholic school wish to see a return on their 'investment' and that return may be a Catholic education. To be able to exercise choice of a Catholic school or any other type of school, effectively, parents must know their options and alternatives, that logistically they can avail of them, have reliable information, the ability to understand their choices and the time to consider them (Gorard, 1998). Research has suggested that the tendency to make ill-informed choices regarding schools is most often made by low-income families (Sheehy-Skeffington and Rea, 2017). Such families may not have the education to make decisions, nor the confidence or experience. Moe (1995) equally emphasises that "parents- especially low-income parents- supposedly care about practical concerns such as how close the school is or whether it has a good sports team and put little emphasis on academic quality and other properties of effective schooling" (p.27). Perhaps for lower income parents or immigrants, factors other than 'effective schooling' (p.27) may be a priority for them. School choice is acknowledged as a

stressful and challenging activity especially for low income and immigrant families (Roda and Sattin-Bajaj, 2024). In Kafka's (2022) longitudinal study of a diverse school district it was found that parents, especially those of low income were faced with too many uncertainties when trying to find the best 'fit' for their children. In essence choice can often be a case of the capital that the chooser possesses. Much of the impetus behind school choice is fuelled by capital as alluded to in Chapter One.

## **2.4 Capital**

Capital, as discussed earlier extends beyond material assets to capital that may be social, cultural or symbolic. Bourdieu (1986) refers to 'social capital' as the cultural ability of a person to achieve greater access to the educational market and use it to their advantage. This person has in effect the knowledge and ability to recognise and take advantage of a choice of school that would offer the maximum benefit to their child. The term 'social capital' used in this review is defined operationally as the resources embedded in one's social network that can be mobilised to facilitate individual action. In another way it could be termed "the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures" (Portes, 1998, p6). If an individual is not very well educated or in the correct club or social setting, they are not aware of the value of social capital or may not have known there was a term for such a concept.

It could also be argued that education is valued more by those who are educated. In addition, an individual is likely to make a wrong choice due to that lack of education, as previously suggested (Moe, 1995). Bourdieu (1986) argues that the sociocultural background of a student is a causal factor in educational success due to parents' willingness and ability to 'in education. The literature has revealed that social capital is an important resource that parents invoke when they wish their children to succeed and one which is particularly called into play when considering school choices (Lareau, 1989; Holme, 2002; Chin and Phillips, 2004).

Cultural capital, -and how it is created from other forms of capital- plays a central role in society's power relations. Economic capital, for example, can be used by parents for example to choose schools that require more costly means of transport (Lareau and Goyette, 2014). Bourdieu (1986) argues that "social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds through cultural products", including systems of education, values, judgement, language (p.471). These all may lead to an unconscious acceptance of social differences, to a 'sense of oneself' and to behaviours of self-exclusion (Bourdieu, 1984, p141).

Self-exclusion may be exhibited for example in the educational arena whereby a school may not be chosen or avoided because it is 'not for people like us. On the other hand, the practice of sticking with one's own can also be harmful leading to marginalisation and exclusion of low SES or minority groups of students (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara, 2014). The social, cultural and economic capital of a family is extremely significant in influencing school choice (Coldron, Cripps and Shipton, 2010). When individuals wish to access information, they tend to turn to their own social groupings or networks and this type of social capital has been linked to parental choice of schools (Schneider, Teske, Roch and Marschall, 1997; Holme, 2002). Sometimes that information may not always be accurate but is often highly valued because it comes from high status members of a social network. For example, Holme's qualitative study of forty white, upper- and middle-class parents revealed that parents solely depended on inaccurate, reputational rather than curricular information, they received from high status individuals, to make their school choice decisions. Evidently not all parents view school choice in the same manner.

The process of school choice is linked to how education is viewed by the chooser and what it is expected to deliver. It has been argued that the school choice system is geared towards middle-class parents, arguably white middle-class parents, as 'the system itself is one which valorises middle rather than working-class cultural capital' (Reay, 2001, p334). Middle-class

families see the post-primary school as the institution which will maximise their child's educational attainment and chances in life (Allen, Burgess and Mc Kenna, 2014, p.19) and they are skilled choosers. Those who put less thought into the process may be disconnected and often working class as earlier alluded (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe,1995). In some cases, working-class families will allow their children to have more input in the school choice decision process as for them it is not considered a high stakes life decision (Coldron and Boulton, 1991; Ball, 1993; Cahill and Hall, 2014). For working class parents, having their child attend a school that is safe and geographically/ logistically accessible is what matters to them. Many working-class parents may be unaware of the future academic implications of school choice (Trevena, McGhee and Heath, 2016). Equally it could be argued that they regard other issues in their lives as more pressing.

Based on a wide range of topics, one of which is schooling, Trevena, McGhee and Heath, (2016) in their study of parental capital and strategies for school choice making were curious as to how Polish parents navigated the school choice process on immigration to England and Scotland. They based their study in rural and urban areas just as this current study has done, though the population of the areas of this study are smaller. The study, concentrated on interviewing twenty-five parents (sixteen women, nine men), revealed that the Polish parents did not make informed school choice decisions due to low cultural capital and their inability to transfer it to a new environment. Equally their social capital was low and only witnessed in the form of 'bonding capital' which arguably is limiting in not allowing themselves to expand their social ties beyond the already domiciled Polish immigrant population. The study highlights that for immigrant children to succeed academically in their newly adopted country parents must make informed choices. Unfortunately, immigrant parents may not have the social or cultural capital to do this. The study did not examine in depth the role of Catholic schools chosen by the Polish parents except to say that parents were aware that

Catholic schools had a good academic reputation. Interestingly, Trevena, McGhee and Heath, (2016) found that some parents choose schools where their children would have the support of co-ethnic networks. Such networks offered language and psychological support to those who felt ill-equipped. Equally schools which had language support and resources were also favoured by these parents.

Though working-class parents have been said to invest less time in school choice decisions (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995; Cahill and Hall, 2014) either through attributing less importance to them or not having the social and cultural capital to negotiate them, this may not always be the case. A small-scale qualitative study of working class African American women in the U.S. found that working class African American mothers were discerning choosers by choosing to leave the public school system as they felt it was not offering their children the best possible opportunities (Herelle, 2022; Cooper, 2005). These mothers were able to avail of vouchers and ‘shop’ around for what they believed was better for their children.

A further study (Cooper, 2007) was significant for two reasons as it revealed that mothers seemed to be the parents who were more involved in the choice of school and contrary to Cooper’s (2005) study it found that at an economic level, low-income families move less to facilitate school choice. Cooper (2007) conducted a qualitative study to examine school choice and educational advocacy roles. It again studied fourteen mothers who were identified as low income /working class. It involved in-depth interviews with mothers from four different types of schools in Los Angeles. The study revealed how race, class and gender influenced school choice. The conclusion was that more theoretical and empirical work on school choice and parental involvement as socially constructed practices that are gendered and culturally relevant were needed. Equally it could be concluded that low-income parents of any gender or culture may have a range of other factors in their lives to arrange, before concentrating on the quality

of education their child receives or the life path that they will navigate. Arguably the possession of greater capital can exacerbate social inequality.

Ball (2021) suggests that school choice is rife with inequality as those who possess social and cultural capital are in prime position to make more informed choices to enhance their children's positions:

Inequality, in part at least, is produced and reproduced by the actions and strategies of the socially advantaged as they seek to insure or enhance their social position. The efforts involved are either ignored or facilitated by policies such as school choice, school diversity and selection.

(Ball, 2021, p.204)

Socially advantaged or middle-class parents aspire to a 'rounded general education' for their children (Ball, 2003, p71). This is often achieved through sports and extracurricular activities. In recent years, parents have shown increased interest in their children's sports (Strandbu *et al.*, 2019). Arguably, this could be because it is said to improve memory, attention and lower absenteeism for students, improve grades and mental health (Owen *et al.*, 2023; Dyer *et al.*, 2017; Lubans *et al.*, 2016). However, it could also be linked with the neoliberal view of sport providing a function of increasing the human capital of their children. Parents who wish their children to succeed academically and in life are investing in their children's sports and thereby perpetuating inequality (Lareau, 2018; Mikus, Tieben and Schober, 2021; Warikoo, 2022).

Some would argue that participating in sport is a means to social mobility (Benkorti, 2024). One Irish journalist has gone so far as to say that for many people sport has come to replace the religious experience (Gallagher, 2022). Nonetheless, these activities also help in distinguishing their children, something which parents consider a good investment in their children's futures and which also serve to protect their children from downward mobility (Vincent and Ball, 2007). In many cases such activities demand capital outlay for gear and equipment, something that may not be as available to working class or immigrant parents.

Bourdieu (1977) would regard such habits and resources as forms of cultural capital that serve to distinguish social classes and preserve class privilege which in turn perpetuates inequality. On the other hand, working class parents believe that providing ‘love, food and safety’ is sufficient for their children (Vincent and Ball, 2007). Some studies have shown that marginalised parents or disadvantaged parents who try to improve their social position through school choice for their children are constrained by their own limited successes in life (Yoon and Lubienski, 2017; Ellison and Aloe, 2019).

To bridge the gap that can be caused by capital inequities, the U.K has choice advisers to help those parents who may not be able to access information about schools due to lack of technology or education. This measure was introduced by Labour’s Education Act 2006. It was hoped to lessen the educational gap/divide (Allen, Burgess, Mc Kenna, 2014, p.24) and support those ‘most in need’. However, this system was ended by the new coalition government in 2011. The 2006 Act which has been amended several times-up to as recently as 2020-also introduced a Code of Practice for school admission to prevent ‘cream-skim’ (Ball, 2021). Exley (2012) contends that the purpose of the advisers is to make working class parents think like middle-class parents. This would suggest that advisers could influence parents on what should be prioritised in a choice of school. Some of these factors will now be discussed.

## **2.5 Factors influencing school choice**

There is a combination of factors that influence school choice (Drics-Bursten, 2015). Nevertheless, no matter how well equipped a school is, it will not run effectively if it has not got good leadership. Many parents will choose a school if they believe it has good leadership (Hughes and Reid, 2016). A well-led school will have an effective pastoral system in place and show care for students and prepare them for life (Hughes and Reid, 2016)). This can make it an attractive choice. Rymarz *et al.* (2019) points out that if teachers/ leaders are showing a

holistic attitude and run the school well with good discipline, that parents will highly value such a trait and influence their choice.

However, there are many more factors related to school choice which are interrelated and go towards assessing what a good choice is (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019). These include social concerns, academics, safety, reputation, transport, proximity, extracurricular and physical facilities and of the schools, leadership and ethos to name a few. These factors will give an insight into the research question “What factors do parents consider when choosing a Catholic post-primary school in the Midwest of Ireland?” This section will review the literature relating to some of these factors under several subheadings.

### ***Social factors***

Parents’ choice of school is based on a range of factors that go to make the package that is attractive to parents. Evidence from research suggests that the criteria for evaluating schools vary according to family social position, including social class and ethnicity (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1995; Coldron and Bolton, 1991). It is influenced by several social factors such as the care and support a school is reputed to give (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019). School choice is also influenced by what peers or social groups are saying, the social reputation of the school (McCarthy, 2007), what is heard on the ‘grapevine’ or from family and friends (Ball and Vincent, 1998). Insider knowledge of a school can advantage those with enough social and cultural capital to access it (Byrne and Smyth, 2011; Reay, Crozier and James, 2011). The reputation or status of the school in the community, referred to as ‘the cogency of the grapevine’ (Ball and Vincent, 1998; McCarthy, 2016) has a bearing on parent’s choice of school (Ball and Vincent, 1998). In fact, Rymarz *et al.* (2019) make the point that reputation or status can be elusive as it is fed by perception and is susceptible to changing attitudes. The ‘best’ school or the socially aspirational school is both subjective and prone to the vagaries of

society with parents perhaps using past experiences to guide their choices (Rhodes, Szabo and Warkentien, 2023).

Choice of school may involve a nostalgic element where parents want their children to have a similar experience to their own (Ball and Vincent, 1998). Collins and Snell (2000) argue that this can be a means by which social class can be preserved and perpetuated. Rymarz *et al* (2019) agree. In Ireland this is something that is contentious as schools are allowed to reserve 25% of their places for the children or grandchildren of former pupils (The Education (Schools Admissions) Act, 2018). Seven percent of Irish second level students attend fee -paying schools which also give priority to siblings or children of past pupils (Brown *et al.*, 2021). Family and social traditions can be maintained, and parents can deepen their relationships with their children when they choose the same school for their children. Choosing a Catholic school where tradition can be reinforced will play an important role for parents (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019; Kennedy, Mulholland and Dorman, 2011). The thought of a child achieving good academic results and becoming a disciplined citizen may bring great comfort to a parent.

In his study of Australian rural and remote parents' choice of a Catholic boarding school for their children, McCarthy (2016) revealed a few factors including the 'experience' of boarding school, a safe environment where the children would be happy (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019; Mc Carthy, 2016). Arguably, attendance at a boarding school in general may indicate a certain social environment that parents wish to preserve. They may even consider it the best choice academically but also socially.

Early researchers of choice in education posited that freedom of choice would lead parents to send their children to schools perceived as the 'best' in the 'market' (Caldwell, 1999). However, if everyone had a choice in the market, enrolment would be limited to those who got there first or who fulfilled the policies of that school (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992). Some researchers contend that private schools offer more culturally appropriate education

(Rymarz *et al.*, 2019; Bagley, Woods and Glatter, 2001; Theobald, 2005) and cultural appropriateness could be a matter of consumer interpretation. Social class may be a factor in the choice of school for one's child with parents wishing for their children to be educated with children from a similar background or holding the same values (Reay and Ball, 1998; Xiaoxin, 2013). For the parent who chooses a fee-paying Catholic school in Ireland it may have a social, academic and religious benefit. Rymarz *et al.* (2019) also refer to the school serving the local community and school choice maintaining social class and the values admired by that community. Catholic schools are often compared to private schools rather than public schools as they may be viewed as offering similar extras (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019). This may be more the case in the U.S. and U.K. where many Catholic schools are private. Though some private schools in Ireland, many of them Catholic and more so in the Dublin area of Ireland, may also be viewed as offering more than public schools (Lynch and Moran, 2006). For example, three private schools in Dublin now offer the International Baccalaureate as an alternative to the terminal Leaving Certificate Examination. Bradfield and Crowley (2019) contend that another attraction of the fee-paying school is that many private schools tend to dominate secondary school rankings published by the Sunday Times newspaper each year (Kennedy and Power, 2010).

Attending the 'right' school might carry inherent privileges, and this has its Irish historical origins in the difference between voluntary academic schools and technical schools. The 'right' school carries with it institutionalised cultural capital that opens the doors of privilege to students (Stenhouse and Ingram, 2024). Cahill and Hall (2014) would claim that there has long been an 'unspoken classness' constituted through the various types of schools chosen by parents. There are those who argue that class differences can influence the choice of school, that somehow the middle-class have a knowledge advantage in choosing schools (Ball 2003; Brantlinger, 2003; Byrne and Smyth, 2011; Reay, Crozier and James, 2011). Those who

do not have knowledge advantage due to a lack of social and cultural capital will arguably be at a social and academic disadvantage.

### *Academic factors*

School choice is often governed by school performance or academic results. The academic reputation and the attainment of good results matter to parents in their school choice (Hughes and Reid 2016; Rymarz *et al.*, 2019). Arguably, the academic results of a school are the joint work of students and teachers. Parents will choose a school if it has good teachers as they are indicative of the quality of a school (Bekele and Boru, 2024). Good teacher quality will yield good results and for many parents this affects their choice (Shahzad, Naoreen and Ashraf, 2020). Indeed, good teachers will make a significant impact on the development of the child. Some parents will go so far as to check the performance and status of teachers before enrolling their children (Faramarz *et al.*, 2022). In addition to teachers being judged and thereby affecting choice, teachers, when consulted, can be a source of information for parents (Tarkhnishvili, Tarkhnishvili and Strielkowski, 2022). While in private schools in some countries teachers can be held accountable for their results (Chaturvedi, 2021) there is little data to support that occurrence in Ireland. In Ireland, teacher accountability in public schools is not as personal, though inspections and ensuing reports can refer to teacher quality, without naming anyone (McNamara *et al.*, 2020; O'Hara *et al.*, 2023). Parents may choose to consult them or not.

Looking at school choice from another perspective Burgess *et al.* (2015) argue that school choice has the potential to increase academic standards and that schools in the U.K. should focus on academics to attract pupils. However, some would call for the cessation of academic selection as it only benefits the already privileged and produces further social inequity (Brown *et al.*, 2021). Unfortunately, poorer families cannot compensate for any deficiencies in the academic standards with private schools or tutoring, unlike wealthier

families (Sriprakash, Proctor and Hu, 2016; Doherty and Dooley, 2018). School choice is often dictated by how people see themselves and they like to align themselves with people like themselves. Consequently, Byrne and De Tona (2019) find that references to academics are linked to habitus and the desire to keep their children with children like themselves who would have similar regard for education. Many parents prioritise academic quality in their choice of school as they believe their children will receive a better education (Bauch and Goldring, 1995). Academics and pastoral care have consistently proven to be a greater influence than religious factors in school choice (Flynn, 1993; Mok and Flynn, 2004, Kelleher, Smyth and McEldowney, 2016).

In contrast to the strong emphasis on academic attainment in school choice, Shaw and Northern (2013), pointed out that academic quality of a school is less important for parents that choose a faith-based school. Bulman (2004) noted that parents who had children in a faith-based school deemphasised quality and rigour of curriculum and instruction. Burgess *et al.* (2015) would contend that nearly all parents, regardless of class or socio-economic status have a strong preference for schools with high academic standards. They contend that low-income families do care about educational attainment. This notion is supported by Haynes *et al.*'s (2010) study of Latino parents' choice of magnet in the U.S. Magnet schools are largely publicly funded and administered schools whose special characteristics (e.g. science concentration, college preparation etc.) are said to attract students to school locations that would otherwise be under-utilised, hence the term 'magnet' (Buchanan and Fox, 2008). Although magnet school parents draw from a wide range of income groups, parents' incomes are more likely to be higher than that of parents in traditional schools (Hausman *et al.*, 2000). However, Haynes *et al.* (2010) concluded by comparing different groupings of parents in magnet schools that higher education levels do not necessarily indicate higher incomes. Both Haynes *et al.* (2010) and Burgess *et al.* (2015) suggest that parents can be educated but not

have high incomes and this would account for all parents' wish for academic achievement for their children.

It has already been suggested that freedom of choice would lead to parents seeking and sending children to what they perceived as the 'best' school (Caldwell, 1999). There is the assumption that parents try to choose the best they can for their children. What does the best mean in the context of schooling? Parents do not always know what 'better' or 'best' means (Moe 1995) which concurs with Cahill and Hall (2014). Indeed Goldhaber (1999) suggests that it is possible that some schools with high overall "levels" of achievement do not contribute a great deal of "value-added" to student achievement. If parents do not have enough information to accurately distinguish between these, they may be apt to choose schools that have high achieving students, but little value added for their children (p.56). Equally, parents may consider a school with social cachet and very little else. In Holmes Erickson's reviews of literature on school choice (2017) she focused on "how parents function as consumers in the market" (p. 493) and concluded like Moe (1995) and Friedman (2002) that parents value academic quality in their school choices but she suggests that they may value other things too. The location of a school and ease of transport and proximity to school can have a major bearing on what school parents choose. A fairer means of school assignment by introducing socially enclosed mixed communities to which students could apply, thus reducing proximity and transport issues has been suggested (Burgess, 2016). Though academic standards matter to many, parents may have to make some trade-offs with other factors when choosing a school (Allen, Burgess and McKenna, 2014). Harris and Larsen (2015) would concur, maintaining that parents may prioritise their school choice to convenience, sport or extracurricular activities over schools' academic levels. In some cases, parents may consult league tables to help with decision-making.

## *League Tables*

While unofficial league tables exist in Ireland there is no extensive data to suggest their effect. Current legislation and policy in Ireland do not support the publication of school league tables. Section 53 of the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) states that:

... the Minister may – refuse access to any information which would enable the compilation of information (that is not otherwise available to the general public) in relation to the comparative performance of schools in respect of the academic achievement of students enrolled therein, including the overall results in any year of students in a particular school in an examination, or the comparative overall results in any year of students in different schools in an examination’.

(Government of Ireland, 1998)

Despite this, it is now commonplace for newspapers to publish the percentages of students transferring from second-level schools to third-level institutions and to rank schools based on these percentages (McCormack, Lynch and Hennessy, 2015; McGuire, 2019). Although columnists such as Faller (2014) and academics like Allen and Burgess (2011), Leckie and Goldstein, (2009, 2011) and Goldstein, (2013) frequently identify problems with such lists, these league tables generate much public interest and are said to influence school choice (Leckie and Goldstein, 2009; Mc Cormack, Lynch and Hennessy, 2015). Suffice it to say the tables are read and one of the purposes of this study is to verify if League tables are a factor when considering a choice of Catholic school as they generate much public interest (Gilleece, 2014). However one may suggest that league tables are ‘unreliable and misleading guides for school choice’ as researchers explain that a school today may not be the same kind of school in six years’ time (Leckie and Goldstein, 2011, p.833). However, such media published tables have fuelled a neo-liberal marketplace in Ireland (Cahill, 2020). Allen and Burgess (2011) found that league tables used by parents in choosing a school for their child are not particularly comprehensible or relevant for choosing a school that maximises a child’s likely attainment.

They would hold the idea that past performance is not necessarily indicative of future success.

In Ireland, O'Hara states that league tables:

Often oversimplify the complex landscape of educational outcomes, reducing the rich tapestry of student achievement and school effectiveness to a mere numerical ranking.

(O'Hara, 2023).

He further elucidates that league tables fail to measure other elements of school success and only uses Higher Education entrance as a measurement. Cahill (2020) makes the point that disadvantaged children continue to be so, owing to structural inequalities and the increasing dominance of neoliberal market principles:

Inter school competition, particularly at the post-primary level, has fuelled an ever-increasing marketplace where schools vie for desirable middle-class students through media-published school league tables.

(Cahill, 2020)

Though one might praise or denigrate league tables people still look at them. They may not always influence their choices. It must be stressed that league tables in Ireland consistently demonstrate schools that are fee paying and/or faith-based schools dominate the top of these tables in Ireland (O'Caollaí, Mooney, Mc Guire, 2022). On the other hand some researchers would claim that parents make little use of performance indicators when choosing schools for their children (De Wolf and Janssens, 2007) Some reasons for this may be a lack of awareness of the existence of such information; an inability to interpret these data (De Wolf and Janssens, 2007; Leckie and Goldstein, 2011); the role of other factors in choosing a school such as location or place (Bell, 2009) ; or criteria broader than academic performance alone (De Wolf and Janssens, 2007). League tables may matter little compared with other factors such as safety and being able to get to school.

### ***Location, proximity and transport***

The schools in this study stretch from the dense urban to the sparse countryside over three counties. Smyth, Lyons and Darmody (2013), 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. Bell (2009) also proposed that parents make choices based upon place, suggesting that parents attach social, economic and political meanings to spaces or places. Such spatial markers might be the student profile, race and social class within the school, the neighbourhood, or the learning environment. Parents who attach such place-based meanings to a school may move to an area because of the school or may not even visit the school before choosing it for their child (Holmes, 2002). 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).

The proximity rule is ubiquitous in school admissions arrangements in many schools in Ireland and it has a central influence on preferences and admissions to schools. In other cases, parents choose proximity as their guiding principle. It is important to most parents especially when it relates to convenience for their workplaces (Karsten *et al.*, 2003 2006; Boterman, 2019; Cantu *et al.*, 2021). Accessibility near workplaces or near grandparents for after-school pickup/care or somewhere to go after school is especially important for those living in rural areas or on the edge of cities. Kelleher, Smyth and McEldowney (2016) argue that if distance and travel time is the primary concern then this will have the effect of constraining choice. Kelleher, Smyth and McEldowney (2016) also identified in their study of post-primary schools

in Northern Ireland that if religious or academic concerns are of primary concern for parents in school selection, longer journey times will ensue and parents are more likely to be willing to travel. Parents are willing to forfeit the choice of religiously segregated schools to retain academic selection of grammar schools, suggesting that the aspiring middle-class in Northern Ireland are more concerned with academic achievement than religious issues (Kelleher, Smyth and McEldowney 2016). Transport and government subsidies for this are a consideration. In the Republic of Ireland free school transport is available for those eligible and is available to the nearest school, not necessarily the nearest Catholic school, so choice may be limited. Transport has a bearing therefore on choice (Kelleher, Smyth and McEldowney, 2016; Denice and Gross, 2016; Corcoran, 2018; Catt, 2020). Researchers who have investigated the role of transportation on school choice have found it to be a significant constraint on parents (Nelson, Muir and Drown, 2000). Research has also demonstrated that most parents pick the school closest to them (Karsten *et al.*, 2003, 2006; Mandic *et al.*, 2023)). Yet others, like Glazerman (1998) contend that there are subgroups who would travel further for a higher achieving school. He and Giuliano (2018) for instance found that parents will travel whatever distance to what they consider a good school. Middle-class parents have the means to be more mobile and can travel further to access their choice of school (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Reinoso, 2008; Wu, 2012; Yoon, 2020). However, one might also consider those who do not have the means of transport.

Not having the transport to travel to a school of choice limits a parent's ability to choose what is best for their child (Allen, Burgess, Mc Kenna, 2014). Studies in Northern Ireland and elsewhere have revealed that parents wishing to avail of schools may be limited by distance from the school (Roulston and Cook, 2021). In Ireland, the average distance travelled to get to post-primary school is 4.32 miles (7 km), 5 miles (8kms) in Northern Ireland (Nelson *et al.* 2008; Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI), (2014); Roulston and Cook, 2021) and in the U.S 58% of students live within one mile (1.6kms) of their school (Beck and Nguyen,

2017). A more revealing finding of Roulston and Cook's (2021) study was the available choice for parents to have their child attend an Integrated school in Northern Ireland. They found that it was extremely difficult for children living in smaller settlements to attend such a school as such schools were oversubscribed. Therefore having a choice to attend such a school was 'illusory'(p75) even though the 1989 Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order (EFO) requires the Department of Education to 'encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education' (EFO, 1989, p.45) On the other hand, concerning religious affiliation in the Republic of Ireland, for parents, proximity to home rather than religious affiliation is more of a factor in school choice in primary schools (Smyth *et al.*, 2010).

Cost is another consideration related to transport to school. School transport in Ireland for 2024/2025 is seventy-five euros per child with a maximum family fee of 125 euros. According to government criteria 'children are generally eligible for school transport if they satisfy the distance criteria (3.2km at primary and 4.8km at post-primary) and are attending their nearest school as determined by Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language' (Government of Ireland 2024, p16). Pupils who hold a medical card are entitled to free school transport to the nearest school. The government recognises that there is a 'disparity in practice' (p.45) between primary and post-primary schools as under current arrangements of the primary transport scheme, a child may bypass a closer denominational school to attend a multi-denominational school and vice versa. However, at post-primary level, a child may only bypass a closer school (whether it be denominational or multi-denominational) to attend a minority religion school (p.45). The recommendations of the most recent report (Government of Ireland, 2024) are that the situation will remain the same for the academic year 2024/2025. Pupils who do not qualify for school transport may apply for concessionary tickets under certain conditions, but the availability of concessionary transport may vary from year to year, is not available on public scheduled services and cannot be guaranteed for the duration of a child's

post-primary school education cycle (p.48). This arguably would greatly influence choice as one not only has to consider the first year of school but also the following five to six years and possibly longer if sending siblings to the same school. The current travel arrangements may have repercussions for pupils who do not get a school choice near their homes and especially those who have the least access to personal transport.

McShane (2024), however, asserts that parents will travel for whatever they want thereby implying that parents will find a way. But this may not be quite as easy for all. Transportation is particularly important for those who can ill afford transport costs further away from their home (Bradley and Taylor, 2002; Woods, 2005). Those who have greater economic capital have more liberty to negotiate transport arrangements. Travelling further from home can also incur risks therefore safety is a factor which concerns parents.

### ***Safety - a consideration in school choice***

A safe environment is among parents' top reasons for choosing a school (Bedrick and Burke, 2018). In more recent years safety in school has emerged as a factor in post-primary U.S. school choice (Catt and Rhinesmith, 2016; Denice and Gross, 2016; Schwalbach and De Angelis, 2017; Butcher, 2019; Hailey, 2020) but Leukert (2022) points out that this does not appear significantly in the literature relating to faith-based schools. However, bullying in Irish post-primary schools is as prevalent as elsewhere (Foody *et al.*, 2018) with 11% of post-primary students having been victims of bullying (Foody, Samara and O'Higgins Norman 2017). There have also been reports by teachers of Catholic students being bullied in schools because of their faith (Meehan and Laffan, 2021a). One of the findings of a related study was that 12% of the teacher respondents voiced their concerns about students being bullied due to religion (Meehan and Laffan 2021b). The literature has also revealed that safety is more of a concern for minority and low SES parents than it is for working-class parents (Hammond and

Dennison, 1995; Lee, Croninger and Smith, 1996; Sander, 2023). Safety today can relate to more than issues of bullying. There has been a proliferation of violent attacks and social disorder in cities in Ireland in recent years, many of them racially related. The Immigration Council of Ireland reported that 25.7% of racist attacks occur in the streets (ICI, 2022, p.17). Indeed, this is a concern for all parents but especially children of racial minorities who travel to school each day. Parents with the economic capital can shield their children from much of this. One could argue that parents who wish to protect their children and parents with means will move their school choices to areas they consider safer (Yoon and Lubienski, 2017). Small schools have been associated with safety and parents may see Catholic schools as offering that security (Bedrick and Burke, 2018; Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1996). Regarding ethnic-minority parents, they choose post-primary schools with a 'sufficient ethnic mix' to safeguard their children from being the only minority children in the school (Byrne and De Tona, 2019). It can be physical, psychological or in most cases both. Arguably, safety considerations will differ depending on where an individual lives and their ethnicity (Altenhofen, Berends and White, 2016).

### ***Facilities***

Just as the external environment is a consideration for parental choice so too is the school environment and the facilities it offers. School facilities and environment were found to be important in Alsauidi's (2016) study on school choice decisions. Parents regarded facilities such as lighting, a theatre, internet, sports facilities and a good library as essential for their children to learn in school. Rymarz *et al.*, (2019) also refer to this together with IT equipment and recreational facilities. Class size (Holmes Erickson, 2017) was a factor in choosing private schools but not necessarily Catholic schools. Many schools in Ireland are lucky to have reasonable recreational facilities and sports fields. Griffin (2019) makes the point that many of

the facilities such as playing fields, P.E. halls and theatres were provided by Catholic congregations that may never have been provided by state funding. Both Hughes and Reid (2016) and Rymarz *et al.*, (2019) have also found that parents find Catholic schools acceptable because they also offer children ‘a range of attractive programs that would help children flourish in a caring and nurturing environment’ (p.96) where students can reach their full potential.

This section has reviewed the literature concerning the factors that influence school choice. The next section will examine the literature in relation to the second research question “How do parents gather information about available schools?”.

## **2.6 Methods for collecting and analysing school choice information**

The literature reveals the various methods which parents employ to gather information which informs their choices. Parents gather information formally and informally (Ball and Vincent, 1998). Formal means may involve school websites published material and inspection reports. League tables, which have already been discussed are published in newspapers, and could arguably be regarded as semi-formal as they are compiled by newspapers. Informal means of information gathering would entail hearsay/ word of mouth and regard to reputation. Ball and Vincent (1998) contend there is also ‘grapevine’ knowledge where the choice is influenced by one's opinions, experience, friends’ and relations’ choice and access to knowledge which is socially structured/ influenced.

Gathering information is not the same for all as there are many elements in school choice. Parents who are new to an area or country can find difficulties as they lack local knowledge of an area (Walker and Chalk, 2010). Some researchers would suggest that success

in school choice is attributed to the skills and resources that are available to a person and their ability to work them to their advantage (Willms and Echols, 1992). However, if there is a lack of social and cultural capital, this is difficult to do. Parents of children with special needs find additional difficulties in identifying suitable schools for their children's needs (Satherley and Norwich, 2022; Bagley, Woods and Woods, 2001).

According to Lareau, Evans and Yee (2016) possession of social capital in the school 'marketplace' is very important today in securing a school place. Having social capital provides you with a network of friends or associates who will provide 'hot knowledge' to access schools (Ball, 2003, p.100). The information gathering of parents may begin many years or a few months before a child begins post-primary school. In Irish terms that could be information or references provided by influential 'stakeholders'. Many parents try to strategise school choices to maintain social position. The most common method of finding out about schools is through parent networks (Berends and Zottola, 2009). The parents' social milieu tends to influence what schools they gather information about.

The methods for collecting information and the factors that parents consider when choosing a school have been discussed. When parents take cognisance of the factors, they then must decide what suits their child. It may be some of the factors previously addressed, additionally, it may be the fact that the parent wishes their child to attend a Catholic school. The final part of this literature review will address the subject of the Catholic school.

## **2.7 Choosing a Catholic School**

In a video message to the International Office of Catholic Education World Congress (OIEC in French), Pope Francis spoke of the need to revive authentic humanism in education and stressed that one of the greatest problems facing education is the modern deconstructed

version of humanism. This, he said, was partly due to consumerism which regards people as machines. He warned that such consumerism leads to the “dictatorship of results.” (Cattaro, Richard and Wodon, 2021). The influence of academic results and league tables in the choice of school has been shown to play a major role for parents. Pope Francis is perhaps warning that by taking such cognisance of results and league tables something else may be lost. As leader of the Catholic Church, he may have been hinting that the Catholic school offers more than academic results.

Parents may or may not be wholly influenced by results, but they may wish for a good school for their children. The choice process provides parents with the opportunity to think about what makes a ‘good’ school. A ‘good’ school may get good academic results because it values self-discipline for example. Hughes and Reid (2016) in their study of the enrolment of Australian Catholic students in Catholic, publicly funded and private schools identified six factors which influenced parents’ decision to send their Catholic children to Catholic Primary schools. Catholic schools are only partially funded by the government, so they are neither fully public nor private schools. The six factors included dedication of teachers; care for students; discipline in the school; leadership of the school; emphasis on moral and ethical values; and school facilities and environment. The same factors were identified for post-primary schools along with the school’s preparation of students for life after school, range of subjects and academic reputation. The range of attractive programmes in schools that will nurture students and help them flourish in a caring environment to reach their potential is highly valued (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019; Hughes and Reid (2016). A notable finding of the study was that there was no difference in the importance of these factors for Catholic parents choosing either Catholic, private or public schools. Most parents sent their children to public schools (especially those who attended Mass less than once a month). For those who attended Mass more frequently, there was almost an equal division between those who sent their children to Catholic schools

and those who chose public schools. For those who moved their children to a publicly funded school, their reason was that the quality of education in the public school was superior and for those parents who did not send their children to Catholic schools at all, the cost was the main reason. Hughes and Reid (2016) attribute the choice of parents to send their children to public schools to societal changes, a major part of which is growing secularisation or a decrease in the importance of religion in people's lives. Rymarz *et al.* (2019) emphasise that in the face of this societal change Catholic schools need to offer quality education as public schools are perceived as offering similar but at less cost. The difference, however, may be in the ethos that is offered.

School ethos, particularly for those attending a faith-based school is important for many parents (Mc Coy *et al.*, 2024). When choosing a school especially a faith school the terms 'ethos' and 'culture' are often invoked. Ethos and culture are often considered similar, and, in some cases, it is the culture of a school that parents consider when searching for a school. There have been many efforts to define ethos in education. Williams (2000) suggests that 'every human institution has its ethos in the sense of a dominant, pervading spirit or character that finds expression in the habits of behaviour of those who are part of it.' (p.74) The culture of a school is said to comprise a range of "identifiable elements, beliefs, values, understandings, attitudes, meanings, norms, symbols, rituals and ceremonies" (Furlong, 2000, p.62). It is suggested that symbols, icons, emblems, rituals and ceremonies, communication systems, and relationships with parents may be some of the markers of a school's ethos (Furlong, 2000, p.62). Others suggest it may be the whole atmosphere of the school including structures, policies as well as the values and expectations of the stakeholders (Monahan, 2000, p.22; McLaughlin, 2005, p. 319). Ethos is constantly in flux, and it depends on what is important to the school at any given time (Donnelly, 2000). Ethos can remain part of our consciousness long after the lessons of school have been forgotten (Williams, 2000). The gestures of kindness and mercy will never be forgotten. Meehan and Axisa's (2022) study of the subtle kindness

extended to newly arrived migrant families in Maltese Catholic schools is evidence of such ethos. Leukert (2022) makes the point that it is a community's culture (e.g. Catholic community) that strongly influences consumer behaviour, (in this case the choice of Catholic school) not the doctrine, dogma or religion. She is suggesting that a school's recruitment campaign for its church would be more advised to cultivate social and community relationships. Leukert (2022, p.230) states 'It could very well be that the sustainability and future of faith-based schools lies in the ability to engage, connect and relate to members inside and outside of the community through the language of culture, rather than the rhetoric of high academics or cutting-edge technology.'" It could also be argued that parents are still looking for good academic performance but would also like their children to be taught in caring environments. Parents are perhaps seeking schools that allow children to flourish in 'warmly inclusive communities' (Meehan, 2023). Depending on the type of chooser, parents from different socio-economic backgrounds are seeking very different things but a caring environment, though not always enunciated, is arguably paramount for all parents. This is nurtured not only through its ethos but also through the values a school inculcates.

Values are often viewed in social terms where schools can mould model citizens, but these are not just values exclusive to Catholic schools (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019). The values that the school tries to instil e.g. tolerance, compassion, and regard for others, many parents identify as allied to a Christian outlook on life (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019). Parents want their children to have good values more so than following a particular faith (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019; Mc Carthy, 2016). The Catholic school offers an education in values and as Rymarz *et al.*, (2019) remark vis à vis McCarthy's (2016) study of a Catholic boarding school, a Catholic school offers students 'the opportunity to experience a more explicitly religious dimension that was not evident at home'(p90). In Rymarz *et al.*' (2019, p.95) own studies of why parents enrol their children in Catholic schools, parents wanted their children to experience Christian values but were not

necessarily ‘very good Christians’ themselves (p.95). However, they also found that many parents who had high religious expectations of the school were in the minority. The values of the Catholic school were expressed in personal terms, for example, children learn about good manners and the importance of self-discipline and these schools in many cases were described as ‘well-conducted’ and discipline was obvious (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019 p.95). In an Australian context, McCarthy (2016) refers to the values that parents believed that the Catholic boarding school could instil. McCarthy suggests that parents were happy that their children received an immersion in Christian values, that they could not necessarily quantify but knew that it was good for their children and would in a sense immunise them for their post-schooling life. He refers to this as a ‘medicinal’ (p.37) dose of religion. Rymarz *et al.* (2019) also refer to this in their study where parents did not want their children to find Christian values ‘overwhelming’ (p.95) but religious identity is important to parents to a certain extent- a religious aspect of education is considered something of value.

### *Catholic schools with good academics*

Much of the literature reveals that parental religious values are a factor in the choice of a faith school (Reichard, 2012). The literature would claim that religious denomination is a major factor governing some parents’ choice of Catholic schools for their children (Praedtz, 1974; Partington, 1990; Carpenter and Western (1992) and Flynn (1993). Parents aspire to Catholic values and standards and prefer Catholic schools for their high academic standards, sound curriculum, quality of teachers and teaching, discipline, sense of community and safe school environment (Mok and Flynn, 2004). Being Catholic and having a high level of religious expectation of schools increase the odds of sending children to Catholic schools. Those who have attended a particular faith school are more likely to send their child to one (Leukert, 2022). Will this happen in the future if parents cannot send their children to the school, they went to?

This was not the case in Schultz's (2008) study of why parents send their children to Catholic post-primary schools. He found that only 21/238 of the parents who responded to his survey who had enrolled their children in a Catholic school, themselves attended a Catholic school.

On the flip side, research has also found that parents will find a way of sending their children to a faith-based school even if they are financially constrained if they feel it is necessary for their child's development and health (Bulman, 2004). The religious aspect of the school may be an influence but may not be a major aspect of the overall choice as is the case in some Australian studies (Flynn, 1993; Mok and Flynn, 2004). Parents favour a link with the church, but this is achieved through a link with the school community rather than a link with the parish (Rymarz *et al.*, 2019). Boerema's (2009) study in British Columbia, Canada, suggests that mission may be a more influential component of school choice than academic quality. Mok and Flynn (2004) conclude that this signifies a need to focus on academic quality in the future. They also concluded that the challenge for future academic researchers was how to maintain academic quality and sustain and revitalise Catholic values.

### ***Preserving religious identity and tradition***

The literature suggests that parents who rely heavily on their faith tend to want to preserve their family's religious identity and have a commitment to religious education (Cohen-Zada and Elder, 2018). They also seek schools which will transmit those values to their children (Cohen-Zada and Elder, 2018). With the new Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, in Ireland, and objections towards post-primary schools wishing to preserve 25% of places for children of past pupils or grandparents, parents may not be able to pass on that religious tradition as there may not be a choice for them. Parents and families are more likely to choose a Catholic school for instance because of academic rigour and discipline (Trivitt and Wolf, 2011). Catholic parents, when presented with an option, choose Catholic schools (Trivitt

and Wolf, 2011). This certainly begs the question, why do parents who are not Catholics (or strong Catholics) choose Catholic schools? For those Catholics who do choose Catholic schools, it is difficult to measure their religiosity. It is more than a one-dimensional scale (Azzi and Ehrenberg, 1975; Wilkes, Burnett and Howell, 1986; Koenig *et al.*, 1988).

One might surmise many reasons for parent's choice of Catholic school, one might be obvious, that they wish their child to be educated in the Catholic tradition. Parents, in 2024, in an era of war and pandemics may feel that a Catholic education may save their children from the despair of many who have "moved away from the security of legacy religions or the churches of their parents" (Case and Deaton 2017, pp. 429–430). Perhaps the choice has nothing to do with Catholicism. In a study of Christian and Catholic schools in the U.S., research has found that the choice of school is influenced by past educational experience and the religion of parents (Bulman, 2004). Nevertheless, successive published research suggests that people are choosing religious schools for reasons other than religion (Jeynes, 2002; Ball, 2003; Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington 2009; Green, 2018). Green (2018) would contend that the factors influencing school choice are far more complicated than just religious or secular.

### ***The effect of religiosity***

How one chooses to invest one's time in a religious environment/practice might indicate how they invest in other 'commodities', like their children's education. As a person's behaviour is influenced by their beliefs and values (Chang and Jetten, 2015) and as religion can be interpreted as a cultural system of beliefs and values (Saroglou and Cohen, 2011) then it could be argued that religiosity influences behaviour (Leukert, 2022). One can identify this in health choices (Agarwala, Mishra and Singh, 2019), environmental choices (Arli, 2017) and academic achievement (Jeynes, 2003). Leukert (2022) concludes that goods consumed by a

religious person, in this case, a parent, could be expanded to include school. Cosgel (2015) would argue further that not only is consumption a matter of acquisition of goods but also a social activity that conveys a person's values and beliefs. School choice and Catholic school choice are making a statement- I am Catholic, and I want that choice for my children. The degree to which one subscribes to their religion will affect their commitment to it. Dressler (2017, p185) defines this as cultural consonance which is "the degree to which individuals, in their own beliefs and behaviours, approximate the prototypes for belief and behaviour encoded in cultural models". (i.e. how closely members of a culture (religion) live according to that community's culture). Religious values and ideas which people are exposed to in their youth tend to be the ones that they will adopt as adults (Crick and Jelfs, 2011). Other values that may be instilled in youth may include attitudes to inclusion and diversity. Although some authors contend that efforts made by schools to include or celebrate cultural events, though well intended, can often be considered superficial (Troyna, 1987; Coelho, 1998; Bryan, 2008). Actions to include pupils of minority religions to leave school premises to practise religious ceremonies every week may seem welcoming but just like with cultural events may 'simultaneously abnormalise diversity in the sense that it represents it as a new and aberrant phenomenon and therefore as something which is at once unusual and alien to the Irish nation' (Bryan, 2008, p54). Arguably not every parent might want this and might want their child to remain in school. So, a school that may think it is being inclusive might actually be disruptive.

Additionally, perhaps not all Muslims, for example, are religious (Hamzeh and Oliver, 2012) and schools could be too presumptuous in this respect. Research has found that the way a school deals with religious diversity is an important issue for minority parents and students (Smyth and Darmody, 2011). Identification with the culture of the faith i.e. the religiosity of the parent, presents food for thought on how schools' administrators and marketing people should operate in the future (Leukert, 2022). Wadsworth and Walker (2017)

suggest that many families choose Catholic schooling to instil religiosity and that this is effective, in the years immediately following graduation.

### *The Catholicity of the Catholic school*

Conversely, some parents do not think of their childrens' education in terms of religion or non-religion (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). They may not make that connection. Others may not want to acknowledge their religiosity as revealed in *Articulating a New Positioning for Catholic Education in Ireland* (CPSMA/CSP/AMSCC, 2019) where respondents were reluctant to profess their Catholicism, maybe even embarrassed and ashamed. McGraw and Tiernan (2022) have also suggested that principals in schools may 'tow the party line' regarding church teachings in schools but provide a more 'nuanced treatment' at a personal level (p.62). This would appear to concur with Fahie's (2017) view that Catholic schools display their religious obligations with "differing degrees" (p.19). Tuohy (2007) has claimed that some schools may be led by principals who are not theologically educated. Consequently, these principals are not so confident in 'selling' the Catholic school. Ganiel (2016) defines post-Catholic Ireland in terms of "a *shift in consciousness* in which the Catholic Church is no longer held in high esteem by most of the population and can no longer expect to exert a monopoly influence in social and political life". The different types of Catholics were referred to in Chapter One and whatever the reason or the religiosity of parents, the participants of this current study have chosen a Catholic school for their child and their level of religiosity will be revealed.

## **Summary**

This review of literature explored the influential writings on parental school choice within an Irish context and beyond. In an Irish context, academics like Cahill and Hall (2011) and Roulston and Cook (2021) have made significant contributions to an understanding of what

influences parents' school choice of a Catholic post-primary school. Other contributors such as the ESRI (Joyce, 2012) have also added to the discussion of school choice within an Irish context. International literature offered various contextual understandings of school choice and offered a glimpse of possible avenues yet to be explored and practised in Ireland.

The review began with defining what school choice means in an Irish context and distinguishing it from the school choice movement in locations such as the U.S. and Sweden. The review emphasises that choice is practised differently by different choosers. Both Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) and Cahill and Hall's (2014) discussion of choosers revealed the classed nature of school choice. Many individuals' choices are governed by Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital and the notion that the sociocultural background of a student is a causal factor in educational success. Bourdieu argues that social order and a sense of oneself and their capabilities can influence what an individual chooses, and this can also be applied to educational choices.

The review further presents how different groups of parents choose and the sources they use to access information. The literature reveals the inequalities that exist in accessing information and subsequently in the choices that are made. Some of the factors that influence parents are revealed. They range from social factors such as wishing for children to be educated with children of similar backgrounds to academic factors such as achieving good academic results, though academic factors matter less to those who choose a faith school (Shaw and Northern, 2013). The influence of league tables is discussed regarding their relevance to perpetuating inequality amongst disadvantaged students. Parents have to consider the trade-off of other factors such as transportation and safety and the facilities that schools offer. The literature sought to expose what a Catholic school means to parents when choosing a Catholic post-primary school. Ethos is particularly important for those attending a faith-based school (McCoy, Carroll and Ye, 2024). The values that a school transmits to its students are important

to parents and Catholic parents will try to choose a school similar to what they experienced. The literature shows that the degree to which one subscribes to their religion will affect one's commitment to it (Dressler, 2017). Arguably this in turn has a bearing on the school that is chosen by a parent. Preserving religious identity and tradition is important for those parents who have a faith. Catholic schools with good academics are also important to parental choice. However just as some parents will seek to perpetuate their values and beliefs in their children's education there are others for whom education is not viewed in religious terms. Allied to this view is the degree to which Catholic schools emphasise their Catholicity and how the school is presented to the parental chooser.

The next chapter will describe the methodology employed in the study.

# Chapter Three Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and methods used to explore the research question “How do parents choose a Catholic post-primary school for their children?”. The research aims to gain insight into how parents experience the school choice process by answering the guiding questions of what factors they consider, how they gather information and how they choose the school that best fits their child.

To develop a deeper understanding of parents’ experiences and decision-making, a case study has been adopted and the researcher’s rationale and positionality will be outlined. The study is situated within the qualitative research paradigm and rooted in a constructivist/interpretivist epistemological investigation. Careful reflection was given to choosing a suitable research design and paradigm to address the research question (Blaikie, 2010). An interpretive qualitative method was chosen because it allows the researcher to gather personal accounts of parents’ experiences. The strength of this method is that it allows for the process rather than the outcomes to be revealed (Maxwell, 2005).

## 3.2 Research Design

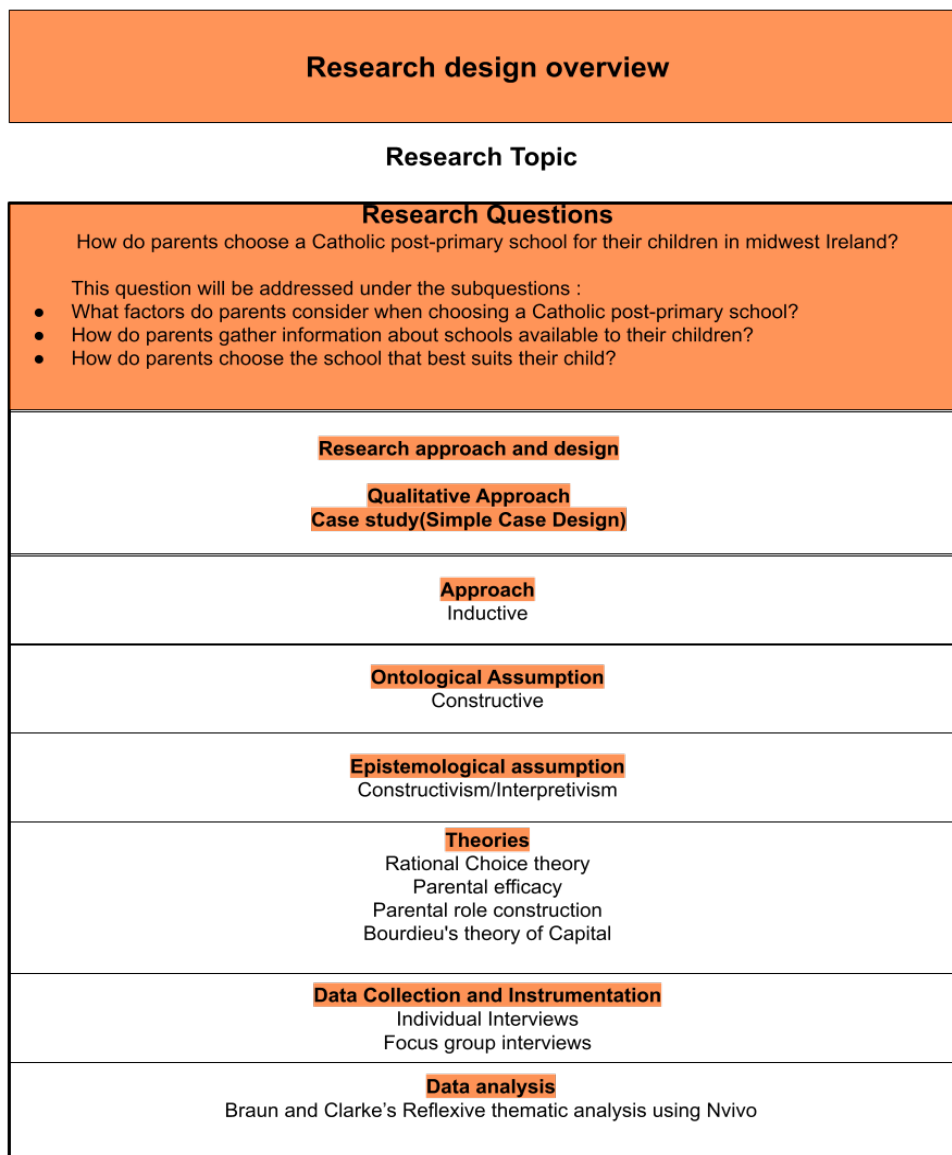


Figure 2 Research design overview

Research designs are types of enquiry within, qualitative, quantitative and mixed method approaches that provide specific directions for the research study (Creswell and Cresswell, 2018). Some call them *strategies of inquiry* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, 2018, p.309). Before a study can begin, a research design must be conceptualised and according to Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 2018), this incorporates five phases. Firstly, the researcher must reflect on what they bring to the study such as ‘their personal history, views of themselves and

others, ethical and political issues' (2011, p.5). Philosophical ideas can remain hidden in research but can influence research practice, therefore acknowledgement of such is essential (Slife and Williams, 1995; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Arguably the researcher's philosophical position or 'world view' (Guba, 1990, p.17) needs to be clarified from the outset (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, 2018; Pitard, 2017). Having established the researcher's philosophical assumptions, phase two then incorporates them into the design process. The researcher's worldviews (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) or paradigms 'inform the conduct and writing of qualitative study' (Creswell, 2007, p15). Denzin and Lincoln (2005b) agree by asserting that 'all research is rooted in philosophical beliefs and assumptions and is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied' (p.22).

The researcher brings their view or interpretation of the world to their research and this impacts on the nature of and route that their study takes (Creswell and Poth 2018, p.15). The researcher must then decide what philosophical assumptions and beliefs will be allowed to impact and actively influence the research (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The research design of a study is governed by many factors including the researcher's beliefs about the world (ontology) and the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired (epistemology). This research requires an understanding of the social sciences such as psychology, education and philosophy. These disciplines have different ontological and epistemological assumptions as well as differing notions about the nature of research findings. Such assumptions and expectations regarding research are known as *paradigms* (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011; Mertens, 2010). Guba and Lincoln (1994) say:

A paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the 'world', the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as for example, cosmologies and theologies do.

(Guba and Lincoln 1994, p107)

A paradigm is also defined as '*worldview*' (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), and *epistemologies and ontologies* (Crotty, 1998). Paradigms are a means of analysing what the researcher brings to the research, philosophically, experientially and cognitively.

### **3.3 Ontological stance**

Ontology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of beliefs about reality (Richards, 2003, p.33). Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2011) stress that some views of that reality are 'privileged[ing]' while others are under-represented[ing]' (p.33). The purpose of this study is to clarify the rationale for parental school choice in Midwest Ireland as lived out in their 'subjective reality' (p.33). This researcher comes to this study with a certain view of parental choices, being a parent of children who attended post-primary schools in Ireland. As an experienced teacher, this researcher knows the school system and in her duties has engaged in professional conversations with parents around this research topic. The researcher began this study with an awareness of the beliefs and values that she has built up about parental decision-making and a consciousness that the people interviewed have also built up a set of values and beliefs on the subject matter based on their own experience. Every effort is made to include many diverse views of reality but given the limited nature of this research, it is inevitable that some views and experiences are not represented.

Ontology is associated with a central question of whether social entities can be perceived as objective or subjective -Objectivism (also known as positivism) and Subjectivism (also known as Constructivism or interpretivism) which involves a post-positivist stance. Objectivism suggests that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of those social actors (Bryman, 2016). Conversely, Subjectivism holds that social

phenomena are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of those social actors concerned with their existence.

This researcher's ontological stance is her assumptions of what exists in the social world surrounding her, the nature of reality and what can be discovered about that reality. The researcher believes that reality is a subjective entity that is acted upon by social players and that social phenomena are created by the actions and perceptions of the players. This study aims to capture the experiences of parents' choice of Catholic post-primary school for their child. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) recommend that the selection of a paradigm should be guided by the suitability of the topic to be researched. Therefore, in choosing to view the decision-making of a group of parents and attempting to unravel their interpretations of their roles in the process of school choice, the researcher applied a constructivist post-positivist understanding of the nature of reality and what can be known.

### **3.4 Epistemology**

Epistemology is concerned with the nature and forms of knowledge (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Epistemological assumptions look at how knowledge is created, acquired and communicated (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Epistemology is concerned with the relationship that exists between the ontology, or 'reality' and the researcher (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Sobh and Perry, 2006). The epistemological perspective in this study is that parents are in the position of 'knower', that they can provide valuable insights into how school choice practice works and the impact it has on them and their families. The epistemological status of any work of research rests on identifying and justifying the kind of knowledge claims the research wishes to make. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 2018) and Creswell and Creswell (2018) four major paradigms (Post-positivist, Constructivist, Transformative, Pragmatic) inform qualitative research. The researchers' epistemological, ontological and methodological premises can be

referred to as a paradigm or interpretive framework. The paradigm deemed to be most suitable for this study was constructivism.

### **3.5 Constructivist /Interpretivist paradigm**

Constructivists try to ‘address the processes of interaction among individuals’ and ‘focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work’ (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p.9). To social constructivists, meanings are constructed by humans as they engage with the world (Creswell, 2014). They claim that knowledge can only be known through the active construction of the knower and contend that social actors develop subjective meanings of their contextualised experience. The study attempts to interpret the meaning that parents have about their world of school choice. Constructivists argue that truth is relative, and subjective, depending on one’s perspective. Constructivism is built on the premise of a social construction of reality (Searle, 1995). An advantage of this approach is the collaboration between the participants and the researcher, which allows the participants to tell their stories (Crabtree and Miller, 2023). An interpretive paradigm was used in this study to gather in-depth information on how their choice of Catholic post-primary school is made. The researcher’s task is to try and understand the many and various ways that meaning and knowledge are constructed and communicated in different contexts. Different paradigms offer different epistemological and ontological views and these in turn dictate the methodology used in a particular study (Crotty, 1998). A Constructivist /interpretivist outlook seemed to align with the philosophical views of the researcher of this study. Crotty (1998) identified several assumptions, associated with constructivism which are suited to eliciting data. Using open-ended questions, the interpretation of data is shaped by the researcher’s own experience and the process is largely inductive whereby the researcher generates meaning from the data collected. An interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methodology allow the researcher to create a ‘composite description of the essence of the experience’ (Creswell and Poth, 2018) of parental choice (p.75). This was

the paradigm deemed to be most suitable. According to Maxwell (2005) research paradigms ‘include specific methodological strategies linked to these assumptions and identify particular studies that are seen as exemplifying these assumptions and beliefs’ (p.36). The research paradigm, in other words, emerges from the researchers’ ontological and epistemological perspectives which act as a compass that guides how the research is conducted, analysed and interpreted, what Denzin and Lincoln (2011) define as ‘the net that contains the researcher’s epistemological, ontological and methodological premises’ (p.13).

Once the researcher has established their epistemological and ontological stances the next phase of the study according to Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 2018) involves looking at the research question, questioning the purpose of the study and deciding what information is needed to answer the research question(s) and how the information will be sought. Many strategies can be chosen to investigate the research question but the one that aligns best with this investigation is the case study as it provides a framework for an inquiry into a phenomenon (parental decision-making) in a real context (the application process for a Catholic post-primary school). The ‘all-encompassing feature of a case study is its intense focus on a single phenomenon within its real-life context’ (Yin, 1994, p.13). The case study would appear to be the most appropriate strategy with which to investigate the research question(s). Further rationale for the case study will be explicated later but before that, the researcher will outline the various approaches used in research to explain why the case study is most suited to researching how parents choose a Catholic post-primary school for their children.

### **3.6 Qualitative and Quantitative Research**

Social Scientific research in education follows two approaches -Qualitative and quantitative (Castellan, 2010; Punch, 2016; Queirós, Faria and Almeida, 2017)) and Mixed Methods -which is a combination of the former two. To justify the rationale of this study there will be a brief focus on the differences between the two former approaches and the reasons for

her choice. Researchers disagree on the *uses* of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Bryman, 2012; Castellan, 2010). Bryman (2012), however, outlines their differences regarding the ‘role of theory in relation to research,’ whether it is inductive or deductive and how their ontological and epistemological assumptions differ. This in essence concerns what type of data is collected and how and what philosophical perspectives are held by the researcher. This does not mean that qualitative and quantitative research methods are to be viewed as dichotomies rather they are different ends of a continuum (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Creswell, 2015; Newman and Benz, 1998). Indeed, there are research questions that are best addressed by quantitative, qualitative means or using a combination of both in the form of mixed methods research (Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

### ***Quantitative research***

Philosophically and epistemologically (or paradigmatically) quantitative research identifies with ‘positivism’ (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996). Within this philosophical tradition, claims about the world can only be verified through scientific means of observation such as objectivity, logic, and empiricism and are not value-laden which gives an etic or culturally neutral account of reality (Creswell, 1998). Quantitative research is a method of testing objective theories by examining the relationship among the variables (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The ontological assumption in the quantitative tradition allows for more breadth (causality) than depth (meaning) of research. It assumes that phenomena in our world can be measured and understood. The positivist perspective takes the view that research is merely uncovering an existing reality. It asserts that science supplies the most explicit knowledge (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011) and as such it positions the researcher as an outside observer who is independent of the research subject (Castellan, 2010; Yilmaz, 2013). The quantitative positivist approach requires methods that are grounded in statistical analysis, using

instruments such as questionnaires and surveys amongst others. It is grounded in deductive reasoning as it uses methods to test theories or hypotheses. It has been postulated that quantitative methods have the advantage of allowing precise hypothesis testing and are less vulnerable to theoretical bias in the data (Brink, 1995). It has been argued that data is credible when it is ‘unbiased, objective and independent of the particular stances of the inquirer and of particular theoretical or policy ideas’ (Greene, 2007, p. 39).

### ***Criticism and Rejection of a Quantitative Approach***

A quantitative positivist epistemology presupposes that it is possible to separate facts from values (Slevitch, 2011). As this study deals with parental values, religion and choice this researcher suggests that quantitative methods would not allow for the depth of understanding that is needed. Admittedly, quantitative research methods can provide rich data on cause-and-effect relationships. Nevertheless, one of the most common criticisms of quantitative methods is that they do not allow scope for elaboration or allow the researcher to dig deeper. The focus of understanding the contextual situation is also smaller (Sefotho, 2015). This current study would argue that for such a complex issue as parental choice, an in-depth qualitative study like a case study is more likely to pick up that complexity than a quantitative one. Contextual factors which help to interpret data or explain variations are often ignored in quantitative research. The inability to infer meaning outside the statistical results may also be problematic (Castellan, 2010). Similarly, Jones (2000) highlights the inability of quantitative research to unravel deeper meanings or to capture the complexity of certain social contexts.

In quantitative research, there is no room for outliers. However, Jones (2000) argues that ethically we need to carefully consider how outliers are treated. We may need to consider who benefits from the quantitative research and what are the potential uses and consequences of the data generated. Outliers could be a possible source of rich material in any scenario, and in an educational or medical context even more so. With quantitative research nuanced, in-

depth data could be easily missed. Therefore, for this study, it was rejected in favour of a qualitative study.

### ***Qualitative Research***

Qualitative research allows the researcher to explore and understand the meaning that people ascribe to a social or human situation (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). It is a type of research that focuses on process, understanding and meaning, where the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, where the process is inductive and results are communicated through rich description (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research is a process involving emerging questions and procedures, the data is usually collected in the participant's setting and data involves inductively building from particulars to themes and finally making interpretations of meaning from the data (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This researcher is not mathematical and chose to do justice to the study by playing to her strengths.

Additionally, as 'research design should be a reflexive process operating through every stage of a project (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.24) in qualitative research, this too suited this researcher's mindset. Qualitative research concerns itself with exploring people's lives, history and behaviour and as the purpose of the research was to explore the decision-making behaviour of parents, this was the method chosen that would best explicate that (Silverman, 2000). Qualitative research also values the participants' and the researcher's viewpoints and is particularly helpful in understanding personal meanings, worldviews and the personal perspectives of their lived experiences (Johnson and Christensen, 2012). Qualitative research methods are valuable when researchers seek to examine phenomena 'about which little is yet known' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In the case of school choice decisions in a Catholic post-primary context in Midwest Ireland, there is a lacuna of research. A qualitative approach seeks to unearth new information rather than proving preconceived ideas about people (Gerson and

Horowitz, 2002). A qualitative approach addresses the questions of ‘how’ and ‘what’(Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019).

Understanding human behaviour and the meaning behind it is successfully achieved by using qualitative research (Merriam, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005a). This involves the researcher meeting the participants and discovering how they construct, give meaning to and interpret their experiences of parental school choice. Hence adopting a qualitative strategy contributes to the researcher’s understanding of how individual experiences differ across contexts and provides the mechanism through which to examine the complexity of the real world from several perspectives (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). When conducting qualitative research, exploration and discovery need to be considered (Nelson and Quintana, 2005). By exploring and discovering the processes of school choice, made by parents through qualitative measures, a researcher can learn of the perceptions of these parents. Qualitative research is appropriate for this type of research as it allows parents to explain and elaborate on their decisions (Levin, 2010).

The structure of the study follows the basic steps of an interpretivist qualitative study: defining the problem, selecting a purposive sample, collecting and analysing data, and interpreting and reporting on the findings (Merriam and Grenier, 2019 p35) (See Table 1) Parental interviews regarding their decisions were the primary source of data for this study and allowed the researcher to interpret their experiences to explain the phenomenon of school choice. Qualitative research allowed an exploration of views, perceptions and experiences of school choice and through the parents’ words, it was possible to uncover the many realities that exist for parents making school choice decisions (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Though a qualitative method was chosen for this study it would be naive to ignore some of the criticisms of it.

## *Criticisms of the qualitative method*

### *Bias*

Arguably the flexibility of qualitative methods can have disadvantages. The researcher must be careful not to impact the research process by injecting bias (Denscombe, 2010; Bryman, 2012). The case study can be seen as problematic and lacking in rigour due to the problem of bias. Flyvbjerg (2006) posits that “[the case study] maintains a bias towards verification, understood as a tendency to confirm the researcher’s preconceived notions, so that the study, therefore, becomes of doubtful scientific value” (p.17). However, this can be minimised if the researcher is aware of such an influence during the collection and analysis of the data (Bryman 2012) while simultaneously not oversimplifying the data or disregarding data that is perceived as unsuitable (Bryman, 2012). Care was taken in this study not to assign personal ideas on school choice to interviewee responses. Subjectivism and bias can occur in all forms of research, not just the case study if the researcher does not regulate for it (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

### *Positionality and Researcher Reflexivity*

It is very difficult for the researcher to remain impartial given the inevitable presence of a system of beliefs, ideals and expectations (Kaptchuk, 2003). However, it is essential and if not eliminated, could lead to a distortion of objectivity or the ‘premature foreclosure of possible understanding’ (Levitt *et al.*, 2020, p.1). Practising ‘self-reflexivity’ throughout the study helped to keep preconceptions at bay (Punch, 2016; Tracy, 2020). Giddens and Sutton (2014,) define reflexivity as a process of constant reflection on one’s biography, social position, values, biases, preconceptions etc., so as to constantly ‘bracket them out’ while carrying out the research and analysis of the data (pp 77-79). Such biases might be the choices and priorities that the researcher made for her circumstances. For example, the researcher has taught in many

Catholic patronage post-primary schools and therefore had to be careful not to superimpose preconceived notions of her experiences of parents choosing a Catholic school. Equally, the researcher also had to put aside the reasons and choices she made of post-primary schools for her children. Though Giddens and Sutton (2014) do warn about getting too obsessive regarding reflexivity and running the risk of paralysing the researcher's work, this researcher kept her 'guiding assumptions' to the forefront of her mind while 'consistently reconsider[ing] their value and consequence'(Tracy, 2020). In practice, this took the form of the researcher examining her thoughts, feelings, actions and reactions and their impact on her interpretation of the data while asking questions like "Am I imposing bias?" "Am I influencing the data?" and questioning her assumptions, critiquing and appraising constantly. Feedback from supervisors and discussion of work also led to bias being addressed and controlled.

Bias was also avoided by a process of reflexivity as part of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). Questioning subjectivity and interpretations of data was practised on an ongoing basis keeping in mind that it is incumbent on the researcher to present the findings not just descriptively but in a manner that reflects an understanding of what is relevant in the data. Stake (1995) also emphasises that the researcher must present meaningful and noteworthy data to the reader.

### *Generalisability*

Merriam (2002) suggests that 'the basic question even for qualitative research is the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations' (p.28). The case study strategy of research provides minimal basis for generalisability, and it can produce limited and anomalous theories (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). However since small, non-random random samples are selected purposefully in qualitative research, it is not possible to generalise statistically. A small sample is selected 'precisely because the researcher wishes to understand

the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many' (Merriam, 2009, p.224). This study restrained from claiming generalisability and argues that research is suggestive and provides a basis for further research. The sample size of thirteen participants living in a relatively small geographical area also lends itself to non-generalisability. The strategy chosen for this research was a Case Study.

### **3.7 Case study**

The case study has undergone many methodological developments over the years and the three most prominent proponents of the case study are, Yin, Stake and Merriam (Harrison *et al.*, 2017). Yin (2018) proposes three types of case studies: explanatory, exploratory and descriptive. Yin (2009) suggests five elements in a case study research design: research questions, purpose of study, unit analysis, logic that links data to propositions and criteria for the interpretation of findings. However, a case study need not necessarily have propositions (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003). According to Yin (2003), a case study design should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions as the adoption of such interrogatives prompts participants to reveal richer data on the process of school choice (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; McLeod, 2001). It should also be considered when you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study when you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study and when the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. In this current study, the views of parents were the focus of the research however in line with a holistic approach to the research, additional perspectives were included in the research. This researcher for example would have gleaned much from her years of professional experience in dealing with parents and being involved in Boards of Management regarding school admission processes. Informal discussions would have taken place with colleagues after the literature review and before the data analysis. Such conversations informed the creation of interview

schedules. The third element of the case study is the unit of analysis which is the area of focus that a case study examines (Yin, 2009, 2014). The unit of analysis in this research is the parental group who chose a Catholic post-primary school for their children for September 2022. The fourth component of the case study from a Yinian perspective concerns linking the data to the propositions. Using Braun and Clarke's (2022) methods of RTA, patterns and thus themes were identified from the data. Yin (2009, 2014) recommends the application of codes to the data before the development of themes. Through the process of RTA, establishing codes is part of the process. The case study was finally chosen as it allows for the 'story' of a research study to be told (Patton, 2015). The story of the parents' decisions on the journey towards choosing their child's school is told.

According to Merriam (1998), the five steps of research design are: conducting a literature review, constructing a theoretical framework, identifying a research problem, crafting and sharpening research questions, and selecting a purposive sample. Stake (1995) names his types of studies as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective. Stake's 'intrinsic' approach was chosen for the study as Stake suggests that researchers who have a genuine interest in the case should use this approach when the intent is to better understand the case. However, there is also the contention that this case is exploratory (Yin, 2018). A case study is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because the case itself is of interest (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Its purpose is not to come to understand an abstract theory or phenomenon, nor is its purpose to build a theory, though the option still exists (Stake, 1995). This case is of interest in itself because the focus of this study is on the individual's experiences and understandings in their context-specific environment i.e. the parents' experiences and understandings of themselves as school choosers for their children. The case study methodology was selected as, according to Stake (1995), it is a suitable research approach for evaluating the lived experience of participants in a particular setting – in

this study the setting was the community of parents in Midwest Ireland, and the case study was bounded by focusing on those parents who made the Catholic post-primary school choice in a particular year.

Both Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) base their approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm though Yazan (2015) argues that Yin's framing of the case study suggests positivistic leanings and that it is constrained by his four conditions for quality control- 'construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability' (Yin, 2003, p19). To gather in-depth data, this research was based on the epistemological philosophy of Constructivism/ Interpretivism (Thomas, 2013). Stake (1995) and Merriam's (1998) framing of the case study, according to Yazan (2015) is connected to constructivism where the central notion is that 'knowledge is constructed rather than discovered' (Stake, 1995, p.99), that 'reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds' (Merriam, 1998, p.6). Though Yin's approach to case study has plausible value, due to this researcher's epistemological stance, this case study is inspired by Merriam and Stake's premise that knowledge is socially constructed, and multiple realities exist and therefore multiple interpretations can exist when exploring the decision-making of parents. In gathering data, this researcher is '[an] interpreter[s], and gatherer[s] of interpretations which require [her] them to report their rendition or construction of the constructed reality or knowledge that [she] they gather[s] through their [her] investigation' (Yazan, p.137). Just as there are many realities, there will also be as many interpretations. The case study has evolved as an approach to research which can capture rich data, giving an in-depth picture of a bounded unit or an aspect of that unit. It is often considered the most flexible of all research designs as it allows the researcher to retain the holistic elements of a real context while simultaneously researching it (Schell, 1992, p.2). Located in a subjective and interpretive research paradigm (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011) case study methodology seeks to understand the world and experience of the participants.

A case study was chosen for this research due to the range of options it offers in terms of focus, be it on a program, event, or activity involving individuals rather than a group per se' (Stake, 1995, p.3). Stake (2010) also stresses that "case studies are a common way to do formal and informal inquiry" (p.279). A case study is not a method of data collection so much as a research strategy used to study a social unit (Yin, 2009). Such a 'unit of analysis' could be a family, a household, a community, an organisation, an event or even a decision (DeVaus, 2001, p220). In this case study, for instance, the unit of analysis is the parents of first-year children who have chosen to send them to a Catholic post-primary school. The case study for Stake (1994) is "not a methodological choice but a choice of the object" to be analysed (p.236-247). Nije and Asimiran (2014) concur that the focus of the case study is to reveal the characteristics of a particular entity, and its key distinguishable attributes include focusing on a single unit, an in-depth description of a phenomenon, anchored on real-life scenarios and using multiple data collection methods. Thomas (2013) contends that a case study offers a more rounded, richer, more balanced picture (p4). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) concur stating that the primary purpose of this research strategy is to "portray, analyse and interpret the uniqueness of real individuals and situations through accessible accounts" (p.85). This case study set out to explore the processes and factors involved in parents choosing a Catholic post-primary school for their children in Midwest Ireland.

### ***A Bounded study***

Some define the case study as a phenomenon occurring in a bounded context (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Defining what the case unit of analysis is, can be difficult. However, Miles and Huberman (1994) go on to say the case is "in effect your unit of analysis" (p.25). Merriam (1988) considers the most important aspect of case study is determining that the case is a bounded unit. A bounded study is one bounded by place and time (Stake, 2006) or put

simply ‘You can “fence in” what you are going to study’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 38). A decision on boundedness is reached by asking ‘how finite the data collection would be; that is, whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite time for observations’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 39). Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) have further suggested how the case could be bounded thus preventing a topic too broad to be researched. Creswell (2003) suggests binding it by time and place, Stake (1995) by time and activity and Miles and Huberman (1994) by definition and context. Cognisance has been taken of this dilemma. The case study boundary in this research is the parents of First year students in Catholic post-primary schools in the Midwest of Ireland and the case under investigation is the process of how parents of children choose a Catholic post-primary school for their first-year child. It is a multiple site single case study/ collective case approach (Stake, 2005).

### ***Limitations of the case study***

Case study analysis has its limitations, and this study took this into account. Yin (2018) stresses that a single case-study is like a once-off experiment and may therefore represent common and/or typical. This researcher does not assume that a single case study is a microcosm of a larger system. Consequently, she adopts a multiple-site single case study approach which Schofield (2011, p.79) argues increases the generalisability of a study. Schofield (2011) goes on to argue that findings that emerge from the study of several heterogeneous sites are more likely to be robust, allowing generalisations to be made to a variety of other sites (p.79). Hence in utilising a multiple-site case study methodology, this researcher is aware that it may not be appropriate to apply the knowledge unfolded from this study to other situations as it may not be representative of a whole population. It is not generalisable, but this research proposes that the findings are relatable or transferable (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) to other Catholic schools in Ireland and perhaps further afield.

### **3.8 Data collection**

The fourth phase of Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 2018) suggests that the fourth stage of the research process model is the collection and analysis of the data. Interviews, the chosen data collection method of this study can be read and analysed in a variety of ways including ‘content, narrative and semiotic strategies’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018, p.14). Equally important is the appropriate management and interpretation of the data. In this study semi-structured interviews were conducted as this data collection technique closely aligned with the case study methodology, allowing participants the freedom of spontaneity in their replies.

#### ***Research instruments***

The researcher is the primary instrument (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015) who must prepare carefully for gathering data. The second research instrument is the interview. Before conducting interviews and focus groups, the individual data collection instrument was piloted with two parents/colleagues as suggested by Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998). The pilot study allowed the researcher to hone her interviewing skills, measure time for interviewing and gain feedback on her research design. Stake (1995) argues that ‘a considerable proportion of all data is impressionistic, picked up informally as the researcher first becomes acquainted with the case’ (p49) and this was also found to be true in this study. At the same time, this researcher would lean towards Yin’s (2003) opinion that the ‘considerable proportion’ cannot be used for analysis purposes. The data simply has to be traceable. This can be supported using an audit trail.

#### ***The Sampling Process***

The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will best answer the research question and add a greater depth of understanding (Creswell and

Creswell, 2018). Purposive sampling is a popular technique in qualitative research whereby subjects who are most likely to provide the richest data are selected to effectively use limited resources (Patton, 2015). In this study, purposive sampling was chosen to select participants that would yield the most extensive answers to the research questions. Certain criteria must be established in the selection of participants (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). The criteria in this case were that the parents had to be the parents of First Year students i.e. those children that had begun post-primary school in September 2022. Parents of any other years were excluded. A limitation of the sampling method may be that certain parents were excluded from the study if their language levels were inadequate to understand the nature of the research or the request for participation in the study. The letter of invitation was only sent in English as extra resources for multiple translations were not available to the researcher. In addition, linguistic proficiency in English was a key requirement for participation in the research therefore a certain cohort of people were excluded because of that deficiency. The researcher wanted to have a sample from each type of school i.e. urban, rural, mixed, DEIS school, boarding school. The schools were selected from the Department of Education website of Catholic post-primary schools in the Midwest region of Ireland. There were forty schools in all. The rationale for contacting all schools was to get as broad a representative sample as possible, a process known as ‘maximum variation’ (Merriam and Grenier, 2019, p31). This would also lend greater rigour and trustworthiness to the study.

Once ethical approval was gained from DCU, principals of the 40 schools were contacted by email in early January 2023 (Appendix F). Within the email to principals was the letter to parents, setting out in plain language the purpose of the study and an embedded link to a survey to which their reply defined their interest in being part of the study (Appendix G). The survey was not so much a quantitative instrument as a method of gathering demographic data of the participants. Demographic information regarding the participants is useful in

framing the context of the study and is also important for example when examining factors like gender differences or location of their home in relation to the school that the participants choose (Table 2).

### ***Participant profile***

Locating participants was dependent on two criteria (1) that principals (the gatekeepers) would forward the email of invitation to parents and (2) that parents would be interested enough to participate and reply. These criteria were challenges. There was no guarantee that all principals forwarded the letter to parents, and this could account for the low number (seven) of replies from parents. Principals are constantly bombarded by requests each day (Mulford, 2003). A second 'reminder' email was sent to principals. The help of Le Chéile Trust and the National Parents Council was also requested in the promotion of the study amongst principals and parents. The researcher also knew parents through her volunteer work with children, many of whom were New Irish, and through professional work. Some of the parents had children in First Year in Catholic schools and were asked if they would be interested in participating in a study on school choice. Some of the parents agreed to participate. Participants were not offered any incentives.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) note that the "quality of a piece of research stands or falls not only on the appropriateness of methodology and instrumentation but also by the suitability of the sampling strategy that has been adopted" (p.100). Many parents are first-time post-primary student parents, and this researcher was cognisant that many might feel that what they had to say might be reported back to Principals and it might affect their children's progress in school somehow. Parents were assured in the proposal letter regarding confidentiality but also in person before the interviews and on their consent forms (Appendix J). In the final analysis, thirty parents replied, by answering the survey, but when contacted to participate in

the interviews only seven parents could participate in the individual interviews. This may have been because parents did not read the letter properly and therefore did not realise that they would have been needed for the interview or that they changed their minds in the interim. Such attrition of participants has been explained in Eysenbach's (2005) work on surveys as the '*curiosity plateau*' where at first participants' interest may be high but then they lose interest in the '*attrition*' phase and the '*stable use*' phase produces the participants that one can ultimately work with. The researcher then reached out to parents of the volunteer group and professional connections. In the end, there were thirteen participants and twelve **different** participants in the three focus groups. The study therefore relates to participants who secured a place in a Catholic school within the bounded area of Midwest Ireland. For this study, the researcher chose to focus on the choices made by parents as they are in most cases the primary decision-makers. Parents generally have legal guardianship of their children and are emotionally and financially invested in their children. However, there are also other personnel who may be involved in choosing schools for children, for example, grandparents, guardians, foster parents and those who may be acting in *loco parentis* for children who are in the care of the state.

A notable feature of this sample group was their high level of educational attainment. Of the 10 Irish parents who lived rurally, 5 of them had children attending rural schools and 5 attending urban schools. Of the parents whose children attend rural schools, 4/5 had third-level qualifications and 1 had a post-primary level of education. One of the rural schools was single-sex. All New Irish chose urban schools for their children. Irish parents whose children attended urban schools all had third-level qualifications. Of the New Irish parents, 1 had primary, 1 had post-primary and 1 had third-level qualifications. Therefore 10 of the thirteen respondents had third-level qualifications with 100% of parents desiring a third-level education for their children. More educated parents are more likely to invest in education (Kirchsteiger and

Sebald, 2010). 10 of the thirteen parents in the sample group have a middle-class profile with social capital that many parents may not have, and this has an impact on the findings of the study. The researcher considered her position as an educated person interviewing highly educated respondents with perhaps similar middle-class backgrounds as both a strength and a limitation. She was able to draw on her knowledge to interpret responses with insight. However, the researcher also ran the risk of bias and of limiting the range of responses due to over-identification with the respondents. Nevertheless, the researcher approached this situation with critical reflexivity acknowledging how some of her own similar experiences could affect the research process. In addition to a similar educational background, respondents may also similarly value education as much as the researcher. A school choice for middle-class parents is influenced by greater ‘insider’ knowledge (Byrne and Smyth, 2011, p.9). They would also find it easier to navigate the complexity of the application system. The fact that class differences can influence school choice will have an impact on how the findings are interpreted (Ball 2003; Brantlinger, 2003; Byrne and Smyth, 2011; Reay, Crozier and James, 2011). Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural capital and the fact that higher social classes tend to have more capital to access choice, also needs to be considered when considering this participant sample. A sample such as this would not be representative of a larger population and is therefore not generalisable.

Participant interviews took place at a location of mutual agreement between the participant and interviewer. Interviews were semi-structured. Where appropriate the interviewer prompted the respondent if there was something not understood or when the respondent wished the interviewee to expand on an interesting idea.

Name	Age	Gender	Education Level	Religion	Location of home	School child attends	Region of Birth	Marital Status	Nationality
Clare	51-55	F	2nd Level	R.C	Rural	SSR	W. Europe	M	Irish

Talullah	35-40	F	3rd Level	R.C	Rural	MR	W. Europe	M	Irish
Breda	51-55	F	3rd Level	R.C	Rural	MU	W. Europe	M	Irish
Donal	51-55	M	3rd Level	R.C	Rural	MR	W. Europe	M	Irish
Laura	35-40	F	3rd Level	R.C	Rural	SSU	W. Europe	M	Irish
Paula	51-55	F	3rd Level	R.C	Rural	SSU	W. Europe	M	Irish
Ursula	45-50	F	3rd Level	R.C	Rural	SSU	W. Europe	M	Irish
Emma	45-50	F	3rd Level	R.C	Rural	MR	W. Europe	M	Irish
Lucy	45-50	F	3rd Level	R.C	Rural	SSU	S. America	M	Irish
Cathy	51-55	F	3rd Level	R.C	Rural	MR	W. Europe	M	Irish
Saa'im	45-50	M	1st Level	Islam	Urban	SSUD	Asia	M	New Irish
Zuka	45-50	M	2nd Level	Islam	Urban	SSUD	Asia	M	New Irish
Fatisha	35-40	F	3rd Level	Islam	Urban	SSUD	Asia	M	New Irish

Abbreviations: SSR/U=Single-sex Rural/Urban. MU/R = Mixed Urban/Rural SSUD = Single-sex Urban DEIS

Table 2 Demographic data of Interviewees

Though there were no private schools in the study, one mixed urban school and four single-sex urban schools in the study could be considered as having some private school characteristics. Such characteristics would entail being non-DEIS, having smaller classes, sports amenities and sports that demand expensive equipment, extra sports coaches, expensive school trips and parents with high levels of employment. DEIS schools on the other hand have higher than normal levels of unemployment among parents, can serve high-density areas of local housing, have extra supports and a home school community liaison officer and may provide EAL classes. The five remaining schools in the study may partly resemble each type of school.

### 3.9 Interviewing as a research strategy

As already stated, the primary source of data in this study was semi-structured interviews with thirteen parents. Merriam (2009) writes the following about interviews:

Either all the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific

information is desired from all the participants, in which case there is a more structured section to the interview. But the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.

(Merriam 2009, p.90)

The semi-structured nature of the questioning allows for greater flexibility and puts the interviewee at ease (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Stake (1995, p. 65) advises that ‘the interview is the main road to multiple realities’, and the interviews in this study were employed to garner the ‘perceptions or knowledge over multiple participants’ and provide ‘rich, thick descriptions’ of the case. The questions were informed by the literature review (Appendices K and L). Questions one to five and nine to thirteen were informed by Parental Role Construction Theory (PRCT), and/ or Rational Choice Theory (RT) or both. PRCT describes how parents make decisions to become involved in their children’s education. RCT is a decision-making mechanism that takes all of the options available to a person and decides the best solution based on these factors, one which works the same way in all conditions (Schulz, 2011). The questions were also designed to garner greater information about what kind of school the child came from, what kinds of schools were available to parents and what factors, in general, influenced their choices. Questions six to eight and eleven to thirteen were mainly informed by parental self-efficacy theory (PSE) and some by RCT. PSE theory refers to parents’ perceived abilities/ capabilities for learning or performing actions (Bandura, 1977). The questions were intended to explore what parents saw themselves achieving, how they achieved it and how useful they were to their children. As the study was situated in Catholic schools, questions fourteen and fifteen sought to examine the influence/ link between Catholicity and parental school choice. Question sixteen asked participants if they had anything further to add. This was a further means to gather data that may not have been initially considered.

The interviews took place between January and June 2023. As it is incumbent on the researcher to draw data from multiple sources an initial short demographic survey was also carried out (Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998). The final number of participants interviewed was thirteen and twelve different participants were involved in the three focus groups. Researchers are encouraged to use more than one method of data collection, a process called 'triangulation' (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). It was decided to conduct three focus groups after the semi-structured interviews. Sample size depends on the qualitative design being employed. There is no definite recommended number of participants and sites in research. Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend four to five cases in a case study but there are a variety of opinions on the issue as illustrated in the literature (Creswell and Poth, 2018). A sample of thirteen respondents was therefore considered sufficient for the depth of analysis required, in addition to considering the time scale and the resources available to the researcher. The participants were given the option of how they wished to be interviewed, either face-to-face or through Zoom. As they were the ones providing the data, this was considered the fairest option. Clare, one of the participants opted for face-to-face and a few other participants who because of language difficulties or limited technology ability also chose face-to-face. Saturation is said to occur when no new data is appearing (Charmaz, 2006). After data collection, it was considered that 'saturation' had been achieved (Charmaz, 2006).

### ***Semi-structured Interviews***

From January 2023 to June 2023, thirteen semi-structured interviews were undertaken face-to-face or by using Zoom (a video-conferencing platform). At all times the researcher was cognisant and respectful of the interviewees' time and willingness to participate and therefore made herself available to concur with the interviewees' plans. Once dates were set through email or text and in some cases by phone or physical meeting, Zoom links were sent to the

participants who chose Zoom. Six of the thirteen interviewees chose face-to-face interviews. Consent forms were sent, signed and returned by email or signed in person for in-person interviews.

The interview schedule was drawn up and informed by the literature review and experience of the researcher. The interview protocol (Appendices K and L) outlines the theoretical framework informing each question. There were sixteen questions and an extra final question which allowed the interviewee to add something if they wished. In written form, the questions asked would appear to be quite tightly structured but in the live situation of the interview these were guidelines for the researcher to elicit information, but the interviews were allowed to flow in a semi-structured manner to allow for discussion. Reasonable space was allowed for developing or clarifying a point. The questions are outlined as such in Appendices K and L to demonstrate how they align with the theoretical framework. Interviews were recorded using a voice - recorder (with the interviewees' consent) and field notes were also made. With the participants' consent Zoom recordings were also made of on-line interviews. A voice - recorder was also used in conjunction with Zoom in the event that internet coverage failed, and the interview would have to continue by phone. Once transcribed, the recordings were deleted. The recording was also useful for the interviewer as it allowed her to critically analyse her own skills. Evaluating the pilot interview is an important developmental exercise for the researcher (Atkins and Wallace, 2015). This was particularly useful in the pilot interviews as it allowed the researcher to see herself and her mannerisms through the eyes of the interviewee and adjust. For example, she found that paraphrasing a question was less stilted and kept the interview more conversational. Each interview lasted approximately forty to forty-five minutes, and post interview notes were made. Every effort was made to transcribe as early as possible after the interviews.

### *Focus groups*

Focus groups were also chosen as a method of data collection as they offered the opportunity to create safe spaces for small groups of research participants of similar backgrounds to share their experiences with their peers (Wellington, 2000). The focus group has been described as a contrived rather than natural setting whereby a group gathered to discuss a particular topic (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Though it produces less data per person than a one-to-one interview it does produce a lot of data in a short time. It allows the researcher to observe and gather a diverse range of opinions and perspectives on the topic (Flick, 2007). In this study the themes identified from the individual interviews were used as the topics of discussion that the groups either confirmed, altered, or rejected as factors which influenced school choice (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2016). It has been emphasised that members of a focus group should be composed of those who are qualified to speak on an issue and that the questions should be theoretically informed (May 2003)(see Appendix V). As already discussed, each of the questions in the semi-structured interviews is theoretically based (Appendix M). The focus groups were chosen randomly from participants who volunteered when the researcher initially sought participants and were all parents who had selected a Catholic post-primary school for their children for September 2022. The groups were no larger than four people. Consent was received from each participant (Appendix N). Initially, two focus groups were decided on for triangulation purposes but as interviews progressed it became clear that there was an urban rural divide in terms of school choice and further than that there was a subgroup of urban parents whom this researcher termed 'New Irish'. (This title was decided upon after consideration of other documents and was considered the most apt name by this researcher.) These were parents who had not been educated in Ireland or Europe and were not *au fait* with the post-primary application method to the same extent as native Irish or those educated in the Irish post-primary system. Thus, in seeking to validate her data the researcher

constructed three focus groups- an urban group, a rural group and a New Irish group. Rutledge, Gillam and Closson-Pitts (2021) describes the focus group as a highly efficient means of qualitative data collection; however, they do warn against certain voices dominating a group and thus excluding the voices of the less extrovert or linguistically proficient. This was a further reason to divide the three focus groups. The New Irish focus group was conducted in person due to technology restrictions/financial constraints of the members and the other two groups were conducted on Zoom. The data from the Focus groups was used to triangulate the data from the interviews. This was done by subjecting the focus group data to coding by using NVIVO and Thematic Analysis (TA).

### ***Zoom platform***

Zoom is a collaborative, cloud-based video-conferencing service offering features including online meetings, group messaging services and secure recording of sessions (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2016). The use of Zoom in this research was carried out under the ethical approval of the DCU Research Ethics Committee (DCU Ethics 2023). When using Zoom, DCU is regarded as a ‘Data Controller’. Accordingly, this researcher is considered an employee of the Data Controller and abides by data protection rules and obligations under GDPR when using Zoom.

### ***Field Notes***

Throughout the single interviews and the focus groups notes were made, sometimes in the margins as an *aide-memoire*. Pyrczak and Bruce (2005) recommend writing down keywords as it can be difficult to write long sentences when engaging meaningfully with the interviewee. In the main, however, as soon as possible after the interview concluded, reflections, feelings and observations of the researcher and the participants were noted. This is

regarded as a useful support to the interviews (Schwandt, 2015, Marshall and Rossman, 2011). It is also in keeping with reflexivity as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022).

### **3.10 Transcription and storage**

Transcription of interviews can be long and arduous (Atkins and Wallace, 2015). However personal transcription by the researcher allowed her to become familiarised with the data before the analysis took place. Data familiarisation is the first phase of RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Data was securely stored on the researcher's personal computer and written data was stored under lock and key. Participants' names and smaller locations were anonymised as were references to school names. To proceed with the analysis, the researcher set about assigning unique identifiers for import to NVIVO 12.

### **3.11 Data Analysis**

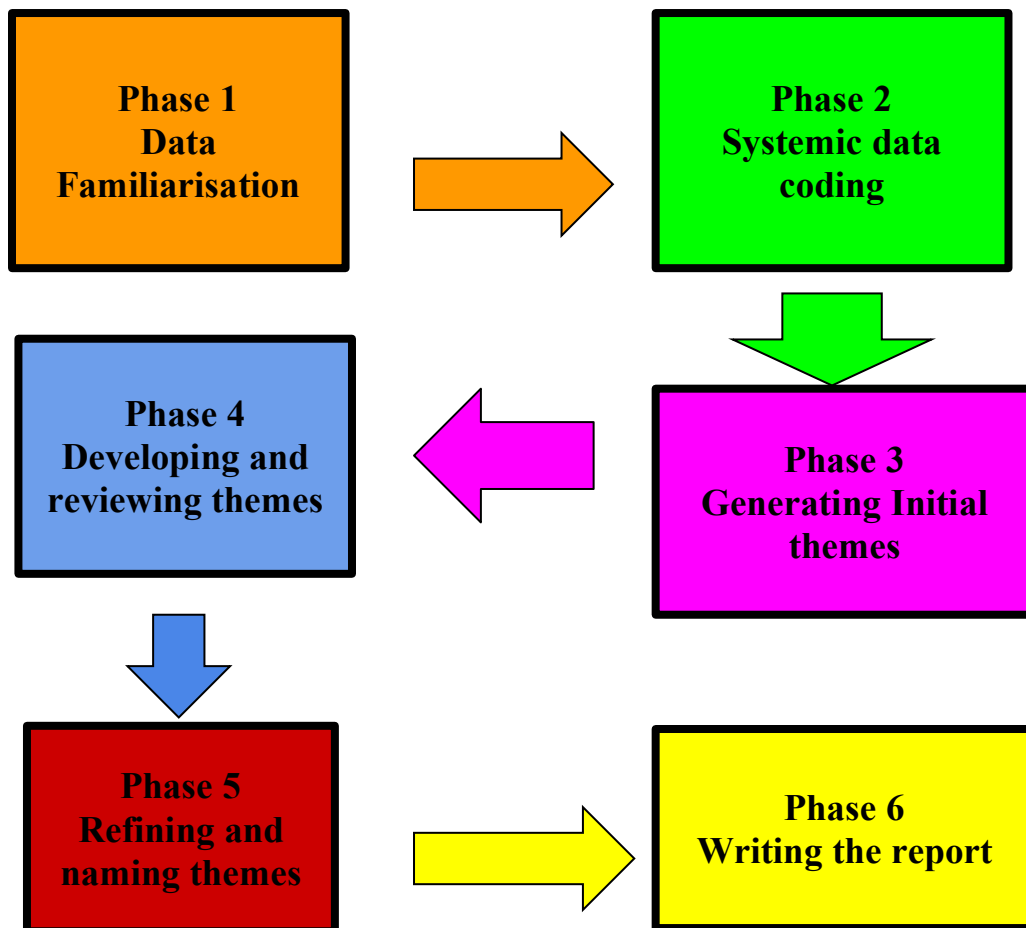
The fifth phase of Denzin and Lincoln's (2011, 2018) research process model involves the 'interpretation and evaluation' of data. RTA was employed for analysis of the data. An inductive approach to the data was employed and codes were not superimposed. Themes were identified at a semantic level where the surface meaning of data was examined, and at a latent level where underlying concepts and ideas were explored. The data was first organised by identifying patterns through coding. These patterns were then interpreted, and their broader meanings were deduced through engagement with the theoretical framework and the literature, as advised by Braun and Clarke (2022).

#### ***Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2022)***

RTA was chosen because its practice 'reflects an approach to qualitative research that's reflexive and involves asking questions that are not just about very surface-level observations or simple descriptions of experience' (Braun and Clarke, 2019a, p.5). The framework for RTA

is designed to evidence thoroughness and accuracy in the data analysis process which is what this researcher required. The 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the interviews provides an account of experience that is multifaceted and complex. Eliciting thick descriptions produced by interviews is regarded as one of the main tasks of this study's exploration of parental decision-making. RTA prioritises the reflexivity of the researcher, especially in the analysis of thick descriptions which in turn aligns with the epistemology and ontology that she adopts for this study. RTA encourages an active engagement with the data, searching for patterns which helped create the codes. RTA is conducted in six phases which are elaborated below (Figure 3). This researcher's background in psychology had a bearing on her interpretation of the data as some contend that 'the researcher's disciplinary background and preferred choice of method will influence the analysis' (Harding and Whitehead, 2013, p142).

The data was coded inductively. This was done by actively engaging with, and searching for, patterns in the data. Patterns are strongly linked to the data. The codes produced are reflective of the researcher's interpretation of meaning in the respondent interviews. A key principle adopted for the analysis was to reflect parents' own opinions, attitudes, and experiences as faithfully as possible while also accounting for the reflexive influence of the researcher's interpretations, as a researcher. A reflexive approach to thematic analysis emphasises the researcher's constant attention to producing knowledge (Braun and Clarke, 2019b).



*Figure 3 An overview of RTA by Braun and Clarke (2022)*

#### *Data Familiarisation (Phase 1)*

Once the researcher begins data collection, familiarisation with that data begins, consciously and unconsciously very early on. While interviewing, short field notes were made on the interview protocol sheet which was later expanded after the interviews. Actively listening to the recordings took place to get a greater contextual understanding (Byrne, 2022). Each of the interviews was read and listened to, initially, for transcription. Reading and transcription of the data helped to establish the voices of the participants in the researcher's head. A folder of transcripts and field notes for each participant was stored on Google Drive. Some would say transcribing is part of the analysis (Weinbaum and Onwuegbuzie, 2016). In choosing to transcribe one is intuitively becoming aware of the codes and perhaps even themes. Saldaña (2013) recommends coding as soon as collecting and formatting data. Once the

participants' transcripts were saved, they were then imported to NVIVO 12 for analysis. This researcher became more deeply immersed by reading and re-reading the transcripts at least five times before embarking on Phase Two which began in June 2023.

### *Systematic data coding (Phase 2)*

The transcripts were then subjected to Phase Two of the process which involved systematic data coding. Data coding began in June 2023 and is an arduous task that demands extreme attention from the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved the researcher reading the transcripts line by line and creating codes from each transcript. 'Line-by-line coding is a good starting point to identify initial phenomena and produce a list of themes of importance to the interviewee (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A code is a name or label that the researcher gives to a piece of data text that contains an idea. Coding is the first step in moving from statements in the data to making analytic interpretations (Charmaz, 2006, p.43). The research question and the literature informed this process. Use was also made of the memo and annotation facilities in the software package to help log thoughts and understand contexts (Figure 4).

Annotation	#	File Name	In Folder	Modified on	Modified by
Mother laughs slightly here bef...	1	Respondent 10 MB	Files	16 Sep 2023 at 14:18	JM
Respondent pauses for a few...	2	Respondent 10 MB	Files	16 Sep 2023 at 14:...	JM
Respondent laughs slightly at...	3	Respondent 10 MB	Files	16 Sep 2023 at 14:...	JM
Mother appears to be shocked...	4	Respondent 10 MB	Files	16 Sep 2023 at 14:...	JM
Mother considers proximity a...	5	Respondent 10 MB	Files	16 Sep 2023 at 14:...	JM
Parent states that all the scho...	6	Respondent 10 MB	Files	16 Sep 2023 at 14:...	JM
In looking for information abou...	7	Respondent 10 MB	Files	16 Sep 2023 at 15:...	JM
Mother pauses to think and co...	8	Respondent 10 MB	Files	16 Sep 2023 at 15:...	JM
Mother suggests that she was...	9	Respondent 10 MB	Files	16 Sep 2023 at 15:...	JM
Mother answers a very definiti...	10	Respondent 10 MB	Files	16 Sep 2023 at 16:...	JM
Mother feels she may not have...	11	Respondent 10 MB	Files	16 Sep 2023 at 16:12	JM
Started looking a year in adva...	1	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 17:57	JM
It is difficult for this parent to...	2	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 18:13	JM
This school is also proximate t...	3	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 18:...	JM
Parent feels he has made the...	4	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 18:18	JM
With the respondents limited...	5	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 18:...	JM
Father feels he did not make a...	6	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 18:...	JM
Though father put St. Matthe...	7	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 18:...	JM
Though father puts St. Matthe...	8	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 18:...	JM
Before his child got a place in...	9	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 18:...	JM
This parent is looking retrospe...	10	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 20:...	JM
Interviewer had to clarify if he...	11	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 20:...	JM
The parent is asked about how...	12	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 20:...	JM
The interviewer clarifies if he c...	13	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 20:...	JM
Respondent gives this answer...	14	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 21:...	JM
Parent consults Google about...	15	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	18 Sep 2023 at 21:...	JM
Parent indicates the difficulty...	16	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 19:18	JM
This comment indicates that t...	17	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 19:17	JM
The respondent is not entirely...	18	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 19:...	JM
Parent feels the burden of doi...	19	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 19:...	JM
This Parent gathered informati...	20	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 19:...	JM
De Valera school being his pri...	21	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 19:...	JM
Father has an academic expec...	22	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 19:...	JM
Does not expect Catholic faith...	23	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 20:...	JM
Parent indicates what he think...	24	Respondent 11 SAAG	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 21:...	JM
Child was due then to start sc...	1	Respondent 12 ZUSU	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 21:...	JM
Parent would have liked him to...	2	Respondent 12 ZUSU	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 21:...	JM
This respondents child did not...	3	Respondent 12 ZUSU	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 21:...	JM
This is the desired school whi...	4	Respondent 12 ZUSU	Files	19 Sep 2023 at 21:...	JM

Figure 4 Sample of annotations from NVIVO 12

Initial codes focused on overt meanings which can be identified at the surface level, but as more and more data was coded the coding became more interpretive, resulting in codes with latent meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2019a). Braun and Clarke (2022) explain that as the researcher’s analytic insight develops, the codes evolve. In the coding phase of the initial thirteen interviews and three focus groups, ninety-two codes were identified. There was no attempt at this stage to develop patterns or hierarchies (Appendix P). The researcher combined the themes from both the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews and unified them for better understanding (Wertz, 2005).

### *Generating initial themes from coded and collated data (Phase 3)*

RTA on the part of the researcher is said to occur at the intersection of the data, the theoretical assumptions of the analysis and the analytical skills of the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2019b). Braun and Clarke (2020, p.13) caution against confusing ‘one-dimensional’ ideas which should be classified as codes, with themes which have central organising ideas. In addition, Braun and Clarke (2020) advise that themes can be discovered in literature but that a theme in RTA is ‘actively crafted’ through the researcher’s involvement with her data. In RTA themes are not summaries of what the participants have said but are rather interwoven pieces of developed craftwork that tell a story, and which help find answers to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2019a). In this third phase, initial themes from the coded and collated data began to be identified. Having generated initial codes, the researcher began generating initial themes as per Braun and Clarke (2022). This involved ‘engaging with the codes to explore areas where there was some similarity of meaning’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p79) while always keeping in mind the research questions. Categories/ ‘candidate themes’ were then generated by identifying clustered patterns across all the datasets and not just within a single data item (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Codes ‘facilitate the development of categories and thus the analysis of their connections’ (Saldaña, 2013, p8). This was achieved by searching for any general ideas that several codes could be clustered around. It also involved returning to the transcripts several times to refer to codes and collated data abstracts. There were sixteen initially generated themes at this point which were carried (pasted) to phase four. (Appendix Q)

### *Developing and Reviewing themes (Phase 4)*

This phase involved developing and reviewing themes based on the coded data. The categories were expanded upon in Phase Four and coded onto some of those codes underneath. ‘Coding on’ essentially involved recoding the codes from the sixteen categories into a possible

four or five main themes. In this phase, some of the categories were made redundant if they did not answer the research questions. Quotes were identified that supported the main themes. This stage of the analysis felt like three steps forward, and one step back as it involved reviewing all the codes across the phases and reading the transcripts to keep the awareness of context alive. However, there was reassurance in Braun and Clarke's (2020, p.4) advice that 'as one's analytic(craft) skill develops, these six phases can blend somewhat, and the analytic process necessarily becomes increasingly recursive'.

Braun and Clarke (2022) caution the researcher about contradictory meanings and tensions within the data set. Those tensions do happen, but they stress that 'each individual theme should not contain meanings or interpretations that are contradictory to the central organising concept of the theme' (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p107). They further emphasise that the 'overall TA *can* contain themes developed around contradictory meanings. Different themes can be contradictory to *each other*, just not *internally* contradictory. Braun and Clarke (2022) contend the researcher's task is not to tell a 'uniform, singular' story but to relate the essential patterns of meaning that emerge from engagement with the data that relates to the research questions. For example, for 'ease of transport' a new code was made under 'deciding factor' but it could also have been coded under 'convenience'. This illustrates the recursive nature of coding (Braun and Clarke, 2014).

#### *Refining, defining and naming themes (Phase 5)*

In this phase, themes were refined before defining and naming them (Appendix R). During the analysis of the data, parts of the report writing were beginning to take shape and notes and drafts began to be written. Effectively the writing of the table of contents for the chapter was beginning to emerge. Braun and Clarke (2013) urge concurrent writing and analysis and contend that the two cannot be separated. At this point also, a certain creativity is

called for in naming themes that are ‘evocative, catchy, concise, and informative’ (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.258). The study then moved to Phase 6 to write a report on the findings.

#### *Writing the report (Phase 6)*

This phase involved writing up the report on the data collection, and interpretation. “The case study report is a summary of what has been done to try to get answers, what assertions can be made with some confidence, and what more needs to be studied” (Stake, 2006, p.14). This will be elaborated upon in the findings chapter.

#### ***NVIVO 12***

NVIVO 12, a Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) was used to analyse the data. Although dubious of her ability to master NVIVO 12, this researcher initially did some of the coding with pen and paper but soon realised that NVIVO 12 would help not least in terms of organisational skills. NVIVO 12 allowed the seamless back-and-forth movement between coded data and the full transcript to allow contextual analysis if needed immediately.

### **3.12 Methods of Verification**

For a research study to be credible every effort must be made to ensure the trustworthiness of inferences drawn from the data (Ahmed, 2024). A small sample size and the potential for research influence or bias when conducting the interviews and analysing the data, for example, may be raised. The sample size of thirteen participants is consistent with research by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006); and Hagaman and Wutich (2016). Generalisability was not being aimed for, so a small size is acceptable. No grand claims were being made based on such a small size. By adopting a reflexive approach bias was kept in check, as already stated.

### ***Audit Trail***

The purpose of the audit trail is to help the reader see the processes of the study. It lends transparency, credibility and plausibility to the work. It allows the reader to see the methodology and thought processes. It is useful to keep a digital audit trail as it demonstrates quality in the dissertation (Connelly and Peltzer, 2016; Nowell *et al.*, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2022). Equally, it may be requested by research supervisors or perhaps for inclusion in the final thesis and at a very basic level it is useful to trace back some of the earlier actions. An audit trail is also useful in the analytic phase as analysis is not linear! (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The audit trail may also include meetings with supervisors and presentations of emerging findings discussed with them. (Appendix O). Some of the items to be included in the audit trail as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022) would be: examples of code data, lists of codes, tables of codes, collated data, thematic maps (initial and final), definitions of themes and a theme table. Some of these are included in appendices at the end of the thesis.

### **3.13 Ethics and Research Integrity**

Ethically, in any study, the researcher is responsible for the execution of the study and also the results of it. Creswell and Creswell (2018, p.45) caution researchers to ‘examine methods and conclusions for bias.’ Regarding participants, the researcher has obligations towards them also. The main priority is preventing any physical, psychological, financial or social damage to the participants (Polonsky and Waller, 2019). Participants must be willing to take part of their own volition and not be coerced in any manner. They should be informed that they have the option to opt-out at any point and refusal to participate further will not have any negative consequences for them (Polonsky and Waller, 2019). Acting in accordance with what has been agreed with the subjects, sharing any relevant information with participants and informing them of their rights, being sensitive to their personal information and ensuring

confidentiality are all considered to be acting ethically and with integrity (Bell and Bryman, 2007). This was ensured by disseminating a plain language statement (Appendix E), reiterating the option of withdrawal in the proposal letter (Appendix F), verbally reassuring the participants before and after interviews and focus groups and finally by anonymising all identifiable data. One challenging aspect of the study would have been how the researcher may have been viewed by the participants. This researcher could have been perceived by parents as someone who had some power and influence regarding school choice. She may have been regarded as an agent of the school or church who could have reported their responses to the relevant schools. This was hopefully resolved by explaining who the researcher was that she had no influence and that their responses were confidential. As interviews can often take place in the everyday environments of participants, researchers must be cognisant of their own safety but also be aware of the ethical issues that may be derived from such interactions (Drolet *et al.*, 2023; Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden, 2000). This would be particularly relevant when it comes to the collection of data. This researcher received ethical approval for the research from the DCU ethics committee in December 2022.

## Summary

This researcher was aware that analysis of any corpus of data should be done robustly and systematically, and it should be valid and meaningful. Qualitative analysis is as dependent on the researcher as it is on the data (Fetterman, 1998). Rigour was aimed at by attending carefully to the various phases of RTA as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). The findings of that analysis will be revealed in the following chapter.

## Chapter Four Findings

*Because we didn't know if J. was going to get the place or not...like it was a really big decision... So it was, it was an awful stressful few months, to be honest about it...it was an extremely stressful time... But like it's an awful process for parents like us anyway.... it's awful for parents.*

(Laura)

### 4.1 Introduction

Stake (2005) stipulates that the methods used in a case study are to:

Learn enough about the case to encapsulate complex meanings into a finite report [and] to describe the case in sufficient descriptive narrative so that readers can experience these happenings vicariously and draw their own conclusions.

(Stake 2005, p. 450).

The presentation of findings is more than a description of the themes identified, it is a process that involves depth and reflection, concluding in a linkage of these themes into a comprehensive model of the findings (Mishra and Dey, 2022; Bazeley, 2009). As elucidated, a case study approach was adopted for the research (Stake, 1994, 2000, 2005; Yin, 2009; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). The purpose of the study was to address the lacuna of research in parental choice of Catholic schools in Midwest Ireland and to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on school choice in Ireland (Kellaghan and Greaney 1970; McEvoy, 2003; Prendergast, 2011; Ledwith and Reilly, 2013; Cahill and Hall, 2014; Kelleher, Smyth and McEldowney, 2016). A clear research question provided the framework for this chapter “How do parents choose a Catholic Post-primary school for their children?” This question was examined under three research sub-questions:

- (1) What factors do parents consider when choosing a Catholic Post-primary school?
- (2) How do parents gather information about schools available to their children?
- (3) How do parents choose the school that best suits their child?

To present the findings of the study, the following were considered:

(1) the process of RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2022). RTA enabled categorisation, codification, analysis and presentation of the data logically while allowing this researcher to exercise reflexivity throughout the study (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

(2) the research questions as outlined above and

(3) the theoretical lenses of rational choice, parental self-efficacy, parental role construction theories and Bourdieu's forms of capital.

This chapter will outline the findings of the data analysis. A rubric for quantifying the qualitative data can be found in Appendix T.

## 4.2 Participants of the study

Each of the participants provided demographic information which helps the reader contextualise the participants' backgrounds. Thirteen participants (10 female, 3 male) were interviewed, and a separate twelve participants formed 3 focus groups (five male, seven female) (Appendix V). The participants were assigned anonymised first names. The focus groups are referred to as FGR (Focus Group Rural), FGU (Focus Group Urban) and FGNI (Focus Group New Irish). The interviewees, Clare, Talullah, Breda, Donal, Laura, Paula, Ursula, Emma, Lucy and Cathy are native Irish (henceforth referred to as Irish) and Saaim, Zuka and Fatisha were born outside Ireland and are recent immigrants to Ireland (henceforth referred to as New Irish). All the Irish participants live in rural areas and all the New Irish live in urban areas. All the New Irish participants sent their children to urban schools. Meanwhile, 5 of the rural participants sent their children to rural schools (also referred to as Ex-CAS schools) and 5 sent them to urban schools. To contextualise the data Table 3 indicates key information relating to parents and the schools to which they applied.

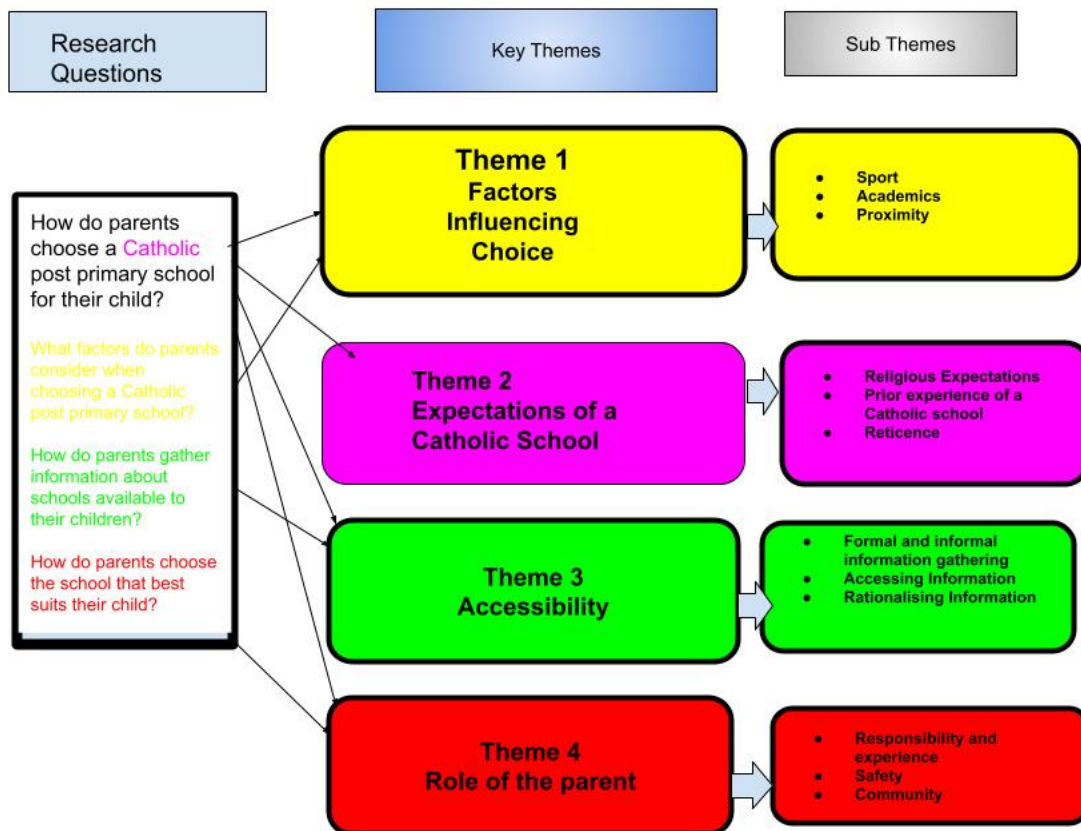
<b>Factors related to CAS</b>	<b>Number</b>
Catholic schools on offer on CAS	10
Participants who applied through CAS	7

Participants who applied to CAS <u>and</u> directly to Ex-CAS schools	2
Irish who got their 1 <sup>st</sup> Preference	10
New Irish who got 1 <sup>st</sup> Preference	1
First Time Parent/ Participants	7
Parents/ Participants with Right of Entry	3 (1 due to sibling, 2 due to living in area)
Oversubscribed CAS schools	10+ (6 unknown) (1 undersubscribed)
Oversubscribed Ex-CAS schools to which parents applied	4 +(1 unknown, 1 undersubscribed)
Oversubscribed schools of parents of study	8

**Table 3** Key data from the application process

### 4.3 Themes and Subthemes

As outlined in Chapter Three, the greatest source of data in this study was elicited from interviews. The interview according to Stake, “is the main road to multiple realities.... [and] seeks to aggregate perceptions of knowledge over multiple participants” (1995, pp.64-65). Appendix R outlines the codebook and references to each potential theme which were then reviewed and further refined into four main themes. The following four key themes were later identified, namely, (1) factors influencing choice; (2) expectations of a Catholic school; (3) accessibility and (4) role of the parent. The thematic presentation of the findings aims to tell a story that best reflects the process of choice that parents exercise (Figure 5). In this study, only 3 of the participants had children attending DEIS schools, all of whom were New Irish.



**Figure 5** Key themes and subthemes identified from reflexive thematic analysis and linked to research questions.

## 4.4 Theme 1 Factors influencing school choice

### Introduction

This theme addressed the main research question: How do parents in Midwest Ireland choose a Catholic post-primary school for their children? And sub-questions: What factors do parents consider when choosing a Catholic post-primary school? How do parents gather information about schools available to their children? And how do parents choose the school that best suits their child? (Figure 5). New Irish and Irish parents negotiated the school choice process differently. There were many factors which parents had to consider in negotiating a

school place for their child. Thirty-two of these factors were identified and the most significant of these will be discussed (Appendix S). The factors influencing parents' choices were expressed throughout the interviews and reflected a process of consultation, consideration and decision-making by parents which encompasses rational choices but also negotiation with themselves, their children and schools. Berends (2019) found that parents used rational choice most when examining factors and making their school choice.

Choosing a school can be difficult and, in this study, rural parents who sent their children to rural schools were the most comfortable in their decision-making and were appreciative of the fact that competition for schools in rural areas is less in the countryside. It could also be argued that these parents were highly educated, as were the majority of the participants, and had the benefit of social and cultural capital when making the choice of school which also could account for their comfort. However, all parents maintain that choosing a school is difficult as Clare attested *"It can be a minefield making decisions about your child's school but as the parent, I know them best and I try to do the best I can for them"*. Though a majority expressed relief, comfort and delight with their decisions, they all cited the stress caused by the preceding months of decision-making, as one respondent put it *"It's an extremely stressful time... an awful process for parents"* (Laura).

The first factor which this study found to influence school choice was sport. The importance of sport in the school choice decisions of Irish parents and its lack of significance in the lives of New Irish parents will be discussed under this theme. Next, the role of academics, how they are viewed by parents and their impact on school choice will be highlighted. Finally, the role of proximity and convenience as an influencing factor will be discussed.

### ***Sport and school choice***

*I suppose sport. M is big into sport. Yeah, she's very sporty and always active so that played a major part in where to send her. They have great facilities and teams.*

(Donal)

The literature on school choice advances the notion that academics and transport are two of the main factors influencing school choice (Bauch and Goldring, 1995; Burgess *et al.*, 2015; Ruijjs and Oosterbeek, 2019). However, an even more interesting factor found to influence parental choice in this study was that of sport. This finding, though surprising, is highly significant as it represents something new and current, which has not been addressed in any significant way by the literature or research on school choice heretofore in Catholic post-primary schools in Midwest Ireland. Twelve of the thirteen parents in this study, when discussing choice, referred to sport, to a greater or lesser degree. Interestingly, only Irish parents who sent their children to rural schools referred to a 'sporty school'. Irish parents, 9 of whom were mothers were far more vocal in their references to sport being an influential factor in their choice of school. Within the context of the study, this is understandable when the ratio of female to male was 10:3 with one Irish father involved.

Irish parents spoke more about sport, mostly citing their children's love of sport and their wish to choose a school that would combine both. The advantages of sport have been well documented (Lunn, Kelly and Fitzpatrick, 2013) and Paula for instance explained its psychosocial influence in her son's life: *Well, my boy, he absolutely lives for sport. And I thought that wherever there would be sports that could be his anchor* (Paula).

The study revealed that other parents like Donal, and Laura also saw sport as a means of social development for their children and where the children could mix with similarly minded "*I want him to be with... make friends that are into sports*" (Laura). This would concur with the literature. Sport was viewed as a means by which the child could flourish. For example, one mother commented "*My fellow is good at sports, so I hope they bring that out in him and*

*give him a good preparation for life*” (FGU). The region in which the study took place has a deep sporting culture and parents saw this as a stepping stone for their children with one parent commenting “*Some people will apply to a school if it has good sports facilities or if they feel their child will get on a county team*” (FGU). The data demonstrated therefore that sport offered a social advantage to children, social/ peer status if successful at sports and gave them a foundation for life. All these advantages influenced the parental choice of school.

However, the interviews also revealed that parents sought references from sports coaches in the hope of acting as leverage for getting a place for their children in a desirable ‘sporty’ school. Talullah explained her views:

*Well, you know, I’ve heard that if a parent wants to get a child, especially boys, I think into a school and he’s good at sports and the school has a good reputation at turning out county players that the parents would be asking trainers to write references for the kids. ... I’ve also heard that sometimes secondary schools will go to training sessions or matches (of primary school/ 6th class) to scout young fellas that are good players so they can have them on the school teams.*

(Talullah)

Laura also explains how she used her sporting connections: “*I got references from all his coaches*”. Though parents may think their child’s sporting ability or references from coaches may influence their chances of securing their school of choice there is no evidence of this in the data. At no point in this study did parents refer to the importance of sport from a physical health perspective, perhaps it was a given. However, this researcher suspects that social adulation of sports heroes and one’s child being part of that was an unspoken factor. Nevertheless, sport is not for everyone.

Contrastingly, only one Irish parent, Breda, did not subscribe to the notion of sport promoting her son, using its contacts to secure a place for him or considering it as a positive factor in her choice process. Breda does not like the single-sex model as her son is not sporty. She argued:

*He would have liked one of the other single-sex schools in the city but I just, didn't, I steered him away from that because I just didn't feel that it was the right choice for him or for our family. You know what I mean? Looking down the line? I just felt no, I didn't want to do that...didn't want to, like go for the single-sex school. And I actually like I said, I think you know, a Coed education does produce a more rounded individual, and I just didn't want him going into a single-sex boys' school. I just don't like that model myself. But look, it works for lots of other people. So d'ya know, I just don't think it's right. Like he wouldn't be a soccer, or a rugby person or anything like that. So, I just didn't feel it was the right fit for him.*

(Breda)

What was noticeably absent from the data were references to sport by New Irish parents. The only reference to sport by a New Irish parent was regarding the culture of the school and seeing the new sports hall. At no point was sport seen as a bonus or source of health or socialisation by the New Irish parents. Fatisha commented that her child might learn “*stuff on the sport ..... may get a new sport or new experience*” but she did not see it as an influential factor in her choice and neither did other New Irish parents.

### ***Academics***

Most parents prioritise academics in making a school choice (Bauch and Goldring, 1995; Alsaudi, 2016; Burgess *et al.*, 2015). This study supports that finding. Recent research indicates that Ireland, Korea and Brazil are most concerned with academics in school choice (OECD, 2023). The literature indicates that mothers are more concerned with academics when it comes to school choice (Brown, 2022). As ten of the thirteen parents who participated in this study were mothers, this could be the case but the fact that more women than men agreed to participate in the study is more reflective of their interest in their children's school life. Academic orientation and reputation were of particular importance to Irish parents whose children attended rural schools. Today, more than half of those whose highest level of education is a postgraduate degree or diploma are women (CSO, 2024).

Interestingly, in this study, New Irish parents did not emphasise academics per se. Arguably, these New Irish parents, yet to receive Irish citizenship, may have been concerned about other factors such as safety and religious tolerance, which will be discussed later. The quality and reputation of teachers are said to influence school choice (Bekele and Boru, 2024; Tarkhnishvili, Tarkhnishvili and Strielkowski, 2022). New Irish parents indicated they held the teaching profession in high esteem. This was noted in both the tone of respect with which teachers were spoken of and what they had to say about teachers “*all the teachers ... Really, really professional[s] That is important to me*” (Saaam). Irish and New Irish parents had slightly different opinions as to what was important in a school. New Irish parental expectations were centred around the idea that the school would provide what was needed but that their children must also “*work hard and be good in school*”(FGU).

New Irish parents did not comment on exam results either, though they did expect that their children would go to college and voiced that expectation more than any other grouping. They expected their children to study well, implying that effort on the part of the child would be expected. Amongst New Irish parents there appeared to be an understanding that once the child gained a place, did what was expected of them and behaved well, that success would follow with an effort from the child and to an extent, the parent, as explained by Zuka “*I will make sure he does his learning and if he has difficulty, I will look for help*”.

### *Motivation*

Irish mothers, like Talullah, Laura and Paula wanted their children to be challenged academically but much of the effort seemed to be expected from the schools rather than the children themselves. This may be explained by the fact that traditionally, the education of rural women in Ireland was highly valued as it was seen as a means of future security when the land was normally inherited by their brothers. The 3 fathers of this study seemed relaxed in their

expectations, Donal for instance stated, “*I’m not [proposing] you have to go to college*” and Zuka just wanted his son “*to relax in school and be happy all times*”.

The Irish mothers in the study demonstrated a different mindset about achieving good results. The notion of the school guiding the child was commented on exclusively by Irish parents, with the that the child would be encouraged and pointed in the right direction, but it was also the school’s duty to exert pressure rather than the children being proactive and self-motivated. Irish parents, like Laura, wanted their children’s potential to be nurtured ‘*to get what they can out of him but not to put too much pressure on him*’. ‘Challenging’ the child appeared to be an Irish phenomenon. The data from this study suggested that New Irish parents expected their children to challenge themselves. The words ‘challenge’ and ‘competitive’ that were used by many Irish parents suggest their ambitions and expectations. Such language, normally reserved for sporting situations, was invoked by parents to refer to academics. Such may have been the influence of sport in these parents’ lives even when discussing academic matters.

### *Cultural capital*

Research has also shown that wealthier and more educated families have stronger preferences for more academic schools (Hastings and Weinstein, 2008; Burgess *et al.*, 2015; Tan *et al.*, 2019). Arguably, the concept of cultural capital was of influence when it came to choosing ‘good’ academic schools. Bourdieu (1986) refers to cultural capital as the cultural competence of a person whereby the possessor can achieve greater access to the marketplace of education and thereby make more advantageous choices. Only one New Irish parent in this study, Fatisha, had a third-level qualification. Of the Irish participants, nine of the ten had a third-level qualification. The New Irish parents were not aware of the academic reputation of the schools when choosing whereas Irish parents demonstrated knowledge of school results in

such comments as “*that was one of the best schools*” (Lucy). Irish participants would appear to have greater knowledge of the marketplace and education would seem to matter to them. Though New Irish parents may not have had the same cultural capital they did receive help from principals of the primary schools that their children attended. Saaïm stated that he picked up the application form at the primary school, was given the “*choice of three schools*” by school management and told to put them down on the form and “*then the form was sent to the organisation*”. The father believed the form was returned to the organisation i.e. The Education Centre when in fact it should have and obviously was returned to the first chosen school on the form, with the help of the management of the primary school. This indicated that the father was not fully aware of how the application system worked.

### *Subject choice*

Subject choice is also an issue which guides choice. In this study several Irish parents were conscious of the lack of subject choice or the range of choice. A few parents believed that though a large school may have a range of subjects, demand for them may be strong and students may not get their choices. Irish parents were also more concerned with getting a place in the school first and felt they had room to compromise as they could use their personal resources to address any future deficits in their children’s education. Donal explains how he can do this:

*They don't do it (BT Young Scientist Competition) in Oakdoon and that's a big thing for me but because I volunteered there for the last 10 years she can come up as a volunteer for BT with me.*

(Donal)

Lucy explains how she can afford to compromise: “*We were disappointed that they didn't have Spanish for example, but then I could teach him that outside school anyway*”. Parents like Donal or Lucy with greater economic capital could ‘plug’ the curricular deficits of the schools

as is practised elsewhere (Ball, 2021; Rönnberg *et al.*, 2022), something that might be more difficult for poorer parents.

### *Proximity*

Another consideration regarding choice for parents is proximity, though Kelleher, Smyth and McEldowney (2016) do suggest that if this is parents' only consideration, then it can constrain their choices. In this study, however, though proximity to the school was an important factor, it did not appear to constrain parental choice and there were also other factors operating. Research on geographic preferences indicates that parents prefer schools that are convenient (Hamilton and Guin, 2005; Hastings, Kane and Stager; 2006; Bell, 2009). Choosing a school within one's community is also a consideration.

### *Community*

The rural school, for instance, is a place of support and connectedness for a community (Wake, 2018). Parents considered maintaining community bonds and were keen to foster a sense of belonging, if possible. Keeping her child in their area rather than taking her to a school a distance away was important for Emma:

*So, as I said, me, as a parent, would have had a choice to bring her to another school where I actually work, but I felt it wouldn't be the best decision for her leaving friends and community. As well, it would have a knock-on effect in a few years' time more so than now.... that she would lose friendships, contacts.....*

(Emma)

Community is important in rural Ireland and preserving community is allied to school choices and transport is a means of preserving that. Attending the local school was important to some as was emphasised by the rural focus group. They seemed to be sympathetic to what they perceived as difficulties for those sending their children to urban schools "*I hear it can be tough*

*getting a place in the city schools though and sometimes it's who you know or if you are good at sport"* (FGR). Some parents mention having a 'connection' with the school. Such connections strengthened their relationship with a school. It may have been that they attended there themselves. Parents who sent their children to rural schools cited one or more schools 'being available' to them and having a connection to them was the deciding factor for them.

### ***Transport links***

The literature suggests that transport has a bearing on choice (Denice and Gross, 2016; Corcoran, 2018; Catt, 2020). In this study participants who referenced the proximity of the school and especially convenience for pick up and drop off, may suggest that this is a task that concerns Irish parents. Equally, transport links in rural Ireland may not be as convenient as in the city and this would have to be a consideration. Transport was referenced by all participants. However, the limitations of transport seemed to be a particular concern for one Irish father. Donal, whose child attends a rural school, expressed his difficulties regarding the bus service in his area and how he felt constrained by Bus Eireann, the National bus carrier, (on behalf of the Department of Education) deciding where his child could be transported to and in effect his choice of school:

*Like the bus actually dictates an awful lot because even though I went to Oakdoon (i.e. to school in Oakdoon) and they're (the bus company) trying to tell me that where I'm living now is outside the catchment and you need to get a concessionary ticket for the bus.....The main reason why we picked Oakdoon over Manilva was, it's a new school. Yeah, it's a brand-new school with a new gym, new facilities. It has everything brand new which had a big impact in choosing. Marbella would also have been an option, but you'd have to drive an awful lot further to get the bus. So, you'd have a drive to the bus stop then catch the bus and then the same thing at the other end of the day, of course, coming home in the evening. You'd do it if you had to, I s'pose but you wouldn't if you could avoid it.*

(Donal)

The urban focus group summarised the importance of proximity as “*people choose schools because they are handy to get to or are near to their workplace*” stressing that “*at the end of the day it came down to I suppose our ease of transport*”. Taking a bus was not problematic for Irish parents. In general, it has been found that parents are willing to travel further if they regard such a measure as beneficial (McShane, 2024).

However, the same could not be said for New Irish parents. Saaim chose the school so that his sons could walk there. The New Irish focus group confirmed that “*getting a bus can be difficult and also difficult if [he is the] only student from school on the bus*”. There is the suggestion that being the only student from his school on the bus somehow made him vulnerable. Zuka, a recently arrived immigrant, also expressed problems with the lack of proximity and having to get a bus. As this man was dependent on the state for accommodation, on arrival in Ireland, he was housed in an area of an undersubscribed school and then later in an area of an oversubscribed school. Living near an oversubscribed school resulted in his older son not getting a place and he had to drive him to a bus stop to get him to school, come home and bring the child of this study and two other children to two different schools. This was a considerable investment of time but also an economic burden for parents who are suffering problems of displacement and adaptation etc. The data also suggests that New Irish parents were concerned about their children travelling on a bus especially if they were the only non-Irish student or travelling home on dark evenings by bus.

In summary, the factors which affected parental choice of school, in this study, in the main were sport, academics and proximity. Sport was a surprising finding in this study as it was regarded as very important for socialisation, the status it may bring a child, and the security it gave parents in providing “*good preparation for life*”. Sport was not an influence in New Irish parents’ choice and neither had they have the social or cultural capital to try to improve their chances of receiving their chosen school. Parents were concerned with their children doing

well enough in school to progress to university. New Irish parents expected their children to be intrinsically motivated and trusted their teachers' professionalism. In addition, New Irish parents did not refer to the academic standards of schools. Any deficits in extracurricular activities or subjects were something that Irish parents could address if they needed as they had the cultural capital. The logistics of getting a child to school are important for parents, especially in relation to work constraints and drop-offs and collections. Limitations of school transport can also present as a factor influencing parental choice. New Irish parents living very far from schools experienced difficulties dropping and collecting their children, however, it concerned all parents to a greater or lesser degree.

#### **4.5 Theme 2 Expectations of a Catholic school**

In choosing a post-primary school, the data demonstrates that parents had a variety of expectations of a Catholic school. Firstly, under this theme, the religious expectations of a Catholic school for these parents will be addressed, prior experience of Catholic school and finally reticence at expression of Catholicity.

##### ***Religious Expectations***

The faith composition of parents in the study was Roman Catholic (n=10) and Islam (n=3). An unexpected finding of this study was that very few parents considered faith a factor in school choice even though they did choose a Catholic school for their child. This was summed up by the rural focus group:

*“The Catholic side of it is incidental really, .... we're more concerned about the sporting carry-on ...the academic, maybe, the social, .... other options that are available”.*

(FGR)

For most of the Irish parents, who all professed to be Catholic, sport was more important than the religious denomination of the school or a Catholic education. Diminished Catholic practice is prevalent in modern Ireland, and this is to be expected due to the significant “political, social, economic, cultural, demographic and educational change” that has taken place in Ireland in recent years, but the primacy given to sport above the religion of the school was surprising (Irwin, 2018, p. 4).

### ***Tolerance***

The data demonstrates that parents expected religious tolerance. Catholic schools in this study showed a high level of tolerance and inclusion, for instance, accommodating Muslim children to leave school early to attend the mosque or Muslim celebrations. Muslim parents held Catholic schools in high regard: “*I know Catholic school give good education*” (FGNI). Additionally, the New Irish parents suggested that: “*everyone needs a faith, no matter what faith it is*” (FGNI).

### ***A Catholic school was not a prerequisite***

*..... parents don't mind what religion the school is if it educated their child ...kept them safe .... they were happy there and that it was easy to get there.*

(FGR)

Many parents cited that their preference for a Catholic school was not a prerequisite. The findings would concur with the literature that not all active Catholics choose a Catholic school for their children, for religious reasons (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). Some parents do not think of their childrens' education in terms of religion or non-religion (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). The findings of this research would support this opinion. The data of this study revealed that the majority of parents believed Catholic schools have little advantage over other

types of schools as they felt other types of schools shared similar value systems and that they got similar academic results. This was summarised by the FGU: “*Everyone has to do the same exam at the end of the day. And so, everyone is studying the same academics*”. Nevertheless, Catholic schools were regarded as offering “*dignity*” to students who can often be treated like “*herds*” in larger schools (FGU). The only other advantage that Irish parents thought a Catholic school offered, other than its small size, was that it prepared children for understanding the rituals of Catholic ceremonies should they ever have to attend one. One parent summarised the predominant view of many Irish parents:

*At least he will know what is going on when they do any Catholic ceremonies. I suppose it would be nice if he could hold on to the religion he got in primary school. It won't do him any harm anyway.*

(FGU).

Though many parents did not want their children to be “strong” Catholics they did express a wish that they would have “*something to hold on to like Catholicism*” (Paula).

Nevertheless, there were several Irish Catholic parents, though very much in the minority, who genuinely wished for their children to receive a Catholic education. These parents were willing to compensate by educating them in the Catholic faith at home if they had not got a place in a Catholic school. Fortunately for them, the need for this did not arise. In the case of one parent it:

*Was a Jesuit school that was important, the spirituality that the school would...have..... that's most important for young people.*

(Breda).

This was echoed by Ursula for whom “*...the biggest decider was religion*” and who also suggested that schools should be more proactive in promoting Catholicism and expressing how they help their students. New Irish parents were also appreciative of their children attending a faith school but also getting an education was important. This is best summarised by the FGNI:

*I have no problem[with] my boy be[ing] in that school. Praying is important, but for me, at a base level, it is a school that provides an education that will help him to go to college.*

(FGNI)

### ***The types of Catholic schools on offer***

In this study, parents articulated certain expectations of the type of school that they had wanted for their child whether that was ‘co-ed’, ‘new’ or ‘single-sex’. Irish parents were those who spoke most about each category. Single-sex education was a consideration for New Irish parents like Fatisha who felt somewhat restricted by the number of single-sex schools on offer. Zuka however, wanted the local mixed ETB school above all others but ironically also stated that he wanted a school that was “*not mixed*”. This may suggest that the proximity of the school and being with friends superseded the single-sex school and its religious governance.

Mixed schools were popular with Irish parents, as it meant that once they had chosen a school for their first child the next child of any gender could also attend. More interestingly, however, was that mixed schools were favoured more by Irish mothers as their children could mix naturally and develop platonic relationships as Breda explained:

*You know, if they're in a single-sex school with one gender, the other gender could suddenly, you know, become kind of like foreign to them. .... Like I went to a single-sex school myself for secondary school and I don't think it was a great idea, do you know what I mean? I don't think it's. I think co-ed schools are better for boys and girls, you know, so that's..., I was very, very conscious of that and I wanted them both to be in a school together.*

(Breda)

Emma’s child was an only child, and she wanted her to attend a mixed school for similar reasons:

*I think a mixed school is good for her. I went to an all-girls school myself and I think it's better to have a mixed school. Just to have the experience of.... mixin' and have friends, male friends, that they're not boyfriends but they're their friends. A girls' school is, you know...., different.*

(Emma)

The rural focus group contended that the option of single-sex schools should exist for parents who want them. Interestingly, a recent report confirms that both teachers and parents still see merits in single-sex schools even if students do not (Mc Coy *et al.*, 2024). Higher Education Minister O'Donovan, however, will side with the children in his bid to rid the country of single-sex schools within the next fifteen years (Loughlin, 2024). The data also demonstrated that Irish parents who chose rural schools would like the option of non-denominational schools in rural areas but even if the option were there, they still thought they would choose a Catholic school.

### ***Ethos***

Though parents did not refer to the term 'ethos' particularly and many stated that a Catholic school was not a deciding factor for them, they did refer to the 'atmosphere' and the 'feel' of the school which were indicative of a Catholic ethos. The parents who commented on the atmosphere of the school were Irish parents who valued the ethos of caring in the school and knew that "*the culture there would fit ...that he'd be happy there*" (Laura). Parents like Talullah and Cathy expected the school to encourage good manners and to provide a pleasant environment supported by a good pastoral care system. Many of the values of Catholicism such as being '*tolerant and respectful*' (FGU) '*having good morals*' (Zuka) '*dealing (efficiently) with bullying*' (Saim) and inclusivity were recognised and acknowledged as present by New Irish parents. The Catholic ethos of encouraging mutual kindness was appreciated and was expected by several. Several parents commented that getting a feel for the current school was an important factor in the choice of the school which they regarded as being a very "*happy*" one.

### ***Happy with the school choice***

Evidence of what expectations parents had of their chosen Catholic school was to be found in how they felt about the Catholic school their child attended. The 4 parents with children attending a rural school, were particularly swayed by the novelty factor in schools such as a “*new school*”, “*new buildings*”, “*new principal*” and “*modern, state-of-the-art facilities*”. For example, Talullah stated that the “*new secondary school facilities were excellent so again that all made it a much easier choice*” and Emma’s daughter’s school was ‘*a span-new building* and was “*very attractive*”. Irish parents had many good things to say about their current school, be it dealing quickly with bullying (Lucy), offering extra subjects (Donal), teaching study skills (Lucy) or getting good results, they were happy that their children were there. Irish participants commented slightly more with such phrases as “*transitioned well*” (Laura), “*delighted with herself*” (Donal), “*very settled*” (Breda), “*loves it*” (Paula) and “*has been a good year for him*” (Laura). Only one parent, Ursula, expressed dissatisfaction but her circumstances were complex, and she had already had difficulties with other schools. While Zuka and Fatisha, New Irish parents, were happy with their school they still hankered for the school their children did not get a place in and vowed to reapply the following year. Nonetheless, parents overall were happy with their choices. The fact that it was a Catholic school was not a priority for them.

### ***Parents’ prior experiences of a Catholic school***

Initially, Parents were asked (Q.9 Demographics Questionnaire Appendix H) if their attendance at a Catholic post-primary school influenced their choice of school for their child. Ten of the thirteen participants had themselves attended a Catholic post-primary school. Only three parents responded that it had. These parents wanted their children to experience a Catholic education like their own, as they believed it had positively influenced them and

served them well. They felt that the ethos and values of a Catholic school would benefit their children. Cathy, for example, “appreciate[s] that it's a Catholic School.... they have some nice ways that we shouldn't lose sight of, and having a faith doesn't do you any harm... it would be great if she emerged from the school with a Catholic faith. " Four parents noted that it may have had a positive influence but did not elaborate. The question did not apply to three parents, as they had not attended Catholic schools, and three parents said it had not influenced them. Some Irish parents felt that a Catholic ethos ‘*should not be imposed*’ (Lucy). This was echoed by many Irish including, a non-practising Catholic of the rural focus group, who liked the ethos in his daughter’s Catholic school “*That’s not shoving religion or Catholicism down their throats by any means and stuff like that*”. Such a comment along with other references, suggested an undercurrent of unhappiness of some of the former methods used in Catholic schools and this had a bearing on this cohort’s choice of school. When one rural focus group respondent made the point that Catholic schools have a great reputation worldwide and that many had benefited from educational opportunities offered by the likes of the Christian Brothers it was met with a sneer and laugh from another who remarked “*You’d wonder, you know when you look back, you’d wonder did they know how to run schools, you know?*” Equally another mother in the urban focus group grimaced and said nothing for a while when asked what they thought were the attractive characteristics of a Catholic school for parents. Her next comment was a reply that “*the religious side of it didn’t have a big bearing on our decision*”. Most Irish parents believed that the ethos of a Catholic school would be like other schools. One parent did however point out to the others that “*Catholic schools would have their slant on those values*”. It was obvious that parents had not considered this opinion. Ursula, who had returned from the UK had a different perspective on the Catholic ethos:

*I think there's less respect for religion now in schools compared with what it used to be. It would be nice if the school supported the Catholic faith more.*

(Ursula)

She went on to say that teaching Catholic doctrine was very prevalent in her U.K. school with very little emphasis on gender. Together with Irish mothers' opinions of mixed and single-sex schools already discussed, perhaps Irish participants' attendance at Catholic post-primary schools did influence their choice more than they thought.

### ***Reticence of expression of Catholicity***

Parents in the focus groups were more reluctant to express their preference for Catholic schools to others and this is supported by the literature (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). When interviewed individually, parents were not afraid to say they were not Catholic that the denomination of school affected their choice or that they chose the school for reasons other than it being Catholic. After all, 3 said they were positively influenced by their own experience of a Catholic school and 4 said 'maybe' but in the focus groups, participants were reluctant to publicly speak up about being Catholic, to bear witness to their Catholicism as it were. Such a reticence has not only been found among some individuals but schools themselves can also differ in the degree to which they manifest the Catholic nature of the school (Fahie, 2017). In this study also, management of post-primary schools appeared to be reticent in referring to the Catholicity of their schools. Having examined online some of the mission statements of the schools mentioned by parents, their Catholic ethos was not highly visible. Terms like 'holistic' and 'Christian' and references to founders may exist but "X is a Catholic school" does not occur as often. Some parents stated that there was no reference to the schools being Catholic when they visited them. The urban focus group reveals some evidence of this which is quite telling:

*For us, we didn't really consider the Catholic aspect of it, to be honest. I don't think they overdo the Catholic angle too much. I don't know if anything was said about it being a Catholic school on the Zoom open night. That said, I don't know if religion was mentioned at any of the ones I heard.*

(FGU)

It is not the brief of this thesis to examine the reasons for such reticence if principals feel they cannot or do not want to speak freely of their patronage. Certainly, this may necessitate further research. In this study, parents like Lucy and others did not desire the practice of Catholicism in schools. It would appear that Catholics are somehow intimidated in professing their faith, unlike Muslims who are not. One comment from the rural focus group stated:

*I suppose there might be people who send kids to a Catholic school to get a Catholic education, whatever that is. I'm not sure, but I don't know anyone like that or at least anyone that would admit to it.*

(FGR)

Her comment about not knowing anyone that would “*admit*” to sending their child to a Catholic school for a Catholic education suggested that there is some shame or reticence in it. Such a comment would make an interesting study but again it is not within the scope of this one.

In conclusion, the data referring to this theme demonstrated that parents had certain expectations, of a Catholic school. One of those, and perhaps the most surprising finding, was that though parents had chosen a Catholic school and most professed to be Catholic, they did not necessarily want a Catholic education for their children. Some parents believed that a Catholic ethos should not be imposed on their children. They appreciated some of the values and ethos of the Catholic school without acknowledging them as Catholic per se. What parents did expect from the school was an education for their child. Most parents were happy with their school choice though some thought they were limited in that choice. Nevertheless, parents would like to be offered multi-denominational schools in rural areas, but they also say that if

offered, they may not take up the offer. Parents' prior experience of attendance at single-sex schools did influence parents, especially mothers, to send their children to mixed schools. Reticence to express Catholicity was found among participants themselves but also in the schools. The next section will deal with how parents access these schools.

#### **4.6 Theme 3 Accessibility -Gathering Information and the application process**

This study would indicate that school choice is to some degree determined by parental accessibility to information and resources (Campos, 2024; OECD, 2024; Vega-Bayo and Mariel, 2018; Burgess *et al.*, 2015). Accessibility includes the sub-themes of gathering methods, and choice constraints/rules. Under this theme, the informal and formal gathering methods which parents employ when choosing a school will be reported. The difficulties that are incurred, length of time and reliability of information related to the gathering of information will be elucidated as will the process of admission and Central Application System (CAS). The opinions of the CAS form will also be revealed. The notion of ‘apparent’ choice will be discussed and the effect of lack of social and cultural capital will be considered. Right of entry and unacceptable schools will finally be considered.

##### ***Gathering Methods***

This sub-theme discusses when, how, and what information parents gather, to make their school choice. The data set of this study revealed that parents ‘in the know’ began their search earlier and with more knowledge of how to get that information. There was a dearth of social and cultural capital among certain parents which consequently affected the outcome of

their choices. The gathering of information regarding schools happened formally and informally.

### *Informal and Formal information gathering*

The data suggests that parents adopted formal and informal means of gathering information about schools to help them make informed choices. Parents regarded these means as a rational method of being an effective parent. Ball and Vincent (1998) refer to informal means of gathering information through social means as 'grapevine'. This study revealed that consulting others is the most popular means of gathering information informally. The reputation of the school was a means of informally informing parents about schools amongst the whole cohort and was regarded as considerably more important amongst parents with children attending rural schools. Mothers referred to the sporting reputations of schools whilst fathers did not. For parents who sent their children to rural schools, sourcing information from primary school teachers and post-primary teachers who were friends or teaching in the prospective post-primary school was a favoured method of information gathering and this grouping was also more certain of where their children would attend school. Donal explains that he:

*Would have known some of the teachers in the school that would have went to school with me and now they're teaching in the school as well which also helps if you know a few teachers, they can tell you a lot*

(Donal)

Ursula refers to another type of information acquisition:

*A lot of my cousins are teachers. Or inspectors. You know, information was always given to us. .... There were plenty good, I suppose, important kinds of sources of information, there was knowledge as well, to know stuff that would have been going on.*

(Ursula)

Insider knowledge can have distinct advantages for those who can access it (Byrne and Smyth, 2011; Reay, Crozier and James, 2011). On another note, Irish parents were aware of league tables but suggested that they did not influence them. New Irish parents did not indicate their awareness of league tables. The only apparent informal method of gathering information by New Irish parents was from friends' children. For the Irish, friends' children were also a source, but more significantly sporting situations were cited by these parents as venues where a lot of information was gathered. The focus groups referenced 'word of mouth' as an important source of information for school choice: "*a lot of it is word of mouth*" as well as "*gut feeling on the Open night*" (FGR).

Many parents accessed information on Open nights conducted through Zoom, owing to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Two of the three fathers stated they contacted the school to gather information whereas several mothers referred to a post-primary school visiting the primary school of their child, to give information on its school. Pamphlets and information booklets were not significant sources of information for parents. However, the data suggests that the majority of parents access information at Open nights, socially, on social media and websites/online. League tables published in newspapers were consulted by a few but not New Irish parents. The information included what facilities the schools had, the subjects taught, subject choice, extra-curricular activities, the size of the school and special needs facilities. Parents felt the patronage of the school was underemphasised.

#### *Accessing information and its difficulties*

A revealing finding of this study was the length of time many parents gave to the school choice process and when they began their quest. Parents who began to research schools up to eight years previously possessed the cultural capital to know that getting their child into a

much-coveted school demanded time. Parents gathered information at sports events and were influenced by sporting heroes who had attended a particular school as Paula revealed:

*I think it had to do with X (Famous sports person) Yeah. Because my little fella loves sports. And at a very young age, he took to sports so yeah, he loves X and at some point, very, very early on, he said, "I want to go to I want to go to that school where X went" and it started from there, and that he never wavered throughout the years.*

(Paula)

On the other hand, the findings revealed that New Irish parents began their search for post-primary school much later than Irish parents. Zuka said:

*In early 2022 we were thinking we would like him to go to Newgrange College because it is near home and am...he [could] go by himself.*

(Zuka)

This suggests that he began thinking of post-primary school in January 2022, nine months before the child began post-primary school. Keeping in mind that the closing date for application for CAS was January 10th, 2022, and offers were made on January 25th, with dates for acceptance or refusal of a place by February 2nd, 2022. This finding not only revealed that New Irish parents were less aware of the work that begins many years before the child started school but that they also had difficulty in accessing information and found it daunting as Saaim reveals:

*Six months or one year before you have to look for it. You know, I mean you have to look for a form, you have to look for information, or you have to go, or you have to find a site how to go to google it online. You know you have to know how to do it, you know? It's not easy.*

(Saaim)

The problem of accessing information was also compounded by the lack of social contacts as was highlighted by the New Irish focus group. In addition, 2 of the 3 New Irish participants were relying on mobile phones for access to information as the researcher learned during data collection. This could be perceived as limiting the ease with which they could search for information. Middle-class families continuously emerge with the ‘greater’ insider knowledge and therefore their choices are more informed (Byrne and Smyth, 2011, p59) and they also find it easier to address the complexity of application systems (Lynch, 2018). The plight of sourcing information was probably again best expressed by Saaim who highlighted the lack of social capital: “*We do not have many people to ask about schools*”. The New Irish focus group suggested that it was easier for Irish people to choose a school as they had that insider knowledge “*If you are Irish, you know what a good school is and where to go. I don’t know. I worry [that I will] decide wrong school.*”

Generally, parents regarded the information they received about schools, from the schools, as reliable and this was voiced by both Irish and New Irish parents. However, one mother suggested that sometimes schools promised more than they delivered. Social and cultural capital can affect the choices that are made (Bourdieu, 1986) and reliability and trust in that information is important.

### *Rationalising the information*

When parents have spent time sourcing their information they have to rationalise their choices. This section highlights how parents viewed the choices available to them. The concept of ‘apparent choice’ was voiced in the main by New Irish parents but not solely. ‘Apparent choice’ referred to the idea of there appearing to be many school choices on offer but that if you only want single-sex schools, your choices were restricted. This issue has already been

alluded to. Fatisha would appear to have spoken not just for herself when she said that “*there’s no choice for us*”. Compounding the feeling of having little choice, New Irish parents also felt that they had neither the time nor financial resources to appeal their assigned schools and feared that they could miss out on a school place altogether if they did not accept their assigned school as expressed by Zuka. ‘Apparent choice’ was not only referenced by New Irish parents but also Irish. Laura explains the predicament:

*Having choices that you can't really avail of is the same as having no options. Our nearest school was not our choice. When you think about it, you can't freely choose your child's school. It's a lottery to get the one you want so I don't know if you are doing right by your child as a parent in sending him to a school that doesn't answer his needs.*

(Laura)

Irish parents were sympathetic to the situation of ranked applications and though Irish parents whose children attend urban schools were arguably more affected by the CAS system of application (as all the urban schools but not all the rural ones are listed on the CAS application), no Irish parents with a child in an urban school, commented on this anomaly of choice or apparent choice. The way the different parent groups dealt with the ‘wrong’ assignment of school was an interesting observation and again reveals another aspect of parental school choice and cultural differences that lie therein. New Irish parents decided that they would reapply the following year to get the school they wanted for their child whereas Irish parents may not have been fully happy with the CAS arrangement, but they were willing to let things be.

### ***Application and admission criteria***

In this study, parents began consideration of the application process at different times. To understand the process of choice amongst parents, it is important to discuss how they

navigated the application process and what that experience was like for them. The process of application differed from parent to parent. In Limerick city, parents had to fill out the ranked CAS application form. In other cases, parents who lived on the borders of Limerick and Clare took advantage of some of the schools which are on the periphery of the counties of Limerick, Clare and Tipperary and therefore do not use central applications. Today, the CAS system is still not functioning as parents would like (RTE, 2023). This study has six parents who applied directly to schools, seven parents who availed of CAS and two parents who used both methods to apply to schools.

### *Oversubscribed schools*

In this study it was found that parents of 8 children attended oversubscribed schools, 1 attended an undersubscribed school and the subscription status of 4 schools was unknown. Of the 13 schools chosen by parents, 10 were non-DEIS schools. Only 1 Irish parent had a child attending a DEIS school while the children of all the New Irish (3) attended a DEIS school. (See Appendix U)

### *Timing*

Those with children attending rural schools had more to comment on the timing than parents with children in urban schools, perhaps because parents with children attending urban schools were tied to a fixed date of application with CAS. Parents applying to individual schools in rural areas were more relaxed about the process and considered the application slightly later. Zuka, for example, did not apply until early 2022, whereas Irish parents with children attending urban schools started when their children were in 4th or 5th class. New Irish may not have been as 'au fait' with how difficult the process of getting first choice was, consequently leaving their application to later. Parents in rural areas of Clare began in late 2021

and applied to rural schools individually. Some Irish parents like Talullah in Clare started the process in 5th class while Breda and Lucy, both living in rural areas bordering on the city boundary, considered the application in 5th class as they were going to apply to individual Clare schools and apply through CAS for the Limerick school they wanted and got. The mothers in the study, even despite their majority appeared to start thinking about the process of application earlier than the fathers, with fathers thinking about it when it came closer to application. The data also revealed that parents with a higher level of education started the process earlier which would concur with the literature. There is no evidence to indicate that starting the process of choice later made any difference to the outcome. However, beginning research earlier may have advantaged parents who saw that they could apply to Clare and Limerick schools which had different dates for allocating schools, thus giving them time to strategise.

#### *Central Application System (CAS) - Filling the form*

Filling the actual form was a stressful exercise for parents but particularly so for New Irish parents like Zuka who entered the choice process feeling that they would not get the choice they wanted. Two out of the three New Irish parents felt forced to take their designated school and felt if they did not accept or contested the place, they could be left without a school. This was not a feeling expressed by Irish parents. New Irish parents entered the application system believing that Irish children got their choices, but New Irish did not. Equally New Irish parents felt ill-equipped to fill out the form as it was their first school application form. It should be noted that the CAS form was in English which was not the first language of New Irish parents in this study. Irish parents articulated the stress that filling out the form generated, though the enormity of the decision was felt by both groups. Such terms as “*traumatic*”, “*daunting*” and “*wasteful exercise*” were used to describe the exercise.

*An advantage for some, a disadvantage for others*

The CAS process can be complicated. Living on the border of Clare and Limerick meant being able to take advantage of two school choice systems. Clare schools offered places before Limerick, so a parent, if successful, could retain their Clare place until/if offered their first choice in Limerick. The net effect was that a parent could have prevented a genuine Clare applicant from knowing if they had a place in Clare until the Limerick choices were later released. A vignette from Breda, though long, encapsulates the difficulties that parents had with CAS:

*I think because like Limerick has a certain system and where we live in Clare there is a completely different system you have to apply to each different school. So, it can actually be very confusing for parents.... we did apply to both of those schools because obviously we had no idea whether he would get the school in Limerick.....*

*He got my first choice in Limerick, but he did eventually get a place in his first-choice school in Shannon.....we did go through the process, and we did try to get that school and we kind of had it as a backup in case we didn't get Limerick. ....technically I could have had the two schools in Shannon and plus the other school in Limerick City at one point. That's the other thing that like Limerick, like, you know, the places, they all come out kind of at the end of January but then the other schools are offering places before that, so people are holding places waiting for the Limerick or the Ennis schools.*

(Breda)

Irish parents spoke a lot about the CAS system though slightly less than 50% did not avail of it. They sympathised with those having to apply to a lottery system that may not deliver. They regarded their situation as easier. Irish parents partaking in CAS were stressed trying to formulate their choices and felt that if they did not get a school from their first three choices, then CAS was a pointless exercise. However, some Irish parents were in a unique position of living within commuting distance of an urban centre and found a way to expand their choices. In the case of Limerick, parents, like Paula, who chose an urban school as her first choice felt

that if her child failed to secure their preferred place in the city through the CAS form, she would be allocated another school. If she did not want that school, she could always apply to a rural school (even if it too was on the CAS form) later as that school would probably not be oversubscribed. In Paula's case the school she had in mind: "*I went there myself, so maybe that might have helped a little bit*". Such a luxury was not as much an option for New Irish parents or those with limited means, and as Fatisha explained:

*Only (the) first 2 or 3 matter I think and as I said he only has a choice of 5 really. How are you expected to put down 11 when you know your child and your family, and you only want him to go to one of 5?*

(Fatisha)

Ignorance of the application system and feeling a sense of disadvantage could have plagued parents and in turn, have affected their choices. Though not verbalised in Bourdieusian terms, New Irish parents sensed their lack of social and cultural capital which to the researcher suggested frustration on the part of the New Irish parents. Needing the know-how to navigate the school choice system was only expressed by New Irish parents because as evidenced by Paula and Breda there were other possibilities for them. A significant finding of this research was the difficult and somewhat feared plight of the New Irish parents when choosing a school.

*"So there's no choices for us"*

New Irish parents, applying through CAS, felt restricted not only while filling out the form but even before it. They sensed that there were certain schools where they would not have a chance of getting a place "*We heard that he might not get a place in that school*" (Saa'im) so they dismissed some schools. Consequently, they listed the school that they felt certain of a place as No.1, schools where New Irish parents had got places previously. Bourdieu refers to

this phenomenon as ‘self-exclusion’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p141). In their eyes, filling out a form in which there were restrictions for them, (i.e. where they do not want a co-educational or opposite-sex school) was limiting their choices by half. Fatisha noted: *“So there’s no choice for us”*. She further adds *“But you know Irish boys get the places they want but you know we do not. We get choice 7 or 8.”* The New Irish focus group confirmed this sentiment with: *“It is unfair because you never get No.1”* (FGNI). A possible outcome of this belief by New Irish parents was that schools could become ‘ghettoised’ as the literature has indicated (Taylor, 2009). New Irish parents as opposed to other groups had a lot to say about CAS. The data would indicate that for them, the process is difficult, worrying, imbalanced and unjust. Zuka elaborates on his son’s feelings: *“he was not happy, he very sad, not happy because (name of child) he need the (name of school) because all his Irish friends are living in this area and they get (name of school) but my son did not”*.

In some cases, New Irish parents like Saaim were coached by their primary school management on how to apply using CAS: *“My son’s school help and tell us what school will take my son”* (FGU). This researcher suspects that the primary school management may have known what schools would accept students and what schools would be exclusionary. Such help may unwittingly cause further segregation (Reh and Landolt, 2024).

The findings of this study suggest that accessing schools was more stressful for parents choosing CAS schools. Parents, like Talullah, were surer of the success of their choices and were therefore not as burdened:

*I didn’t really have to mull over it as the school is a fine school,  
it’s very near to us and all his friends were going there.*

(Talullah)

Irish parents with, arguably, more experience of the system than New Irish parents, felt stressed if it was their first child and were dismissive of what the system would offer after their 3rd or 4th choice. The reference to ‘no-go areas’ reflected the definite nature of what parents wanted for their children but also what they did not want. They cited distance, lack of friends or lack of knowledge of other schools as reasons for lower choices but this researcher detected by the demeanour of some participants that perhaps socially, they aspired to ‘better’ schools such as ‘The High School’, a much-coveted city school. This is best evidenced by Laura’s comment “*you don’t want those (her emphasis) schools*” or Paula’s statement that “*we could have ended up anywhere (her emphasis)*”. These parents knew enough about the other schools that they did not want them but also did not want to know anything else about them as they had already formed their opinions. Though Irish parents stated they did not want their children going to ‘other’ schools because they did not know a lot about them, was probably not quite accurate. Choice can be limited if preconceptions are not explored.

#### *Sibling rule*

With choices come rules and restrictions on admissions. The sibling rule, (whereby a child can gain entry to a school because there is a sibling already there) and right of entry (criteria established by the school that might confer rights to certain children e.g. children of the parish or staff members’ children, or a child from the catchment area of the school) was a source of comment only for female, Irish parents in this study. Some parents could profit from the sibling/right of entry rule but it could also militate against a parent as Breda explains:

*You're not just making it (the choice) for the young person's going. You're making it for the siblings as well. So you know, you have to think and in Ireland now because of the you know, the sibling rule, you are kind of considering that then because, you know, if you don't send your child to a particular school, and then you tried to send the second child they'll use the sibling rule against you and say 'oh, well no, you didn't send your first child here so you're not coming in.*

(Breda)

Different children needing a different school type may not be entertained by schools if the family chose a different school for an older member of the family and so a child might be forced to attend their older sibling's school. The choice is eroded as there is the expectation that 'one size fits all one family' which is not always correct. Additionally, a situation can occur where all places are taken due to the right of entry/ sibling rule which can be inconvenient for other parents trying to gain a place for their child. This study found that Irish mothers were more cognisant of the right of entry clause and likely to invoke it if a first choice was not achieved. The guarantee of the right of entry to a local school perhaps allows them to gamble on the 'lottery' of the CAS process. Those who expressed sympathy for the uncertainty experienced by CAS-applying parents were those (all Irish) who had applied through CAS and directly to a school. In the case of New Irish parents, an anticipation of rejection had stymied their choice process. The New Irish focus group confirmed its feelings with "*...I heard other school not accept him so I go to (names the school) and they accept him*" (Saa'im). New Irish parents did not comment on the back-up of the right of entry, perhaps they were unaware of it and tended to apply to undersubscribed schools. A solution to the stress suggested by the urban focus group was the idea of no choice of school, that it might be better if one were assigned a place rather than going through the stressful application process.

In summary, the theme of accessibility outlined the formal and informal methods of gathering information to access a school of choice. The difficulties of accessing information were outlined as well as the time given by parents to the whole process. Those who had insider knowledge had greater cultural capital available to them. The data showed how the CAS form was viewed and used by parents and its advantages for some parents over others. Some parents felt restricted by their limited choices, while others with more cultural capital found ways around the choice limitations of CAS, by for example applying to CAS and Ex-CAS schools or by applying to schools beyond Co. Limerick. The notion of apparent choice was voiced by

New Irish parents who felt particularly disadvantaged. What the data demonstrated was the burden exerted on parents in trying to negotiate access to post-primary school. New Irish parents appeared far more fatalistic regarding their children's future were they not to get the 'right' school. Such a burden is reflected in Saaim's words:

*They[will] be just wasting their time. .... in the future, .... they don't have anything , you know and then they will be a bin man. Yeah, so [the] school choice is very important.*

(Saaim)

The next section will present the findings on how parents perceived their role in the school choice exercise.

#### **4.7 Theme 4 The role of the parent**

*We did not pick the school, we got it!*

(Zuka)

Parental choice encompasses taking responsibility. The sub-themes which support this theme are responsibilities and experience, knowing the child, and safety and community which will be discussed hereunder. In fulfilling their parental role parents must consider their child's future. Maintaining and having friends increases the child's links to the local community. The influence of friends on school choice has already been highlighted in the literature (Zwier *et al.*, 2023). Some parents like Emma or Donal make the rational choice to keep their child in the community in a rural/ Ex-CAS school. The strength of community bonds in Ireland, especially rural Ireland is well recognised (Kennedy, 2022) and parents keep this in mind when making their applications.

##### ***Responsibilities and Experience***

Parents want school choices for their children but navigating those choices can be overwhelming (The Goldwater Institute, 2013). The data from this study reveals that both logic

and emotion were utilised by parents to make those choices which, admittedly, was not easy (Wilkins, 2011). The parent could be viewed as that of a guide, a mentor, a protector and in being so they expected themselves to make the correct decisions for their children. Donal suggested that “*as parents we feel we have to do the best we can when they are young*”. A parent may involve the child and take cognisance of their feelings and opinions while also being aware of their parental role and how they construct it. This study suggests that the parent *speaks for* the family as parental role construction suggests but also *acts* for the family. In this study, the added burden of responsibility was felt by many parents more than others and this was captured by the words of Zuka:

*I know I have to make the decision.... must do this for your child.  
.... a duty if you bring a child into this world...must guide and  
watch out for them.*

(Zuka):

Parents felt conflicted when they were forced or felt forced into choices which conflicted with how they saw their role as parents. Zuka said that choosing a school was “*a lot of trouble for[the] family*”. Taking the risk of choosing the wrong school made them question their parental efficacy. The stress of choice affected the whole family: “*I worry I decide wrong school*” (FGNI).

### ***The influence of the child’s friends***

Choosing a school is a high-risk process for any parent regardless of country of origin as it is viewed as the pathway to success (McGinnity and Darmody, 2019). This study examined the child/parent dynamic when choosing a school. In this sample, all nationalities spoke of involving their children to some degree. Parents may cite academics or logistics as reasons for choosing a school, but friends of the children also influence school choice (Zwier *et al.*, 2023). Only Irish mothers reported that their children would be comfortable in a school where their friends were. However, Breda emphasised that they were still children and that school choice

was an adult matter. Experience working with young people has taught this researcher that when young people have a say in school choice, invariably, they will be swayed more by social than academic reasons. Many parents stated that the issue of where friends were applying was a considerable source of conflict. Conflict between parent and child can be stressful also and for some, it was the biggest challenge as suggested by the following “*If they are very strong-willed and want to go to another school, it can be challenging*” (FGR). Some Irish parents felt under pressure to capitulate to their child’s desire, an idea which is supported by the literature (Zwier *et al.*, 2023)

*We didn't want to be listening to this kind of thing' you made me go here and I'm not happy and my friends are going there', you know that was kind of a worry.*

(FGU)

Nevertheless, moving to a school was not what children or parents thought it might be. Parents in this study said that their children had made new friends and had ‘*dumped*’ the old friends very quickly (FGR). Even when a child did go to the same school with friends, the experience was not all positive:

*We had a steep learning curve. Like we sent our son to a school that he really did want to go to, and we wanted him to go and we were all on the same page but he just found it extremely difficult.*

(FGU).

The child making the school choice decision was more a rural than urban phenomenon and therefore more an Irish than New Irish parental phenomenon. The only concern for New Irish parents, like Zuka, concerning friends, is the fact that Irish children, friends of their children, living in the area had received places in the local post-primary school but their children had not. Having been assigned to primary schools outside the area on arrival in Ireland had precluded them from the right of entry to a local post-primary school. Consequently, the ties

of friendship that newly arrived children in Ireland had begun to establish and so badly needed were now broken.

### ***Knowing your child***

As the data outlined in the previous themes indicated, gathering information and getting to know schools was important in making choices. However, what was equally important was knowing the child and what would suit them. Clare knew her child could be easily influenced:

*We as parents only see him being, you know, having no boundaries and, you know, being afraid of peer pressure with him, you know what I mean? So, I just felt like.... the smaller school would keep a better eye on him, and he may not get caught up in the bad influences.*

(Clare)

Cathy knew what school suited her daughter because:

*She's outgoing. But quiet. Sounds funny, but she is. And she's pretty friendly. And I think she would get on well with most people and she's really into sport.... and that's why she would get on well in a mixed school.*

(Cathy)

Breda, as mentioned earlier knew that a single-sex school would not suit her son as he was not sporty. Paula knew that if her son was:

*Told he has an easy ride he will take it but if he gets a little bit of competition thrown his way, he will also take that, and he'll thrive on that too.*

(Paula)

Other children may have needed structure and routine to achieve their best. Arguably, parental choice is a gendered concept. This study found that among the participants of this study, nine of the Irish participants were women and one man. The fact that more women opted to participate may suggest they are the ones who make the choices. Among the New Irish participants, two of the three were men. One father admitted that his wife “*did a lot more thinking about it than I did... I did absolutely none of that*” (FGR). Meanwhile, New Irish

parents regarded the school as a service that should naturally suit a child and perhaps did not have to consider knowing their child or their needs as prerequisites to finding one for them.

### ***Autonomy as a parent***

In reference to autonomy as a parent, two of the three New Irish parents felt that they did not have autonomy because they were forced to take schools they did not want. They felt “forced”, in the sense that they would lose their place if they refused it or contested it. They felt their child’s safety was compromised, thereby diminishing their autonomy as a parent. Zuka states: “*We did not pick the school, we got it!*” felt he had not been a fully responsible parent, had been forced into taking a school he did not want and was risking his child’s safety by having him attend a school in the city. Irish mothers describe their lack of autonomy in the choice process as a “*daunting experience*” and ‘*a lottery*’ (Laura), and “*a risk*” (Paula).

Though the New Irish parents may have thought that Irish parents had some special skills for negotiating school choice, Laura admitted that “*you’re extremely limited as to what skills you can kind of depend on to get in*”. Both New Irish parents and Irish mothers commented similarly on wanting to do their best for their children. Equally, they saw it as their duty both as a mother: “*It is an important decision but as a mother I do it*” (Fatisha) and as a parent: “*At the end of the day, you’re the parent, that’s your job, I think*” (Talullah). Only Irish mothers with children attending rural schools regarded their role as parents, as co-educators of their child with the school.

### ***Safety for the Child***

Safety has been cited as an important factor when considering school choice (Denice and Gross 2016; Butcher, 2019; Hailey, 2020). Irish parents, in this study, who were concerned about safety were all female which was reinforced by mothers in the Urban focus group. When choosing a school, incidents of bullying affected the choices of Ursula and Saaim. Irish parents’

concerns related to the child's safety within the school. Parents believed that if the school was small as many Catholic schools are, their children would be safer, as bullying and potential problems would be identified faster. Ultimately a safe school would make the child happy, and happiness was paramount to these parents. New Irish parents were concerned about the safety of their children on the streets on their way to and from school but also on buses if they had to travel on their own or go to school in the inner city as Zuka explained:

*You know Yeah. I don't like my child is studying in the city centre... Because I know... I can see people don't control bold child... there is a mix of people in the city... I know it goes on everywhere (i.e. social disorder) Here I can control my child, in the city I can't, it is too far, and I can't choose the school I want for my son. I choose but he don't get. ...My son's school is in the city, and I don't like the city. I don't like when he walk home late in the dark in Winter on his own. The school is not near us, and I wait, I worry until he is home. I used to live in the city, and I see all the things [that]happen in the park.*

(Zuka)

Fear of not getting a school place was significantly more prevalent among the New Irish parents who had to deal with safety concerns for their children. This was compounded by the precariousness of refugee accommodation and not knowing where they could be accommodated when they finally received their choice. Fatisha explained her fear:

*I am not confident about you know, of him taking bus, you know, and going away. The transport is not easy, and I don't want bus involved.*

(Fatisha)

Fatisha lived near a single-sex school which was the school she had wanted for her child, but she did not secure that school for her child. Neither did she know she would end up living so close to it when eventually accommodated in a more permanent house. Her son now had to travel further and, in her mind, unsafely to a single-sex school further away.

## **Community**

The happiness of the child within the school was sometimes reinforced by the community and this was particularly visible among parents with children attending rural schools. Emma explained how a school in the community could influence its environs: “*A school in a country village or town can have a lot of control over how kids behave in public*” (Emma). Connections were established between the young and old: “*And they'd have the older persons of the community coming in doing work with kids*” (Emma). Children in the local post-primary school:

*Did work on faith friends, which (was), where the TY students in the school worked with the 6th class from the primary school, preparing for their confirmation.*

(Emma).

This engagement offered security to the child and assured her mother that it would be a comfort for the child to recognise people on first entry to post-primary school. Hence her decision to choose the school was reinforced. Donal’s earlier reference to having gone to school locally and Emma’s experiences reinforced the idea of the importance of community in the school choice process which has also been referred to under Theme 1. Community offers security and familiarity. Fatisha believed that “*you can learn a lot from the experiences of the parents and other students in your community*”. Parents with children in rural schools were particularly appreciative of it and embraced it as a source of knowledge in the school choice process but also as a means of securing happiness for their child.

### ***Whatever is necessary***

*I got all his school reports from third class. I brought them in. I asked for an interview with the principal. I got references from all his coaches. I did everything I could, to, I suppose to try and help. Not that it matters anyway. I got references from the principal in his primary school.*

(Laura)

This study found that part of the role of parent was to do whatever they could to secure a school space for their child. The measures that certain Irish parents took to secure a place for

their children were linked to sport. Talullah gave an insight into this earlier in this chapter with what she called the “wheeling and dealing” of getting references from sports trainers. However, Laura pointed out that it was: “*limited as to what skills you can depend on to get in*”. Irish parents were not leaving it to a lottery system to get their chosen place for their child. As New Irish tended not to participate in too many sports, coaches’ references as a strategy were unavailable to them (McGinnity and Darmody, 2019). However, this researcher sensed that not all parents were explicit in the extra measures they took for what they thought would guarantee their child a place in their chosen school.

### ***Know-how***

*You have to know how to do it*

(Zuka)

Repeatedly parents like Saaam and Zuka stated it was “*not easy*” and “*you have to know-how to do it*” meaning that you had to have the cultural and social capital to navigate the school choice process and they “*do not have many people to ask about schools*” (FGNI) New Irish parents felt disappointed in their assigned schools. They felt that Irish parents seemed to know-how to fill out a form strategically and be successful. New Irish parents felt that they had sabotaged their chances by filling in all ten choices thereby setting themselves up to receive schools very far down in their choice set. This feeling was summarised in Zuka’s words “*we did not pick the school, we **got** (his emphasis) it*”. These parents felt frustrated in trying to be responsible parents. Nevertheless, they also demonstrated their resolve to secure a satisfactory place for their children. They were the only group who vowed to reapply the following year. Ostensibly Irish parents did not have any special privileges to secure a place for their child but, New Irish parents perceived that they had, and in a sense, they were correct as Irish parents had social and cultural capital to help them.

## *Experience of School*

*That's where I went*

(FGR)

Parents who had a positive experience of a school tend to choose the same for their child, (Rhodes, Szabo and Warkentien, 2023; Gorard, 1998). Parents in this study were influenced by the experiences of previous children but also by their own educational experiences of post-primary schooling. Ironically, New Irish parents did not reference their own past schooling experiences, save the single-sex/ mixed school argument but did refer to their experiences of their older children in the school choice process in Ireland where the older sibling helped with the application form. A finding from this study was that some parents believed that what was good enough for them was good enough for their children in terms of the school choice they made, *“That's where I went, you know, it would be my local Parish school. It's where I would have gone to school, regardless, whether it was new or old, that's where they were going, that's where they were going to go, you know* (FGR). This is borne out by the literature (Sikkink and Schwarz, 2018). Irish parents also cited older children's experiences as having a positive and unrestrictive influence on them as in the case of :

*Deciding on a school especially after the older ones, we were fairly experienced and knowledgeable about the schools, but you always have to keep your eye on the ball and listen to what's going on and watch and talk to other parents.*

(Clare)

and

*They (the school) were very good to them through COVID times. So, it was an easy decision when it came to M then to send her to the same school. I would have known some of the teachers in the school that would have went to school with me and now they're teaching in the school ..... It helped that we had older daughters, but every child is different, and you have to give the same fair parental consideration.*

(Donal)

The experience of children in the same school or another can have a bearing on the choice parents make. As already stated, parents who may wish to send their second or third child to a different school than their first child may encounter a stumbling block on behalf of the school who wonders why the parents did not send their first child there. In the main parents felt that the type of schooling that was good enough for them was good enough for their children.

## Summary

The findings of this study revealed the nuanced nature of school choice. The data demonstrated how parents embarked on the school choice process, what factors they regarded as important, how they gathered their information how that information informed their decisions and ultimately what that experience was like for them. While previous literature may have examined class differences or public and private education in an Irish context, this study set out to specifically explore and convey the world of parental choice and decision-making about parents choosing a Catholic post-primary school for their child in Midwest Ireland.

The findings conclude that there was (1) a significant emphasis placed on sport by Irish parents. Sport was regarded by parents as a means of advancement. (2) Second, although sport appeared to take precedence in school choice, academics were also an important factor. The findings supported the argument that mothers (even taking into account that female participants were in the majority) were more concerned with academics when it came to school choice with all parents wanting their children to progress to university. In this study New Irish parents expected their children to intrinsically motivate themselves whereas Irish parents expected more extrinsic motivation from their schools. New Irish parents were not concerned about curricular or extracurricular shortcomings. Irish parents were willing to compromise on certain curricular and extracurricular shortcomings if they believed the overall package was attractive and they also knew how to address those shortcomings. Irish parents suggested that sometimes subject choice was even more limiting in a bigger school. Irish and New Irish parents differed

on safety. External safety was a matter that greatly perturbed New Irish parents and was associated with bus travel and anti-social behaviour in the city. As New Irish parents were not fully guaranteed permanency of address this further complicated their choice of school as well as being a significant upset for their children if placed in schools very far from where they were just putting down roots.

(3) The data demonstrated that parents regarded proximity as important in rationalising their choice and this finding was supported by the literature. New Irish parents preferred their children to walk to nearby schools and would feel more secure in doing this though walking in the city was not always considered safe. This was a significant finding of this study. Irish parents were willing to travel to secure their choice but objected to the national bus service dictating the school their child should attend. Convenience for work was also a consideration.

(4) Another surprising finding of this study was that many parents who chose to send their children to a Catholic School did not choose it because it was Catholic. Some parents did not think of their childrens' education in terms of religion or non-religion (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). The findings of this research supported this opinion. Being a Catholic school was only of interest to a very small minority of parents in this study. A certain negativity from parents regarding Catholic schools was sensed as they did not want schools '*shoving*' Catholicism "*down their (childrens') throats*" (FGR). This attitude seemed to stem from the past rather than relating to Catholic schools of today. It may also be related to the attendance in single-sex schools, especially by mothers who felt that they did not want that for their children. Parents appreciated the size of Catholic schools, regarding them as smaller and safer. The majority wanted mixed, non-denominational schools, preferably, where their children could develop platonic relationships. The data demonstrated that Principals played down the Catholicity of schools. There may have been a fear on the part of principals, of deterring parents who were not necessarily interested in a Catholic education. On the other hand, this research

showed that New Irish parents did not have a problem with Catholic schools and found them to be extremely supportive and believing religion was important for all children. They also appreciated the single-sex nature of some Catholic schools.

(5) This research revealed that Irish parents' access to sport and allied socialisation in sports venues provided the means to gather information. New Irish parents appeared to be precluded from this source of information. The data suggested that New Irish parents, lacking in social and cultural capital, were often excluded from the perceived advantages that engagement with sports clubs brought and which some Irish parents thought could be called upon to secure school places. There is no evidence in the data that suggests that being a member of a sports club could guarantee admission to a school. Though New Irish participants were recruited from an organisation in which children played sport, it was not an affiliated sports club as such but merely a volunteer-run venue for integrating marginalised children both Irish and New Irish through the medium of soccer. Irish parents had more access to “insider” knowledge which helped in their search. The data showed that lack of social contacts and perhaps limited use of technology could stymie the efforts of New Irish seeking information on schools. New Irish parents in this study appeared to be unaware of the right of entry/ sibling rules or league tables. New Irish parents began their search much later while Irish parents with the benefit of cultural capital knew that securing a coveted place demanded time and more work, work which this researcher sensed was not always explicitly revealed. However, there is no evidence in the data that starting the search process earlier effected the choice outcomes. The data demonstrated that New Irish parents needed help with form filling and primary school principals have been helpful in this regard. New Irish parents may apply to undersubscribed schools to secure a place for their children. However, by doing so they may unwittingly contribute to segregation if other parents with similar motives also apply, leading to a concentration of New Irish in the same schools.

(6) Most parents in the study spoke negatively of the CAS application system. The data revealed that those who wished their children to attend single-sex schools felt that the range from which they had to choose from through CAS was limited. Nine of the seventeen schools were mixed and if not mixed, dedicated to the gender that the parent did not need. This restriction was felt most by New Irish parents. Compounded with such restrictions was the lack of finances and time resources to appeal the assigned school, and the fear of losing a place altogether. Such a situation might also have affected Irish parents, but this was not articulated by any. In this study New Irish were more determined to reapply to the school of their choice the following year, if unsuccessful. The study also showed that many Irish parents were dismissive of certain schools, they claimed to know nothing about. Despite this, they had certain conscious or subconscious views about those schools which influenced them, not to apply.

(7) The role of the parent can be difficult. Knowing your child and their needs and appeasing them can be a juggling act for some. The Irish parents of this study felt it was important to have a happy child as did the New Irish parents. However, New Irish parents felt frustrated that their parental autonomy was constrained by them not being able to secure the school that they felt their child needed. Most Irish parents gave more say to the child in the choice of school while the New Irish parent believed that it was a decision that should not overly involve the child. The New Irish parents also sensed their autonomy was compromised by what they thought were fewer choices which created a safety risk for their child.

(8) The role of community in rural schools was an important finding. The rural school for many parents was a place of support and connectedness for a community. Some Irish parents sent their children to the rural school they attended for nostalgic reasons but also because they knew it. It was convenient but also strengthened the child's attachment to their

locality. Knowing the school and the connections that are established between rural primary and post-primary schools reassured parents. Keeping a child within the community in which they had grown up, enhanced the parents' sense of their self-efficacy.

In essence this study has revealed that school choice is not the same for all and that lack of social and cultural capital puts certain parents at a disadvantage. In this case New Irish parents were found to be particularly disadvantaged -in the knowledge necessary to make their choices and apply for them, in their domestic situations that could easily change, in operating through a second language -in addition to the burden of making such an important choice for their children.

The findings address the research question "How do parents choose a Catholic Post-primary school for their children?" under the three research sub-questions "What factors do parents consider when choosing a Catholic post-primary school?", "how do parents gather information about schools available to their children?" and "How do parents choose the school that best suits their child? The data discussed demonstrated how parents made their choices. Though not generalisable, this study gives an insight into a particular group of people in a particular place at a particular time. It is up to the reader to think and surmise what they wish. The concluding chapter of this thesis discusses the findings and implications of the study and suggests consideration of some of the ideas which emerge from the literature.

## Chapter Five Discussion and Considerations

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary and discussion of the main research findings from this Case Study on how parents choose a Catholic post-primary school for their children in Midwest Ireland. The main findings are explored in the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The chapter then highlights the contribution of this study to research while also reflecting upon the limitations of this work. The chapter concludes with some considerations.

A qualitative Case study design was employed to provide a deep, rich and thick description of participants' experiences that would reveal how and why parents chose a Catholic post-primary school, what factors they considered, what it was like for them and how they gathered the information to make their decision. The purposive sampling method allowed the researcher to gain insight into the perspectives of two distinct groups of participants- Irish and New Irish parents. Although it was not the initial plan to have two groups, the possibility of an interesting opportunity presented itself while still acting within the parameters of the framework. The data collection commenced in January 2022 when the children of the participants had been in post-primary school for four months. The participants were reflecting on their choice-making of the previous year. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes. Participants shared their experiences of gathering methods, their emotions and perceptions and the factors they considered for school choice based on the knowledge of their child. The process they used helped them to make decisions and this was examined through the lens of rational choice, parental role construction, parental efficacy theories and Bourdieu's theory of capital. Boundaries were established on the scope of the study, the participants to be interviewed and the timeline. By anonymising the participants names and the names of small localities, confidentiality was maintained. By acknowledging her subjectivities and positionality, such as her own professional experiences and also that as a parent herself, the researcher was able to control for bias. The research study was guided by the main research question "How do parents choose a Catholic post-primary school for their children?" which

was examined under three research sub questions framed as follows: (1) What factors do parents consider when choosing a Catholic Post-primary school? (2) How do parents gather information about schools available to their children? (3) How do parents choose the school that best suits their child? The chapter is divided into four sections, which are as follows: (1) *Discussion of the key findings in relation to the literature*; (2) *contribution of the study*; (3) *conclusion*; and (4) *future research and considerations*.

## **5.2 Section One: Discussion of key findings and literature**

### **5.2.1 Theme 1 Factors influencing school choice**

The following three sections discuss the themes of sport, transport/proximity (discussed under the heading Geography and social class) and academics, factors which influence school choice, all of which answer RQ1.

#### *Sport*

The role of sport for school children has been widely discussed as a means of promoting social and mental health (De Socio and Hootman, 2004; Lubans *et al.*, 2016), improving absenteeism, attention and memory (Owen *et al.*, 2023) and overall academic grades (Dyer *et al.*, 2017; Kari *et al.*, 2017). Sport as an antidote to absenteeism, mental health problems or poor academic grades were not iterated by this group of parents, nevertheless, it could have unconsciously influenced them. In this study, sport was seen to hold an important place in parents' lives and was related to how choices were made. In some cases, parents believed that a child being good at sport or being identified as such could help with gaining a place in a 'sporty' school. Supplying a school with a reference from sports coaches or making an appointment to see the principal of the school was also seen by parents to have an influence. However, there was no evidence in the data that either strategy had an effect on assigning schools, but that perception was there for Irish parents. Such strategies were not availed of or were not available (perhaps

through lack of awareness or not wishing to) to New Irish participants. The study showed that New Irish parents did not speak much of sport perhaps because as Darmody and Smyth (2017) have demonstrated there is a fall off from extra-curricular activities at aged nine for immigrant children in Ireland. However, it has also been argued that there is a fall off from sports in general as teenagers mature, especially for girls ( Eime *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless this group of Irish parents were particularly interested in sport as were their children. Parental involvement in their children's activities are said to keep the children involved longer and this could well be the case with this cohort of Irish participants (Jaf *et al.*, 2023). New Irish participants were not on the sidelines of sports fields and therefore unable to build up social/ cultural capital that could be helpful in making a school choice may be useful for gaining a place in a school of choice.

On the other hand, Irish participants in this study chose schools by sport and for sport. The degree of importance attributed to sport when making a school choice was both surprising, unexpected and significant. For many Irish participants in this study, sport played an important role in their choice of school. An increased interest in their children's sporting activities, where parents are 'investing' in their children's sports participation is now more prevalent as a middle-class strategy and was clearly demonstrated in the data (Wheeler, 2014; Sriprakash, Proctor and Hu, 2016; Tan, 2017; Doherty and Dooley, 2018; Strandbu *et al.*, 2019). By accessing clubs which in turn promoted the child in the sporting arena, thereby accessing a chosen school was a means of converting one type of capital for another as suggested by Bourdieu (1986/2006). Thus, sport became a means of social mobility for parents as suggested by Benkorti (2024). Irish children played in clubs and schools where their parents perceived their children would be seen by personnel who may have been able to assist in their quest for their chosen school. This attitude by parents is also indicative of Bandura's (1997) views

whereby the stronger one's sense of parental self-efficacy the harder one will try to achieve what they want for their child.

As already found in the literature, free time, fees, equipment, knowledge, and resources are required to bring children to extracurricular classes and these are more likely to be available to middle-class parents who can afford these (O'Brien, 2003; Reay, 1998). As already stated, New Irish participants' children take less interest in sport as they get older (Darmody and Smyth, 2017) but they may also be precluded from such activities due to limited resources. Lack of participation in sport may have prevented New Irish parents in this study from gathering information about schools, or being able to, for example, request coaches' references that some Irish parents erroneously thought would garner them a place in a school.

The cultural capital gained from sporting connections put Irish participants at an advantage and may be viewed along with other forms of capital, such as physical capital as 'key to the reproduction of social inequalities' (Shilling, 2010, p274), stratifying social classes and preserving class privilege. The class privilege in school choice was being upheld by Irish parents as the literature suggests (Ball, Bowe, Gewirtz, 1996; Lynch and Moran, 2006; Yoon, 2020). Parental investment in their child's sporting activities reflected the inequalities that exist in society in general and which is perpetuated (Lareau, 2018; Mikus, Tieben and Schober, 2021; Warikoo, 2022). Irish Parents with greater social and cultural capital due to high levels of education were happy in the schools that they had chosen and did not feel that they would change the children from their current school. None of the children attended DEIS schools. On the other hand, all New Irish participants had children in DEIS schools and 2 of the 3 parents were considering a change of school the following year. From a rational choice perspective parents used whatever means they could to gain what they regarded as beneficial to their children be that a sports reference or a meeting with the principal of the school. The data shows that parents will seek schools that have that extra means of promoting their children as Vincent

and Ball (2007) have demonstrated. Parents would like to achieve a place in a 'sporty' school as their children love sport but the school may also nurture that child's sporting talent which could thus promote them. This current study would appear to support such literature. In successfully gaining a place in a school with a good sporting reputation, participants felt that they had fulfilled their parental role and promoted their children. The literature on parental role construction theory suggests that parents construct their own idea of what a parent is and in this study some parents believed that they had to resort to alternative measures to secure the chosen school for their child. The data has also demonstrated that parents were not concerned about the denomination of the school.

The findings of this study also revealed that many of the participants felt that their children would meet like-minded sporting children thereby creating a secure social milieu for them. Vincent and Ball (2007) go a little further suggesting that middle-class parents invest in activities such as sport as a means of preventing downward class mobility and that they see their children as projects. Some Irish parents did not want their children attending unacceptable schools that "could have been anywhere". The Irish participants whose children attended urban schools chose sporty schools with good sporting reputations that were non-DEIS and possessing some private school characteristics could arguably be seen to promote and elevate their children. As the literature revealed sport, and extracurricular activities act as indicators of class taste thereby providing the actors (i.e. parents/ children) with social and cultural capital. The notion of sporting prowess or success in sport or physical capital, as a means of accruing other forms of capital such as the cultural capital of educational qualification is not a new phenomenon (Bourdieu, 1977; Shilling, 2010).

Internationally, there has been an increased interest in youths' sports by parents (Stefansen *et al.*, 2016; Strandbu *et al.*, 2019). Such a pattern may account for participants of this study prioritising sport as a factor in school choice. The growth of professional sports in

Ireland may possibly have a bearing on Irish parents' wish for a sports career for their children. Interestingly, this study revealed that Irish parents, were more vocal in expressing their choice of a sporty school for their children. Though there were 9 Irish mothers and 1 Irish father in this study the literature has suggested mothers are able to build key networks in sports clubs for example, that provide important sources of knowledge, enabling them to make effective choices for their children (Reay *et al.*, 2007; Vincent and Ball, 2006). In this small limited study this may have been the case. In contrast the literature also suggests that being involved in sport is a means of displaying the moral worth of the parents and fathers would be more interested or at least more involved (Coakley, 2006). The data from this study would not concur with Coakley as mothers appeared to be just as interested and involved in facilitating their children to emulate sporting heroes or place them in schools that win county finals. Irish Parents may have thought that getting coach references etc. would help their case but there is no evidence in the data to suggest this, in addition to the fact that any canvassing measures would be contrary to legislation and Catholic education documents. Interestingly, sport was seen more as a means of advancement socially and emotionally, than a means to promote the physical health of the child which may seem strange to the non-sporting. Equally, it could be argued, that New Irish parents wished to promote their children by bringing them to a volunteer-run organisation in order to help them integrate.

### *Academics*

Academic considerations are often thought to be the preserve of the privileged choosers, those who are educated and wealthy (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1996). Nine of 10 Irish and one of 3 New Irish participants in this study had third level qualifications. The literature has demonstrated that mothers more than fathers are interested in the academic achievements of

their children (Brown, 2022). In this study, more mothers volunteered to participate which might suggest that women are more interested in their child's academic life. However, that is not to say that the fathers of this study were less interested in the academic achievements of their children, as they too agreed to participate. Perhaps it was the level of educational attainment of most of the parents that made them agreeable to participating in the study. In this regard, most of the participants could be considered 'privileged choosers' based on their educational levels alone.

In the main, academic considerations in this study, were associated with successful Leaving Certificate results which in Ireland is the passport to further education. The data from this study suggests that the majority of parents were more concerned with academic achievement than religious issues (Kelleher, Smyth and McEldowney, 2016; Mok and Flynn, 2004; Flynn, 1993). Many parents prioritise academics (Alsauidi, 2016). While all parents have academic expectations of schools and of their children (Burgess *et al.*, 2015), the literature suggests that more educated parents are concerned more with academic achievements than the less educated. In this study all parents wished for their children to go to university and their chosen school was going to help them achieve that. New Irish parents assumed that the chosen school would do what was expected of them -to teach their children. One of the lesser findings of this current study was that New Irish participants expected their children to be more autonomous in their learning. Irish participants inferred that the school should play a greater role in the child achieving their potential while New Irish participants like Saaim, and Zuka expressed that the child had to work hard to progress. Only Irish participants considered deeper issues like subject limitations or options or broadening their child's academic interests.

Parents can sometimes have preconceived notions of what a school is like or what a 'good' school is. In this small-scale case study, fear of the unknown and great stress was

evident. For example, subject choice was important, and as Clare elucidated in her case it might have been a big school with lots of choice, but that choice was spread amongst more students which inevitably meant less choice. Academics would still appear to be an important factor in school choice and in the case of the Irish participants in this study, they would be quite happy to attend Catholic schools as long as academic results were achieved. The literature has pointed to the fact that the higher the perception of a school, the lower the number of lower socioeconomic (SES) students, to the point where the lower perceived schools are becoming ghettoised (Taylor, 2009). The New Irish participants of this study applied to schools that they believed were undersubscribed as they believed they had a better chance of getting a place. This has already led to a certain ghettoisation of students and schools in urban areas (Wilson, 2019). The danger of such activity is the production of mono-ethnic schools which do not produce as good academic results as multiethnic schools (Vekic, 2014). In this study, the Irish participants desired certain schools, most of them oversubscribed, perhaps for sport or academics or protection from others (Byrne and De Tona, 2019) or undisclosed reasons (Schneider and Buckley, 2002) while New Irish participants applied to what they believed to be undersubscribed schools where they thought it might be easier to secure a place. At that point, in fact, there was no published evidence that the New Irish participants' schools were oversubscribed or undersubscribed. The subscription levels of the three DEIS schools and one other are still unknown (O'Brien, 2024).

### *Geography and Social Class*

Choosing a school involves several geographic factors. The more options parents have for school choice, the more difficult it is to choose. In this current study, most urban schools were oversubscribed (at least 5 and possibly 8) and therefore difficult to access (See Appendix U). Irish participants appeared to have more choice within rural areas as they could access rural

and urban schools, were used to travelling and were also willing to travel a distance to urban schools to achieve their school of choice. Just as sport and extracurricular activities demand time, and finances so too does the transportation of children to a school of choice at a distance from the student's home. The findings of this study concur with findings of proximity being an important factor in school choice but in this small case study proximity to the workplace rather than home may be just as important. Various studies on school choice have indicated that proximity is very important for most parents (Karsten *et al.*, 2003; 2006, Boterman, 2019; Cantu *et al.*, 2021). Within Ireland, Smyth *et al.* (2010) found proximity to home rather than religious affiliation as more of a factor in school choice as was also found in this current study. In view of the findings of Smyth *et al.* (2010) this study would go further in arguing that proximity vis-à-vis convenience for work and drop off /pick up is more important than just proximity to home per se and more important than religious affiliation.

This current study also indicated in most cases that it suited participants' working arrangements to be able to drop children to school on their way to work or for the school to be near work (Cantu *et al.*, 2021). Working parents may not always therefore have the luxury of bringing their children to 'less convenient' schools if they have work or financial constraints. However, if only convenience and travel time is considered, this can be constraining (Kelleher, Smyth and McEldowney, 2016). This study would suggest that they were factors but not constraining ones. Transport had a bearing on choice (Denice and Gross, 2016; Corcoran, 2019; Catt, 2020). One parent felt his choice of school was being decided by the bus company. This finding concurs with the literature whereby school transport issues can affect choice (Bradley and Taylor, 2002). Such a feeling of stress or limitation was restrictive for a parent. The aforementioned parent was willing to drive his children to school but wished to avail of bus travel and felt there should be no obstacle put in his way in doing so. There was frustration

with the gap between policy rhetoric around free school buses and the reality for a parent who felt his child's choice of school was being dictated by a bus company. Currently, in Ireland with shortages of bus drivers for school runs, this problem could be exacerbated (Hutton, 2022). This shortage will further disadvantage the poor and students who wish to attend a Catholic school as free school transport for all students will only provide transport to the nearest school which may not be Catholic. Those who can travel outside an area tend to be those who financially can or are from higher professional backgrounds (Cahill and Hall, 2014; Gewirtz *et al.* 1995; Reinoso, 2008; Wu, 2012; Yoon, 2020). A school bus may not matter to those who have independent travel. This suggests the classed nature of school choice. The Irish participants in this study who would be considered middle-class, had the means and were willing to travel outside their area to get what they wanted. All 10 Irish parents would be considered middle-class. Half of those were willing to travel, as they had deliberately chosen urban schools a distance from their rural homes. A further 2 parents stated that they had a choice of schools at a radial distance of 8-10 miles from their homes that they would have travelled to but decided to stay in the community. A further Irish parent chose to travel a distance to a rural school further than her nearest one. This finding of means and willingness to travel concurs with the literature (McShane, 2024). New Irish parents preferred proximity to school but even if they wanted, they were precluded from the luxury of choosing schools at a distance from their home due to housing and economic constraints. Zuka did have to travel a distance with his eldest son and now also with his son in first year but in both cases would have preferred not to have had to. Such travel for him was a time costly and financial burden.

The literature indicates that underprivileged parents in the main do not engage with school choice as the local school is the norm (Cahill and Hall, 2014). This may still be the case with some parents, but in this study, this was not found. Participants applying to urban CAS schools had to engage with school choice though they did think that choice was limited for

them. As already indicated New Irish participants had safety fears for their children travelling long distances to school whether that be walking or on bus transport. Such fears may or may not have been justified. Schools are becoming segregated by socioeconomic factors linked to various kinds of capital. Children whose parents have the means will choose the schools that will give them what they perceive to be advantageous whether it be academics, or access to elite sports. If this is allowed to continue, future generations will not have been exposed to rich and diverse cultures. Though there is a dearth of studies on the subject in Ireland, the notion of ‘white flight’ is apparent. It is not new and has been flagged in Ireland from as early as 2007 (Higgins Ni Chinnéide, 2007; O’Brien, 2007; Parazzoli, 2013). It is also interesting to note that all the children of the New Irish participants attend DEIS schools (and whose subscription levels are unknown) and none of the children of Irish participants. This may suggest that ‘white flight’ may still be occurring. It has been acknowledged that ethnic minorities are excluded from schools once it becomes popular and oversubscribed by whites (Boterman 2022, Woodfield and Gunby, 2003). Although this study was small, the data suggested that exclusion was apparent among New Irish participants who felt excluded from certain schools. The schools that the children of New Irish attended also had a higher proportion of New Irish.

In contrast, many participants in rural areas did not feel the need to travel beyond their locality. The rural school can be a place of connectedness, and the findings of this study would reflect that (Wake, 2018). Participants in rural areas alluded to the community and the comfort that it offered their children. Some of the participants were willing to keep their children in the community because they had gone to schools in the community themselves. Equally, links between the post-primary school and local primary school were nurtured. The local Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) club was part of that link as were visitors from the post-primary school to the primary school. Parents are slow to move their children from a supportive community as this study attests (Schafft and Jackson, 2010). The rural Catholic school should

not be underestimated for providing security for parents, relieving the stress of school choice and easing transport issues that afflict the parent applying to an urban school. A rural community school may well do the same, but this was not the subject matter of this study.

### *5.2.2 Theme 2 Expectations of a Catholic School*

Though Catholic schools have long been central to the Irish education system (Cahill and Hall, 2014) the role of the Catholic church and the demand for a Catholic education has diminished. School choice in Ireland has become more market driven than in the past where it was bound by religious or social differences than market ideology (Lynch and Moran, 2006). The participants of this study wanted a school that met their demands of an education for their child, which would allow them to become ‘happy’ citizens. They wanted more for their children than for them to be a ‘binman’ (Saaim). It need not have been specifically a Catholic school. Yet their children were happy in a faith school. This is an important finding. Most parents stated that their children were happy in their current school, and this is an important finding, however, 2 of the 3 New Irish parents expressed that they themselves were unhappy, rather than their children. They were happy that their children attended a faith school, but they wanted a different faith school. Being ‘happy’ is a factor well cited by the literature Rymarz *et al.*, 2019; Mc Carthy, 2016). Participants did not elaborate on the meaning of ‘happy’. Participant parents of minority faith did not express a sense of exclusion in their Catholic post-primary schools. The findings from this study indicated that participants, overall, were happy or at least making the best of their current school. A Catholic education was not a priority for them, and they did not choose it because it was Catholic which concurs with the literature (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). Parents in many cases choose faith schools for non-religious reasons (Denessen, Drissena, and Slegers, 2005). For instance, in this

study, some parents chose a Catholic school because they believed them to be small and safe but more so for sporting, academic and proximity reasons.

The participants of this study wanted their children to be educated in some Catholic schools but did not necessarily subscribe to a Catholic ethos. This finding would confirm the *shift in consciousness* discussed in Chapter Two (Ganiel, 2016). While the New Irish participants respected a faith school and preferred it to a secular education, Irish participants, meanwhile, identified more with their Catholic heritage and tradition and less with the institutional church. Inglis refers to these types of Catholic as ‘cultural Catholics’ (Inglis, 2017). The data would suggest that these participants were ‘cultural Catholics’ and believed that the Catholic school could educate their children in the religious etiquette of Catholic ceremonies and nothing more, what has been referred to in the literature as ‘a medicinal dose’ (McCarthy, 2016). Though the literature would suggest that religious factors are important for parents and pedagogical factors more so, the findings from this study only partially bore this out (McGraw and Tiernan, 2021; CPSMA/CSP/AMSCC, 2019; O’Mahony, 2008). Pedagogical factors were important but religious factors only mattered to a few. As already alluded only 3 participants stated that attending a Catholic post-primary school themselves influenced their choice of one for their child while 4 thought it may have. This concurs with the literature (Schultz, 2008).

#### *Different types of Catholics, different types of Catholic schools*

The different types of schools ‘Faith visible’, ‘faith transition’ and ‘faith residual’ may explain the reasons for the choices of participants in this study (Byrne and Devine, 2018). The participants of this study appeared to want ‘faith transition’ or ‘faith residual’ schools as outlined earlier in the literature. It may explain the behaviours of primary school management in assisting New Irish participants in their choices. Such help may unwittingly contribute to

segregation by channelling them to what may be perceived as undersubscribed schools. In this study, there was also a reticence to own faith within Catholic schools (Mc Graw Tiernan, 2022; Fahie (2017). Most of the schools in this study would suggest that they are ‘faith transition’ schools (Byrne and Devine, 2018) as participants emphasised that no reference to the Catholicity of the school was mentioned by management. Byrne and Devine’s (2018) reference to the lack of theological preparation and therefore not promoting the Catholicity of the school does not seem to adequately explain school management’s behaviour. It would seem that they knew what many parents *really* wanted and were bowing to their needs. Considering this study, one might ask “Why are post-primary school principals slow to talk about patronage of their school?” Faith-visible school principals are normally not tolerant of missing religion classes or skipping classes (Byrne and Devine, 2018). However, in this study, New Irish parents were pleased that they were accommodated in leaving school to attend the Mosque or any Islamic ceremonies. The data suggests that schools had a deep respect for their faith and made every effort to accommodate faith practices. This resonates with the recent literature on Catholic schools in Ireland (Conway, 2024; Mullally, 2019).

Many Irish participants wanted non-denominational choice in schools, though not necessarily for religious reasons. Rather than having any deeply held anti-Catholic convictions they simply wished not to be forced. The New Irish participants in this study were indifferent to the polemic of divestment and chose their school because it was a faith school. As already stated, the data revealed that parents were reluctant to discuss their Catholicity or support for a Catholic school in the focus groups, perhaps because they felt in the minority. An interesting finding new to the field is that many Irish participants revealed that their school choice was not for Catholic reasons, and they did not seem afraid to reveal this in a one-to-one situation. It would also confirm the findings of Jeynes, (2002); Ball, (2003); Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington (2009) and Green, (2018) that the religious element of school choice is not

important. Participants who genuinely wanted their child to have a Catholic education were very much in the minority. Muslim participants of children attending a Catholic school were very supportive of their school, the tolerance that it exerted and the fact that it was a faith school as they believed faith was important for young people.

McGraw and Tiernan's (2022, p.62) reference to schools formally appearing to adhere to Catholic teachings but locally there is less emphasis on the 'party line' would seem to be a version of what was happening in post-primary Catholic schools in this study. McGraw and Tiernan (2022) in reference to *Articulating a New Positioning of Catholic Education in Ireland* (CPSMA/CSP/AMSCC, 2019) hint that the report may already be addressing an awareness among the three contracting organisations of the need to 'take control and be more intentional about telling the story of Catholic schools' (p.58). However, this study would suggest that Irish participants chose Catholic schools because of the tempering of their ethos rather than an emphasis on it. On the other hand, New Irish participants appreciated having the choice of a Catholic school although it would be naive to think they would not choose an Islamic post-primary school if there were one available to them.

Another choice that some parents wanted was a single-sex school. One-third of Irish post-primary schools are single-sex (DES, 2021). Catholic schools do not have to be and are not all single-sex (Clavel and Flannery, 2023). Single-sex schools were the preferred choice of New Irish participants in this study, though if you chose to send your child to a Catholic single-sex school your choice of schools was limited. In this study where some parents used CAS, the choice of options was reduced from eleven to 5 if you wanted a single-sex boys' school within the geographical area of this study. Conversely, for Irish participants single-sex schools would not have been the preferred option but reflecting rational theory, parents tolerated single-sex schools if other demands were satisfied. Irish mothers were particularly against single-sex schools due to their self-perception of being somewhat socially inept when they left school.

New Irish parents preferred single-sex schools so they and any Irish parents who wished for a single-sex Catholic school were limited in their choices.

### *Safety and Size of a Catholic school*

Participants reported that safety was important in their choice of Catholic school. This would be in keeping with the literature along with many other features like academics and proximity (Mok and Flynn, 2004; Bedrick and Burke, 2018). Irish participants believed their children to be safer in a Catholic school not because of its ethos but because the general perception was that Catholic schools were smaller and therefore safer. Choosing a small school is acknowledged as suggesting safety (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1996). Safety within the school was appreciated by Irish participants while New Irish participants were troubled by safety external to the school campus. New Irish participants felt that their child faced certain vulnerabilities being in an urban environment or being a foreign child on the bus to school. The energy that parents expend on finding a school that is safe and productive is greater for urban participants than for rural participants (Kurz, 2002). School choice is not just about values. It is also rooted in economics. Much of the literature would suggest that smaller schools lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness (Agasisti, Queiroz E Melo and Maranto, 2023). Others would suggest that small schools of choice can build relationships with families (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Ouchi, 2009). Comments by some participants in this study referred to size and how children could get lost in the numbers. There may be a possibility that as schools get bigger and subsume smaller ones, many of which are Catholic, the safety that participants now feel will be threatened. One large-sized school may not answer everyone's needs.

### ***5.2.3 Theme 3 Accessibility -Gathering Information and the application process***

#### *Gathering Information*

The following section addresses RQ2 and discusses the findings related to Gathering methods used by participants to make their school choice. The findings of this study revealed that participants used formal and informal means to gather information about the choice of and access to post-primary schools. Word of mouth or ‘grapevine’ information seemed to be particularly appealing and information from school sources such as teachers and inspectors was highly valued. New Irish parents were at a particular disadvantage as they could not call on the social and cultural capital possessed by Irish parents. Many of the participants of this study were limited by the COVID-19 pandemic in visiting schools before their selection. Knowing a school’s reputation is advantageous and Irish participants in this study were grateful for having had their post-primary schooling in Ireland (Mc Carthy, 2007). This was something New Irish participants could not avail of for obvious reasons. League tables and inspection reports were not utilised much by participants which concurs with the literature that they are only useful for schools with exceptional ratings as very often they are outdated (Bokhove, Jerrim and Sims, 2023). However, it was not clear in this study if participants considered that the information in them could have been outdated. New Irish parents were unaware of the existence of league tables.

### *Equity and Capital*

International policy discourses contend that parental school choice is an equitable process (Scott, 2013) that responds democratically to the changing needs of a diverse society (Wilkins, 2012). Ostensibly it may appear to be democratic but in practice, it is not. Equity is not working for everyone. New Irish participants in this study accepted the admission system to post-primary school at face value and were unaware of alternative means that Irish participants tried to use to gain entry. Although there is no evidence in the data that alternative means such as securing coach references etc. worked. This finding concurs with the literature

that migrant families find it difficult to make choices as they lack local knowledge (Walker and Clark, 2010; Trevena *et al.*, 2016). The fortitude of New Irish participants to pursue their choice again a year later demonstrated a resilience not witnessed in Irish participants. Irish participants may have accepted their places because they liked them, their children were happy, or they may also have felt that in time they would have resources to compensate for anything a child may be missing.

Notably, Irish participants in this study possessed greater social capital such as a deeper local knowledge of schools and were therefore able to access useful information to find the best conditions for their child, an observation which concurs with the literature (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Reay *et al.*, 2011; Byrne and Smyth, 2011) These participants were in the ‘know’ and started the process of information gathering earlier, though this did not demonstrate any significant advantage. The data did not demonstrate that using references or interviews with the principal to access schools worked either. Middle-class parents had a knowledge advantage in choosing schools and strongly exercised that right (Ball, 2003; Brantlinger, 2003; Byrne and Smyth 2011; Reay, Crozier and James, 2011). Irish parents in this study attached social meanings to the schools they wished their children to attend and adopted whatever means to achieve access to those schools (Bell, 2009). For them, the ‘best’ school may signify being with those like themselves as Byrne and De Tona (2019) and Ball and Vincent (1998) have suggested. New Irish participants such as Fatisha or Saaim desired a certain school for their children but seemed unaware of how to improve their chances of access to the school and relied on friends’ children for some of their information. Such an inability to source information due to a lack of social capital concurs with the literature (Vincent, 2001). Laura, an Irish participant, on the other hand desiring the same school, had learned that getting a reference from a sports coach would improve her child’s chances of access, though there is no data to suggest this worked. Laura had gleaned this information from her socialisation in sporting clubs. The

sporting arena was an important source of informal information and one which New Irish participants did not use or were unaware of. This would concur with Darmody and Smyth (2017). Strong parent-to-parent networks created at extracurricular events are used by middle-class parents for gathering inside information on schools (Lareau, 1989). Perhaps there were strong networks within the New Irish parental community in this study, but they lacked the social and cultural capital to engage in school choice to the same level as Irish participants. Equally, these networks can cause parents to select schools and imitate parents like themselves thus leading to marginalisation and exclusion of low SES or minority groups of students (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara, 2014).

### *Exclusion*

Some New Irish participants admitted that they would not apply to a certain school or were advised not to apply to a certain school as they would not get a place, a behaviour which Bourdieu described as ‘self-exclusion’ (1984, p.141). Such patterns of behaviour could seriously hamper future integration in an era where many elements of anti-migration have been reported (McCarron, 2024). Irish participants, especially those with children in rural schools, on the other hand, were anxious to replicate their positive educational experiences and chose schools that they had attended. This study would concur with the literature regarding ‘white flight’ and social reproduction (Rhodes, Szabo and Warkentien, 2023) referenced earlier in this study. The behaviours of Irish participants and the schools which they believed favoured such practices as sporting-prowess references, together with a lack of social capital on the part of New Irish, could, unfortunately, be the key to the production of social inequalities and division.

### *Choosers and the chosen*

Although social demographics have changed considerably in Ireland in recent years, little has changed in Ireland regarding schooling for immigrants (McGinnity and Darmody, 2019). All the children of the New Irish participants and the New Irish focus group attended DEIS schools. None of the other participants or focus groups did. This finding concurs with Byrne *et al.*, (2010), whereby new arrivals or immigrants tended to go to what were or were perceived to be undersubscribed schools catering for deprived/ disadvantaged populations in urban areas. Devine's (2011, p.11) prediction of 'immigrant schools' occurring because of school choice would also appear to concur with the findings of this study where New Irish participants felt that they would not get a place in certain schools. Schools can choose the students they want, though the system of application in the Limerick region could give the impression that it is centralised, and schools do not have a part in it. The publication and distribution of the application form to schools is performed by Limerick Education Centre but parents send the completed form to their number one school. The school then has the choice of students. There is no data to suggest that they intentionally exclude some groups in their selection. However, in this bounded case study, all the New Irish respondents' and focus group members' children attended DEIS schools. If 'creaming' (Ball, 2021) of students takes place, those with less social capital will fare worse in the selection process (Orfield and Wallace, 2008). Though the 'creaming' of students is difficult to prove, the schools that students with low social capital attended may be indicative of it (Allen and West, 2009). This finding also concurs with the literature that argues that high-performing schools have lower numbers of socio-economically deprived students (Brown *et al.*, 2021).

### *Central Application System*

Though the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 aimed to promote transparency and fairness by addressing school enrolment policies, this still has not been ameliorated.

Neither has the CAS application fully worked. The former Minister for Education, Norma Foley, has said the CAS system ‘works very well’, though, in 2023, twenty-six students were left without places because all city schools in Limerick had reached their capacity (O’Donovan, 2023). In Ennis, however, in February 2023, there was a surplus of a hundred places (O’Kelly, 2023) a fact that was highlighted in local media as damaging to young people’s mental health (Quinn, 2021). The CAS system can also be manipulated to the advantage of parents living in two different counties but proximate to schools in both areas. Theoretically and practically (according to this study), parents can be offered a place in Clare or Tipperary and hold on to that place until the Limerick offers are made, thus leading to the ‘hogging’ of places (Sattin-Bajaj *et al.*, 2018). This was a practice that some Irish parents admitted to though they did not fully agree with the practice. However, it has been demonstrated that parents will do what it takes for their children while also recognising that it can cause inequities for others (Sattin-Bajaj and Roda, 2024). Such a practice can lead to anxieties for other families who do not receive offers at first.

Rules and restrictions regarding the right of entry in certain post-primary schools today are ironically working against parents, propelling them to apply and accept places that may not suit a particular child just because previous siblings had attended. New Irish parents if they are not versed in the policies of certain schools due to a lack of social and cultural capital are put at a disadvantage. They may also be excluded due to their housing situation which is not always of their choosing. McGinnity and Darmody (2019) questioned if the new legislation i.e. Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, would improve circumstances for immigrants. The parental experiences of this study would suggest that they have not improved. The Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 aimed to promote fairness and transparency by addressing school enrolment policies. However, though all schools are required to conduct the selection process in a non-discriminatory manner which is to be applied fairly, the Government

admits that this may mean some pupils do not get a school of their first choice (Department of Education, 2021b)

Should a system that has been described by Irish participants as ‘traumatic’, ‘daunting’ and a ‘wasteful exercise’ not be re-examined? One may ask if there is another method of assigning schools that is less worrying for participants. New Irish participants’ lives are full of challenge and complexity. Immigrating to a new country is difficult. Navigating its health, social and educational systems is extremely complicated in a foreign language while perhaps concurrently dealing with the psychological stresses of fleeing or having to leave one’s homeland. This is the environment of school choice for these participants.

Burgess (2016) and Burgess *et al.*(2020) have suggested that a lottery system of school assignment could provide greater social mobility if catchment areas which enclose socially mixed communities were created and children applied to the schools within that area. A re-examination of the current CAS system whereby a finely tuned algorithm was to be introduced could take the burden of assigning places away from schools. It would also allow AI to do the thinking which could provide a completely random assignment of schools to parents based on a few choices/requirements that they would feed into that algorithm.

### *Limited choices*

When the research question, “How do parents gather information about schools available to parents?” is considered, one might conclude that the choice can be limited. When gathering information about schools and subsequently filling out an application form, if the available choices are at odds with your religious or cultural values then your choices are limited. The sense of ‘apparent choice’ is felt both by Irish and New Irish participants, in this study, who feel that securing a place very low down in their application form was tantamount to having only an ‘apparent choice’. Parents had to choose eleven schools from a list of

seventeen. Parents who wished to send their children to a Catholic school or a single-sex school as opposed to parents who have no such preferences were indeed limited when applying through the CAS system. New Irish participants were the only participants to voice that the list was restrictive. A possible flaw of the admission process, even today, is that genuine Catholics may not secure a place in a Catholic school due to the lottery system that exists in, for example, the Limerick region. The outcome of information gathering is that unless a parent is educated and has access to reliable local information, it will be difficult to make satisfying school choices. If a parent is new to an area or a country, as in this study, the range of knowledge sources can be limited.

The last and final section “The Role of the Parent” discusses the findings and the importance of knowing your child in relation to the choice that a parent makes. This theme answers the RQ3.

#### ***5.2.4 Theme 4 Role of Parent***

##### *Responsibilities and Experiences/Knowing the child*

This study demonstrates the behaviours, activities and considerations that participants exercise to choose the school that best fits their child’s circumstances. It is normal for parents to be involved in the transition from primary school to post-primary school especially for middle and upper-class (Reh and Landolt, 2024) but also for working-class parents (Cahill and Hall, 2014). Throughout the study, participants expressed anxiety about choosing, about waiting to hear the outcome of their choices if they had chosen the school that best fitted their child. They faced many uncertainties in doing this (Kafka, 2022). Some Irish participants were not always explicit in the measures they took to get a school of their choice and there is no evidence in the data to suggest that their extraordinary measures had any effect in securing a place for their child. Meanwhile, New Irish participants acknowledged their inability to achieve

the school they thought their child should have because in some cases they were advised against it, or they did not apply at all as they thought they would be unsuccessful. The actions of New Irish parents in this study therefore concurred with Bourdieu's theory of 'self-exclusion' (Bourdieu, 1984, p.141).

In this study, mothers still bear the burden of school choice even while taking into consideration that mothers dominated the study in the ratio of 10:3. They are the ones who consider it early, gather information through social contacts, fill out the forms and even participate more in research studies according to Cooper, (2005) and Brown (2022). Parents, especially mothers, will push towards schools that best suit their children's strengths, skills, competencies and needs (Bagley, Woods and Glatter, 2001). Parents can experience a tension between what they want and what their children want. In this study Ursula, wrestled with trying to satisfy her child, keeping her away from bullies while also catering for her special needs. Paula on the other hand felt she knew her child would be happiest in the school of his sporting hero, whereas other participants like Clare and Breda felt the decision should be made by the parent who had more experience and letting the child *think* they have made the decision. Breda considered logistical practicalities to keep all the children in the same school, while some of the rural focus group concurred with the literature that 'what was good enough for us (then) is good enough for them (now)' (Sikkink and Schwarz, 2018). In most cases participants wanted their children to be happy and safe.

### *Safety*

Parents worry about their children's safety (Denice and Gross, 2016; Butcher, 2019; Hailey, 2020). Safety is more of a concern for minority and low SES parents than it is for middle-class parents, and this is confirmed in this study (Hammond and Dennison, 1995; Lee, Croninger and Smith, 1996; Sander, 2023). New Irish participants like Zuka were particularly

worried about their children's safety in the city but also wanted their children to be able to walk to school as did Fatisha. Zuka was conflicted as he currently had an older child who had to walk in the dark in winter to attend a school outside the city. Being in familiar territory does ameliorate any fears that a parent may have and Zuka felt he did not have this. Living in a part of the city that was regarded as an anti-social area was perceived as a threat to the New Irish participant's child. As Yoon and Lubienski (2017) have stressed parents with greater means can move their children to what are perceived as safer schools. This may not be an option for the New Irish of this study. Additionally, as Byrne and De Tona (2019) found, ethnic-minority parents may wish to have their children in a school with a 'sufficient ethnic mix' to feel safe. New Irish parents therefore may be torn between safety and wanting the 'best' school for their child.

### *Community*

School-choice decisions are locally contextual and influenced by class, and ethnic interrelations between parents, their social world and the school system available to them (Bunar and Ambrose, 2016; Byrne and De Tona, 2019). Links to the community, heretofore provided for by the church, did not exist for many. However, some Irish participants, especially those with children in rural schools, had long-standing community ties, histories and emotional connections that shaped their sense of belonging to an area or parish in a rural community. The rural school is the centre of 'social activity and cultural meaning' according to Schafft and Jackson (2010, p.2) and this was the case for those parents. As Wake (2018) suggested rural schools can reinforce community ties and give a sense of connectedness and are therefore important in the lives of parents and their children. Donal had attended the same school as his daughter and knew some of the teachers thus reinforcing the community ties that Wake (2018) speaks of. Emma spoke of children from the local post-primary school coming to meet the children of the local primary school before they transferred to post-primary school and

therefore a bond had already been established. In the past, the ‘parish’ was central to peoples’ lives and a loyalty to it emanating from the church was important. The triadic entity of church, parish and GAA were the stalwarts of belonging and rural communities clung to these. Kennedy (2022) even goes so far as to use the term ‘parish capital’. This research indicates that the church is now probably the least important of these entities amongst this cohort of participants, though the community is still important.

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).

The words of Inglis (2017) ring true when you consider how some of the rural participants in this study reviewed their school days and saw no need to change circumstances for their children. Furthermore, some of the participants kept their children within the community to maintain ‘strong social bonds’ (Inglis, 2017, p.24).

School selection is shaped by parents’ vision for their child’s future and sense of belonging in the community. Participants like Emma and Donal did not just want to send their children to the local school for proximity reasons but more so for friendship and community links that had been established by themselves and their children. Donal knew the teachers and had attended the school himself; Emma did not want to bring her child thirty kilometres away from the community in which she had friends and in which she had grown up. The rural school reinforces ‘identification with the community’ (Woods, 2005, p587) Emma and Donal’s wishes exemplified this notion. Participants, with children in rural schools especially, have had good experiences and want their children to partake of something similar themselves and this concurs with the literature (Rhodes, Szabo and Warkentien, 2023). The community school

acts as a source of intergenerational cohesion, knowledge and security. Ursula referred to her rural area as one in which participants, sisters, mothers and daughters all went to the same school. Such social reproduction may not have been to her taste but for all those whom she witnessed, she perceived that it created a sense of security for them in not having to think about other schools. Though friends of their children did not impinge excessively on the choice of participants, friends do form part of a child's community which additionally gives them that sense of security.

### **5.3 Section Two: Contribution of the Research Study**

This research was conducted to understand the process of parents' decision-making on the choice of a Catholic post-primary school in Midwest Ireland. As far as the researcher is aware, few studies have been conducted on school choice of a Catholic post-primary school, from a parent's perspective. Most current studies include factors that influence parents' school-choice decisions and the barriers to parent engagement in the school-choice process. However, few studies allow the voices of parents in Catholic post-primary schools to be heard about how they make school-choice decisions for their children. It is the first study to examine how school choice is processed and viewed by New Irish parents and Irish parents. This is a small case study which is a non-generalisable case study, but it hopes to add to the extant literature and reveal the perspectives of a particular group of parents in Midwest Ireland in the 21st century. It may provide a foundation for further studies on parental choice or the perspectives of parents in Catholic schools or a background for researching pupils' experiences of choice of Catholic school.

## 5.4 Section Three Conclusion and Limitations

### *Conclusion*

As this study has demonstrated, school choice is not a simple process. It is neither finite nor always rational. It embodies many social factors (Reay, David and Ball, 2001). Sports, society and siblings all have their part to play in helping parents make that choice. This study set out to examine how parents chose a Catholic post-primary school for their child and so is the first study in Ireland that has examined the school choice experiences of New Irish parents and Irish parents. In fact, in Ireland, there is very little known about the experiences and perspectives of parents of their children's education from minority ethnic backgrounds (Adebayo and Heinz, 2023). This study concluded that school choice was not a level playing field for all participants.

New Irish parents navigated school choice from a disadvantaged position rather than from a rational consumer position. Bourdieu's theory of capital helps to bring to light the social inequality that hinders new Irish parents in their choice of school.

The school choice process according to this study was particularly difficult for New Irish parents as they lacked the social and cultural capital to make choices that answered their and their children's needs. These parents were at a knowledge disadvantage not knowing when to begin the process of finding schools or knowing how to access them. As they did not consider sports in the approach to school choice, they did not invoke the help of sports coaches and because they did not attend sports events, they were not privy to the information garnered from such networks. The CAS application form was limiting if they only wanted single-sex schools, as it was for anyone else who only wanted a single-sex or Catholic school. New Irish parents were new to the country where English was their second language and where the CAS form was only in English. The process of filling in the form was daunting and some got help with this. These parents were also adapting to a new culture and setting down roots and may have

had previous traumatic experiences that they had to deal with. The New Irish parents felt excluded as they perceived that Irish parents got the schools, they wanted but they, as New Irish parents did not know how to achieve similar access. They also felt that not only did they not get the schools that they wanted but having to take the schools they were assigned brought certain perceived dangers for their children because of anti-social behaviour in the city.

Admittedly, school choice was stressful for all participants and most participants shared the same requirements for their children. On the positive side, an important finding was that according to the parents, their children were happy in their faith schools. The exception to this was the importance that Irish participants attributed to sport when it came to matters of choice of a Catholic school which was revealed in answer to research question two, the factors that influence school choice. The finding of the significance of sport influencing school choice is an exciting idea. None of the schools in this study are private though some do provide sports and activities that demand extra expense, and which are not offered in DEIS schools. Sport can be an elitist symbol which in this study attracts participants who desire something better (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). Irish participants required sport to be an important part of their children's school life but Irish participants also used the social capital afforded them by sporting involvement to pave the way as they thought for their children. Sport was regarded as a means of promoting their child as most of their children loved sport. Conversely, the New Irish participants did not require sport to be part of their children's educational landscape, and neither were they aware of how some Irish participants erroneously thought sport could help them secure a place in a school of choice. The New Irish participants simply wanted a school that was safe to get to, accessible and would ultimately prepare them for university. The Irish participant required more, a school that would promote their child in sport, a school that had a good sporting reputation and a school that would prepare them for university. More extrinsic motivation of the child than intrinsic

was expected by Irish participants. Certain changes in school curricula are addressing the question of student autonomy and in time students will have to rely on intrinsic motivation.

In answering research question two regarding the gathering methods used, it was found that a variety of methods were invoked. They ranged from word of mouth, to visiting the school, to listening to former students, to family members, to friends in the education field but word of mouth or grapevine information remained the strongest. In a country such as Ireland, this may continue to be the case, but greater integration could lead to all having access to that information. Regarding research question three, choosing the school that best fits, participants chose the school that in their opinion best suited their children's sporting, social, personal and academic needs. Parents will continue to see their role as caregivers and mentors to their children and will try to do their best for them.

Though many participants in this study did not feel the need for a Catholic school to educate their child, there is still a place for Catholic schools in Irish society and parents who wish to avail of their ethos should be able to do so. 8 of the thirteen schools in this study were oversubscribed and possibly more which appears to indicate a demand. Current literature suggests that religious factors are important for parents (McGraw and Tiernan (2021); CPSMA/CSP/AMSCC (2019); O'Mahony (2008). The choice of parents to educate their children according to their values is enshrined in our Constitution. Despite many participants' indifference to a Catholic school they still upheld the values and ethos which are an integral part of Catholic schooling.

### ***Limitations of the research study***

The findings of this study are not representative of the whole population but a particular group of people at a fixed time and place and therefore cannot be generalised. A small sample

is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in-depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). However, Stake (1995) suggests that through its vivid and colourful thick description and socially embedded nature, “the intrinsic case study can be a small step toward generalisation” (1995, p. 141). This study has attempted to provide thick descriptions through the layering of data sources such as interviews and focus groups to illustrate the experiences of the participants and provide readers with a vivid picture and understanding of their motivations. The study only relates to participants who secured a place in a Catholic school in one area and is a bounded case study. Within this small case study, findings are not generalisable, but the data suggests that within this sample group, sport is important and choosing a Catholic school was only important to 2 or 3 participants. A limitation of this study may be that certain sectors of the population may have been excluded i.e. those New Irish who had limited English and those acting in *loco parentis* who may have chosen for the child but were not parents. The Irish participants of the study were middle-class parents and the New Irish parents were working class. These limitations would need to be taken into account in the interpretation of the findings.

## **5.5 Section Four: Considerations and Future Research**

Based on the analysis of the research findings, several key insights emerged regarding how parents choose a Catholic post-primary school in Midwest Ireland. These findings have certain implications for guiding future decision-making and they may provide the basis for the extension of research. The highlighted considerations aim to provide practical solutions to the challenges that face parents when choosing a post-primary school for their child.’

Though the findings are not generalisable, the data suggests that within this sample group sport is an important motivator of choice, that Catholic education matters to several, and though school choice is difficult for all parents it is particularly so for New Irish parents.

### *Considerations for Parents*

According to the Irish Constitution, parents have the right to educate their children in the faith/non-faith as they wish (Articles 42.1; 42.3). For parents who wish to choose a Catholic school for their children for Catholic reasons, they need to express this desire to the management of schools outlining their genuine reasons and arranging appointments with schools to do so, well in advance of application dates. Where parents have doubts or questions relating to school applications and choices, consulting management of primary and post-primary school is an option which should be pursued. Exley(2012) has suggested that more mentoring of parents by parents who have experience in school choice would be helpful. Trustees of Catholic schools, the Immigrant Council of Ireland(ICI), primary school teachers and principals, Government Departments and Local authorities already do enormous work for parents and can still be consulted by parents.

School transport is an issue that may be serving some well, but others are excluded. School transport is operated by Bus Eireann, a semi-state body which provides services on behalf of the Department of Education. In many cases, it is discretionary and concessionary. Participants in this study felt their school choice should not be influenced by the decisions of a bus company. At present there is no legal entitlement to transport even if a child meets the age and distance criteria. In the case of transport issues, this is a consideration that must be examined by the family but also by local authorities dealing with school transport. Parents may need to lobby for more entitlement to transport to the Catholic school of their choice and not just the nearest school. This again should be done earlier than later.

Recent curricular changes in Irish post-primary education are cultivating an autonomous learning approach and this is to be welcomed. Participants based their choices on how schools would encourage their children and the findings demonstrated how different groupings viewed how their children would learn. Parents may need to make themselves aware of new curricula and how their children will learn and thus prepare them for this.

The issue of 'white flight' occurring was addressed in this thesis. Participants intimated that there were 'other' schools that they would never contemplate attending and there were parents who felt that they would never be accepted in others. The government predicts a high level of net migration and a steady birth rate from 2025 (CSO, 2024a). Devine's (2011) prediction of the establishment of 'immigrant schools' as a result of school choice has already happened (p.11). School choice is a social matter that will need to be confronted by all parents so that children will grow up in a safer, more integrated and less segregated society.

### ***Future Research***

A critical step towards meaningful engagement and interaction with New Irish parents would be to further explore their first-hand experiences regarding choosing a school. It could examine their experiences as parents who were not educated in Ireland. Such a study could reveal ways in which the burden for them as choosers could be lessened.

A surprise of the study was that sport rather than academics seemed to be a more important matter affecting school choice. Future research regarding the importance of sport to school choice may prove fruitful. A further study might be conducted to verify if sport is an important factor in school choice elsewhere/ or in Ireland. With increasing sporting success among Irish athletes and especially with New Irish athletes representing the country, sport may soon have an impact nationally on the schools that parents choose. Subjects like P.E. may be adopted much more widely in schools as an exam subject to target students.

The findings of this study raise important questions as to how participants exercise school choice of Catholic schools. Though this study was limited to a particular area and is not generalisable it does point to issues that need to be further examined at a national level. Are there easier ways in which parents could choose schools? Is there sufficient, safe and convenient transport to schools especially for lower SES families? Is school choice leading to segregation? Will this lead to greater social problems and can we address these honestly and openly? How can parents who want a Catholic Post-primary education for their children, be supported?

Equally, further study may like to examine the motivations of parents who begin to think of post-primary school earlier or later than others and if it makes a difference in terms of success rates. A particular consideration would be to ascertain what parents do not say. There may be a discrepancy between what is said about gaining a place in a desired school and what is done behind the scenes in trying to achieve that place. How social and cultural capital is used and how a lack of it can be disadvantageous to certain members of society, could also be addressed.

## **5.6 An afterword**

This study has exemplified how parents choose a school, and what factors they consider important in that choice. Ultimately parents will choose the school that in their opinion best suits their child. Parents are free to choose but who is doing the choosing? Schools choose students based on those who have applied and given their No.1 choice to that school. One may ask if there is another method of assigning schools that is less worrying for participants. Should a system that has been described by Irish participants as ‘traumatic’, ‘daunting’ and a ‘wasteful exercise’ not be re-examined? The findings of this study suggest that offering families, especially New Irish families, more information on the school choice application process and

accepting them into schools within their areas would ease the burdens of school choice and integration. Offering accommodation in one area and expecting families of limited means to go to school in another area does not help them. Greater social good may be generated if New Irish were to be accommodated in their school choices.

Policies that determine access to education, health, housing and social welfare can have a profound effect on young migrants (Brazil, Cosgrave and Mannion, 2019). Young migrants and their parents arguably have much more to deal with than just choosing a school for their child. They lack the social and cultural capital to be fully informed. They are anxious about safety and security, finances, health and housing before they ever make a choice. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) would suggest that before you can successfully navigate schooling etc. basic concerns such as nourishment and safety must be satisfied. This non-generalisable study has demonstrated that New Irish and Irish parents are not on a level playing pitch when it comes to school choice. One may reasonably ask 'Does school choice really exist?'

The growing dominance of "Cultural Catholics" (Inglis, 2017) may signal the slow demise of Catholic schools. That demise might grow at a slightly slower pace in rural communities where the other bonds of community, for example, the GAA, may hold it together. Numbers attending Catholic churches have decreased in rural areas, but membership in GAA clubs is rising. Sport may have become the new religion of Ireland. It may well be the ingredient that parents look for in school choice and if the rural or urban Catholic school can offer that, so much the better. All we know is that in the game of school choice, there is no level playing field.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A Reasons a School Cannot Use for Selection

### Reasons a school cannot use for selection

(Source: <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/the-irish-education-system/admissions-policies-in-primary-and-secondary-schools/#9d5adb>)

A school cannot take the following reasons into account when selecting students:

- A student's attendance at a pre-school (although they may consider attendance at an early-intervention class or early-start pre-school)
- A student's academic ability, skills or aptitude (although these may be considered in applications for post-leaving certificate courses or further education courses or certain circumstances in special education (see below))
- The occupation, financial status, academic ability, skills or aptitudes of a student's parents
- Attendance by the student or their parents at an interview or open day (although an interview may be considered for admission to the residential element of a boarding school)
- The date and time the application was received by the school as long as it is submitted during the period set in the admission notice)

### Schools cannot discriminate on any of the following grounds:

- Gender
- Civil status
- Family status
- Sexual orientation
- Religion
- Disability
- Race
- Membership of the Traveller community
- Special educational needs

There are some exceptions to these rules:

#### **Gender**

If a school admits only students of one gender (such as an all-girls or all-boys school), it does not have to accept a student of a different gender.

#### **Religious ethos**

Many schools in Ireland promote certain religious values. These schools are not allowed to discriminate by admitting students of a particular religion in preference to others, except in the following circumstances:

- If a school aims to promote certain religious values, it can refuse to admit a student who is not of that religious denomination if it can prove that the refusal is essential to maintain the ethos of the school.
- If a school provides religious instruction or education in a minority religion, it can prioritise a student of that religion who wants to attend a school that provides religious instruction or education consistent with, or similar to, their religious beliefs.

Students have the right to attend a religious school without getting any religious instruction. (

(Source: <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/the-irish-education-system/admissions-policies-in-primary-and-secondary-schools/#9d5adb>)

## Appendix B Ethnicity CSO (2024a)

Ethnicity	Both sexes	Male	Female
All ethnic or cultural backgrounds	5,084,879	2,515,954	2,568,925
White Irish	3,893,056	1,921,947	1,971,109
White Irish Traveller	32,949	16,172	16,777
Roma	16,059	8,548	7,511
Any other White background	502,081	245,378	256,703
Black or Black Irish - African	67,546	32,811	34,735
Black or Black Irish - any other Black background	8,699	4,382	4,317
Asian or Asian Irish - Chinese	26,828	12,370	14,458
Asian or Asian Irish - Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi	94,434	50,766	43,668
Asian or Asian Irish - any other Asian background	44,944	19,396	25,548
Arab	20,115	10,968	9,147
Other including mixed background	64,992	31,602	33,390
Not stated	313,176	161,614	151,562

## Appendix C Religions CSO (2024a)

Religion	2011	2016	2022
All religions	4,525,281	4,689,921	5,084,879
Roman Catholic	3,831,187	3,696,644	3,515,861
No religion	256,830	451,941	736,210
Not stated	68,668	119,349	339,562
Church of Ireland, England, Anglican, Episcopalian	124,445	122,612	124,749
Orthodox (Greek, Coptic, Russian)	44,003	60,777	100,165
Islam	48,130	62,032	81,930
Christian (Not Specified)	39,652	35,996	37,370
Hindu	10,302	13,729	33,043
Presbyterian	22,835	22,188	22,699
Other stated religion (nec)	17,897	19,454	21,220
Apostolic or Pentecostal	13,876	13,193	13,500
Buddhist	8,355	9,358	9,053
Evangelical	3,972	9,368	8,646
Jehovah's Witness	6,024	6,264	6,332
Methodist, Wesleyan	6,280	5,847	5,106
Protestant	4,263	4,269	4,657
Baptist	3,219	3,642	4,068
Pagan, Pantheist	1,883	2,645	3,809
Lutheran	5,048	4,549	3,391
Spiritualist	0	2,922	3,293
Lapsed (Roman) Catholic	1,268	8,094	3,254
Born Again Christian	0	2,565	3,138
Agnostic	3,393	5,006	2,881
Atheist	3,751	7,477	942

# Appendix D Common Application System (CAS) Form

School Stamp

Limerick Area

Post-primary Schools

School Use Only

## Applicant Personal Details

GDPR

2024-2025

Surname: \_\_\_\_\_ First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ P.P.S. No: \_\_\_\_\_ Religion: \_\_\_\_\_

Nationality: \_\_\_\_\_ Parish in which you live: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: (all

Correspondence  
will issue to this address)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Primary  
School:

\_\_\_\_\_ Eircode: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Parent / Guardian 1 - Personal Details Parent / Guardian 2 - Personal Details

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Surname: \_\_\_\_\_ First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Surname: \_\_\_\_\_ First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact No.: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please provide details **IF** parent(s)/guardian(s) **PREVIOUSLY** attended any of the schools listed overleaf:

<i>Name</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Years of attendance</i>

**Sibling(s) School Details**

Please state the name of any brothers or sisters **CURRENTLY** attending any of the post-primary schools listed overleaf. **Name**

\_\_\_\_\_ **School** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **School** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **School** \_\_\_\_\_

Please state the names of brothers or sisters who **PREVIOUSLY** attended any of the schools listed overleaf:

<i>Name</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Years of attendance</i>

**Please read the CAS Information Sheet before you fill in this form**

It is MOST IMPORTANT for parent(s)/guardian(s) to indicate **11** schools on this form to which they are applying in descending order of choice. **Forms will be returned where 11 choices are not identified.**

Parent(s)/Guardian(s) should review the Admissions Policies and Admissions Notices for each of the chosen schools on the list. Only those schools identified in order of choice will be empowered to consider your application. If your child is unsuccessful in obtaining their first choice, their application form will be sent to the next school on this list in order of the descending preferences outlined below, **provided that you consent to data sharing in the GDPR section of this form.**

**PLEASE NOTE: Only ONE application can be processed for each child.**

*Please fill in your choices 1-11*

<b>Ardscuil Mhuire</b> ( <i>girls</i> ), Corbally, Limerick.	
<b>Ardscuil Ris</b> ( <i>boys</i> ), North Circular Road, Limerick.	
<b>Castletroy College</b> ( <i>co-ed</i> ), Newtown, Castletroy, Co. Limerick	

Coláiste Chiaráin ( <i>co-ed</i> ), Croom, Co. Limerick.	
Coláiste Mhichíl ( <i>boys</i> ), Sexton Street, Limerick.	
Coláiste Nano Nagle ( <i>girls</i> ) Sexton Street, Limerick	
Crescent College Comprehensive S.J. ( <i>co-ed</i> ), Dooradoyle, Limerick.	
Gaelcholáiste Luimnigh ( <i>co-ed, All Irish</i> ), Sir Harry's Mall, Limerick.	
Laurel Hill Coláiste F.C.J. ( <i>girls, All Irish</i> ), South Circular Road, Limerick.	
Laurel Hill Secondary School F.C.J. ( <i>girls</i> ), South Circular Road, Limerick.	
Limerick Educate Together Secondary School ( <i>co-ed</i> ) Groody Rd, Castletroy, Limerick	
Mungret Community College ( <i>co-ed</i> ) Mungret, Co. Limerick	
Salesian Secondary College ( <i>co-ed</i> ), Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick.	
St. Clements College ( <i>boys</i> ), South Circular Road, Limerick.	
St. Munchin's College ( <i>boys</i> ), Corbally, Limerick.	
Thomond Community College ( <i>co-ed</i> ) Moylish Park, Limerick	
Villiers School ( <i>co-ed, Fee Paying</i> ), North Circular Road, Limerick.	

Please return the completed Application Form to the **Principal at the Number 1 School of your choice** by 4.00 pm on Monday 15th January 2024. Please enclose an A4 sized stamped, self-addressed envelope. Please note that the responsibility for making an application, and ensuring that it is submitted in time, rests with the parent(s)/guardian(s). **The school will acknowledge receipt of the form, if you do not receive an acknowledgement, you must contact the school directly, before the closing date.**

By submitting this application, I/We hereby agree to follow the CAS application process as administered by Limerick Education Support Centre. I/We have read and accept the Admission & Enrolment Policies of the relevant schools.

Parent/Guardian 1 signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Parent/Guardian 2

signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **GDPR**

### **Important notice regarding your data**

Please note that the school of your first choice receives this form and has access to the data you have provided. This school is the data controller. Please consult this school's Data Protection & GDPR Policies for further information regarding their data protection and retention policies.

If you provide consent at No. 1 below, a copy of this form and the data provided therein is forwarded by the school of first choice to

Limerick Education Support Centre (LESC) for the purposes of administering the Common Application System on behalf of the Limerick Principals & Deputy Principals Association – LPDPA (i.e., the 17 post-primary schools in the CAS system). LESC records this data on a database and this data is retained for a period of three years. Limerick Education Support Centre is the data processor.

If you provide consent at No. 2 below, if your child/ward does not receive the school of their first choice, a copy of this form and the data provided therein will be forwarded by Limerick Education Support Centre, to the schools listed 2-11, in order of preference. The data will be shared, as required, with up to 11 schools, in line with the preferences indicated. Each school that receives the form becomes a data controller. Please consult each school’s individual Data Protection & GDPR Policies for further information regarding their data protection and retention policies

All decisions in relation to enrolment are made by each individual school. If you have any queries in relation to enrolment, please contact the school of first choice (or subsequent school where relevant)

**Please read the Privacy Notice carefully before you sign this form**  
**The Privacy Notice is available on each school’s website**

**PLEASE INDICATE YOUR PREFERENCE TO BOTH No. 1 & No. 2 BELOW**

**1) Consent to data sharing between the school of first choice & Limerick Education Support Centre**

**I consent** to the school of my first choice sharing my data and the data in respect of my child/ward \_\_\_\_\_ (name of child) with Limerick Education Support Centre for the purpose of administering the Common Application Scheme.

**I do not consent** to the school of my first choice sharing my data and the data in respect of my child/ward \_\_\_\_\_ (name of child) with Limerick Education Support Centre. **I understand that if I do not give this consent, it will not be possible to process the application under the CAS Scheme.**

Parent/Guardian 1 signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Parent/Guardian 2  
signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ -----

----- **2) Consent to data sharing with the schools listed 2-11 on the CAS form**

**I consent** to Limerick Education Support Centre sharing my data and the data in respect of my child/ward \_\_\_\_\_ (name of child) with the other schools listed in the numbered preferences on this completed form.

**I do not consent** to Limerick Education Support Centre sharing my data and the data in respect of my child/ward \_\_\_\_\_ (name of child) with the other schools listed in the numbered preferences on this completed form. I understand that if consent for the sharing of data between schools is not provided, the CAS form will be submitted to the school of first choice only and to Limerick Education Support Centre. It will not be shared with any of the schools listed 2-11. **I understand that this may result in my child/ward not securing a place in a post-primary school in the Common Application System area.**

Parent/Guardian 1 signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Parent/Guardian 2  
signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E Plain Language Statement

My name is Jude Murphy and as part of my professional doctoral thesis in religious education in the School of Policy and Practice, DCU Institute of Education I am carrying out some research entitled “An investigation of the factors and processes involved in the choice of a Catholic post-primary school for parents in the Midwest.”

Contact details: jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie

Principal Investigators / Research Supervisors Dr Sabrina Fitzsimons Contact details:

sabrina.fitzsimons@dcu.ie and Dr. Elaine McDonald Contact Details:

elaine.mcdonald@dcu.ie

The purpose of my research study is to examine how parents make the school-choice decision of a post-primary Catholic school for their children. It will focus on the parents of First Year such as yourself who experienced the application process of your school a few months ago. This research is being conducted in order to understand parents’ decision-making regarding school choice of a Catholic school as few studies have been conducted from a parent’s perspective and to give them a voice in what it is like to make a decision to send your child to a Catholic post-primary school. Most current studies include factors that influence parents’ school-choice decisions and the barriers to parent engagement in the school-choice process, but few studies allow the voices of parents in Catholic post-primary schools to be heard about how they make school-choice decisions for their children.

If you decide to participate in this study you may follow this link which contains a short questionnaire (embedded link to be inserted here). I will then contact you and we will arrange a face-to-face or digital interview with me lasting approximately 20 minutes. The interview will be semi-structured and recorded. Before the interview proceeds you will be asked to sign a consent form. After the interviews, the recording will be transcribed and the recording destroyed. The transcription will then be analysed. After the interviews have been transcribed and initial data has been analysed, 2 groups of 4 people (from those people who indicated an interest in the study) will be invited to participate in an online focus group lasting approximately 40 minutes. You will be furnished with a consent form prior to your participation.

Any individual who decides to participate in the study will have their anonymity protected. No personal information such as first or second names or school or personal addresses is required in the study. At no point will you be identified nor will your child’s school know that you have participated. Your details will be coded and stored securely in a password-protected DCU Google Drive folder by the student researcher (Jude Murphy) and principal investigators and research supervisors (Dr. Sabrina Fitzsimons and Dr. Elaine McDonald)

All material emanating from the questionnaire and interview will be strictly confidential. However confidentiality of information provided cannot always be guaranteed by researchers. 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. Any individual that takes part in the study will have the right to withdraw at any stage and not be

asked for a reason. It will not be known what parents from what school were interviewees.

There will be no risk to you in participating in this research.

Any individual that takes part in the study will have the right to make contact with me, the research supervisors, the data controller or the university ethics committee if they have any queries or concerns.

Data will be stored on a DCU Google Drive folder between the student researcher (Jude Murphy) and principal investigators and research supervisors (Dr. Sabrina Fitzsimons and Dr . Elaine Mc Donald).

The data will be analysed and retained for a period of five years when it will be destroyed by the principal investigators and research supervisors and student researcher. The data controller for this study is DCU. Please note the contact details for the DCU Data Protection Officer: Mr. Martin Ward.

Contact details : data.protection@dcu.ie Ph.(01)7005118/ (01)7008257

By taking part in this study you could benefit from identifying why other parents of students in the class of 2022 have chosen this type of education for their child. You may help post-primary Catholic schools identify what parents expect or want from schools. Equally schools may identify what is /is not important to parents in planning for their future learning. An indirect benefit of participating in this study is you will be contributing to research in this area by providing your expertise through the interviews.

When the interview has been transcribed you will be allowed to read it and suggest any amendments. Results of the project will be available on request once the student researcher has submitted and passed all the academic requirements for the doctoral thesis.

Your rights under the GDPR act are as follows:

17. The right to be informed
18. The right of access
19. The right to rectification
20. The right to erasure
21. The right to restrict processing
22. The right to data portability
23. The right to object
24. Rights in relation to automated decision-making and profiling

Further information on these rights can be obtained on a website developed by the Data Protection Commission: gdprandyou.ie and the following URL will direct you to a page outlining your rights under GDPR:

<https://www.dataprotection.ie/en/individuals/rights-individuals-under-general-data-protection-regulation>. 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 F Email to school Principals and Chairpersons of Boards of Management (2) Chairperson of CSPN (3) Chairperson of Le Chéile and (4) Chairperson of Céist Schools Trust.

January 2023

Dear Principal (name) and Chairperson of Board of Management /Chairperson of CSPN/Chairperson of Le Chéile /Chairperson of Céist Schools Trust

My name is Jude Murphy, and I am a Doctor of Education candidate at the Institute of Education, Dublin City University (DCU). I would like to thank you for taking the time to read this email and hopefully help me in my research. My research interest is in parent school choice decision-making regarding the school choice of a Catholic post-primary school in 2022. I am specifically interested in the experiences of parents in the Midwest Region.

I would be very grateful if you would forward the attached letter of invitation to participate, to the parents of your current first years asking them if they would be interested in participating in an interview regarding their choice of a Catholic post-primary school. I am attaching a copy of my plain language statement to indicate to you what the study is about. You will not have to do anything else as the letter (attached) will have an embedded link so that parents can contact me directly if interested. Renewed appreciation and thanking you in anticipation,

Jude Murphy  
[jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie)

Attachment (Letter/ Email to parents)

January 2023

Dear Parent(s)/ Guardian:

My name is Jude Murphy and as part of my professional doctoral thesis in religious education in the School of Policy and Practice, DCU Institute of Education I am carrying out some research entitled “An investigation of the factors and processes involved in the choice of a Catholic Post- Primary school for parents in the Midwest.”

Contact details: [jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie)

Principal Investigators / Research Supervisors Dr Sabrina Fitzsimons Contact details: [sabrina.fitzsimons@dcu.ie](mailto:sabrina.fitzsimons@dcu.ie) and Dr Elaine McDonald Contact Details: [elaine.mcdonald@dcu.ie](mailto:elaine.mcdonald@dcu.ie)

The purpose of my research study is to examine how parents make the school-choice decision of a post-primary Catholic school for their children. It will focus on the parents of First Year such as yourself who experienced the application process of your school a few months ago. This research is being conducted in order to understand parents’ decision-making regarding school choice of a Catholic school, as few studies have been conducted from a parent’s perspective and to give them a voice in what it is like to make a decision to send your child to a Catholic post-primary school. Most current studies include factors that influence parents’ school-choice decisions and the barriers to parent engagement in the school-choice process,

but few studies allow the voices of parents in Catholic post-primary schools to be heard about how they make school-choice decisions for their children.

### Benefit

By taking part in this study, you could benefit from identifying why other parents of students in the class of 2022 have chosen this type of education for their child. You may help post-primary Catholic schools identify what parents expect or want from schools. Equally schools may identify what is /is not important to parents in planning for their future learning. An indirect benefit of participating in this study is you will be contributing to research in this area by providing your expertise through the interviews.

### What will you have to do?

If you decide to participate in this study, you may follow this link (embedded link to be inserted here) which contains a short questionnaire. I will then contact you and we will arrange a face to face or digital interview with me lasting approximately 20 minutes. The interview will be semi-structured in nature and recorded. Before the interview proceeds you will be asked to complete and sign a consent form. After the interviews, the recording will be transcribed and the recording destroyed. The transcription will then be analysed.

### Anonymity

Any individual who decides to participate in the study will have their anonymity protected. No personal information such as first or second names or school or personal addresses are required in the study. At no point will you be identified, nor will your child's school know that you have participated.

Your details will be coded and stored securely in a password-protected DCU Google Drive folder by the student researcher (Jude Murphy) and principal investigators and research supervisors (Dr. Sabrina Fitzsimons and Dr. Elaine McDonald). All material emanating from the questionnaire and interview will be strictly confidential. However, the confidentiality of information provided cannot always be guaranteed by researchers. 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.

Any individual who takes part in the study will have the right to withdraw at any stage and not be asked for a reason. It will not be known what parents from what school were interviewees. There will be no risk to you in participating in this research.

Any individual that takes part in the study will have the right to make contact with me , the research supervisors , the data controller or the university ethics committee if they have any queries or concerns.

Data will be stored in a DCU Google Drive folder between the student researcher (Jude Murphy) and principal investigators and research supervisors (Dr. Sabrina Fitzsimons and Dr. Elaine McDonald). The data will be analysed and retained for a period of five years when it will be destroyed by the principal investigators and research supervisors and student researcher. The data controller for this study is DCU. Please note the contact details for the DCU Data Protection Officer: Mr. Martin Ward.

Contact details: data.protection@dcu.ie Ph.(01)7005118/ (01)7008257

Results of the project will be available on request once the student researcher has submitted and passed all the academic requirements for the doctoral thesis.

Your rights under GDPR act are as follows:

1. The right to be informed
2. The right of access
3. The right to rectification
4. The right to erasure
5. The right to restrict processing
6. The right to data portability
7. The right to object
8. Rights in relation to automated decision-making and profiling

Further information on these rights can be obtained on a website developed by the Data Protection Commission: [gdprandyou.ie](http://gdprandyou.ie) and the following URL will direct you to a page outlining your rights under GDPR:

<https://www.dataprotection.ie/en/individuals/rights-individuals-under-general-data-protection-regulation>

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 0863554179. My email address is [jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie)

If you 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](mailto:rec@dcu.ie)

Kind regards,  
Jude Murphy

## Appendix G Proposal Letter to Parents

Dear Parent(s)/ Guardian:

My name is Jude Murphy and as part of my professional doctoral thesis in religious education in the School of Policy and Practice , DCU Institute of Education I am carrying out some research entitled “ An investigation of the factors and processes involved in the choice of a Catholic Post- Primary school for parents in the Midwest.”

Contact details: jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie

Principal Investigators / Research Supervisors Dr. Sabrina Fitzsimons Contact details:

sabrina.fitzsimons@dcu.ie and Dr. Elaine McDonald Contact Details:

elaine.mcdonald@dcu.ie

The purpose of my research study is to examine how parents make the school-choice decision of a post-primary Catholic school for their children . It will focus on the parents of First Year such as yourself who experienced the application process of your school a few months ago. This research is being conducted in order to understand parents’ decision- making regarding school choice of a Catholic school, as few studies have been conducted from a parent’s perspective and to give them a voice in what it is like to make a decision to send your child to a Catholic post-primary school. Most current studies include factors that influence parents’ school choice decisions and the barriers to parent engagement in the school-choice process, but few studies allow the voices of parents in Catholic post-primary schools to be heard about how they make school-choice decisions for their children.

### Benefit

By taking part in this study you could benefit from identifying why other parents of students in the class of 2022 have chosen this type of education for their child. You may help post-primary Catholic schools identify what parents expect or want from schools. Equally schools may identify what is /is not important to parents in planning for their future learning. An indirect benefit of participating in this study is you will be contributing to research in this area by providing your expertise through the interviews.

### What will you have to do?

If you decide to participate in this study you may follow this link (embedded link to be inserted here) which contains a short questionnaire. I will then contact you and we will arrange a face-to-face or digital interview with me lasting approximately 20 minutes. The interview will be semi-structured and recorded. Before the interview proceeds you will be asked to complete and sign a consent form. After the interviews, the recording will be transcribed and the recording destroyed. The transcription will then be analysed.

### Anonymity

Any individual who decides to participate in the study will have their anonymity protected. No personal information such as first or second names or school or personal addresses are required in the study. At no point will you be identified nor will your child’s school know that you have participated.

Your details will be coded and stored securely in a password protected DCU Google Drive folder by the student researcher (Jude Murphy) and principal investigators and research

supervisors (Dr Sabrina Fitzsimons and Dr Elaine McDonald). All material emanating from the questionnaire and interview will be strictly confidential.

However, confidentiality of information provided cannot always be guaranteed by researchers. 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.

Any individual who takes part in the study will have the right to withdraw at any stage and not be asked for a reason. It will not be known what parents from what school were interviewees. There will be no risk to you in participating in this research.

Any individual that takes part in the study will have the right to make contact with me , the research supervisors , the data controller or the university ethics committee if they have any queries or concerns.

Data will be stored in a DCU Google Drive folder between the student researcher (Jude Murphy) and principal investigators and research supervisors (Dr Sabrina Fitzsimons and Dr Elaine McDonald). The data will be analysed and retained for a period of five years when it will be destroyed by the principal investigators and research supervisors and student researcher. The data controller for this study is DCU. Please note the contact details for the DCU Data Protection Officer: Mr. Martin Ward.

Contact details : data.protection@dcu.ie Ph.(01)7005118/ (01)7008257

Results of the project will be available on request once the student researcher has submitted and passed all the academic requirements for the doctoral thesis.

Your rights under GDPR act are as follows:

1. The right to be informed
2. The right of access
3. The right to rectification
4. The right to erasure
5. The right to restrict processing
6. The right to data portability
7. The right to object
8. Rights in relation to automated decision-making and profiling

Further information on these rights can be obtained on a website developed by the Data Protection Commission: gdprandyou.ie and the following URL will direct you to a page outlining your rights under GDPR:

<https://www.dataprotection.ie/en/individuals/rights-individuals-under-general-data-protection-regulation>

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 0863554179. My email address is jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie

If you 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

Kind regards,  
Jude Murphy

## Appendix H Demographics Questionnaire/ Survey

The following information is designed to give the researcher background information that will assist with the interpretation of the research data. Your responses are voluntary and will remain completely confidential. Please answer all the questions to the best of your ability. Thank you for your participation in this research study.

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Gender: M \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_ Prefer not to say \_\_\_\_\_

3. Country of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Education Level: \_\_\_\_\_ (Primary school, Post-primary School, Technical/Trade, Bachelor's degree, Master's, Doctorate)

5. Employed: Y \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_

6. Marital Status: \_\_\_\_\_ Single \_\_\_\_\_ Live with partner \_\_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced  
\_\_\_\_\_ Remarried \_\_\_\_\_ Widowed

7. What is your religion? Tick one box with an X

- Roman Catholic
- Church of Ireland
- Presbyterian
- Methodist
- Islam
- Other (write in your religion)

- No Religion

8. Did you or the child's other parent attend a Catholic post- primary school?

9. Did your attendance at a Catholic post-primary school influence your decision to choose a Catholic post-primary school for your child? Y \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_ Maybe \_\_\_\_\_

10. Was there a choice of other schools available to you when choosing your child's school?  
Y \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

11. Tick the box that best describes the school your child is attending.

- Single-sex rural
  - Single-sex Urban
  - Mixed Rural
  - Mixed Urban
  - Single-sex Rural DEIS
  - Single-sex Urban DEIS
  - Mixed Rural DEIS
  - Mixed Urban DEIS
- Other (Write in the box)

12. For you to participate in the semi-structured interviews, please indicate your email address.

13. Any other information you wish to add?

Thank You

## Appendix I Subscription levels of all CAS schools in the region of study

SCHOOL	STATUS	DEIS SCHOOL S	DENOMINATION	GENDER M/F/Mix
Ardcoil Mhuire, Corbally, Limerick.	Oversubscribed	DEIS	Catholic	F
Ardcoil Ris (boys), North Circular Road, Limerick	Oversubscribed		Catholic	M
Castletroy College (co-ed), Newtown, Castletroy, Co. Limerick	Oversubscribed			Mixed
Coláiste Chiaráin (co-ed), Croom, Co. Limerick.	Oversubscribed	DEIS		Mixed
Coláiste Mhichil (boys), CBS Sexton Street, Limerick.	All applications accepted	DEIS	Catholic	M
Coláiste Nano Nagle (girls), Sexton Street, Limerick.	Oversubscribed	DEIS	Catholic	F
Crescent College Comprehensive S.J. (co-ed), Dooradoyle, Limerick	Oversubscribed		Catholic	Mixed
Gaelcholáiste Luimnigh (co-ed, All Irish), Sir Harry's Mall, Limerick	Unknown			Mixed
Laurel Hill Coláiste F.C.J. (girls, All Irish), South Circular Road, Limerick	Unknown		Catholic	F
Laurel Hill Secondary School F.C.J. (girls), South Circular Road, Limerick.	Oversubscribed		Catholic	F
Limerick Educate Together Secondary School (co-ed), Castletroy, Co. Limerick.	Oversubscribed			Mixed
Mungret Community College (co-ed), Mungret, Co. Limerick.	Unknown			Mixed
Salesian Secondary College (co-ed), Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick.	Unknown		Catholic	Mixed
St. Clements's College (boys), South Circular Road, Limerick.	Unknown	DEIS	Catholic	M
St. Munchin's College (boys), Corbally, Limerick	Oversubscribed		Catholic	M
Thomond Community College (co-ed), Moylish Park, Limerick	Oversubscribed	DEIS		Mixed
Villiers Secondary School (co-ed, Fee Charging), North Circular Road, Limerick.	Unknown		Church of Ireland	Mixed

Status information extracted from Graphic: Paul Scott Source Department of Education survey (2023) of school capacity for first-year students at post-primary level. Courtesy of Carl O'Brien (The Irish Times March 18 2024 05.00) Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2024/03/18/where-are-the-most-oversubscribed-secondary-schools/>

Information also extracted from each school's Annual Admission Notice 2024-2025

DEIS/NON-DEIS descriptors courtesy of assets.gov.ie

<https://assets.gov.ie/39195/d56ceff4f65d4782b1cc87323a5f72c5.xls>

The two schools in Shannon mentioned by respondents were St. Caimin's Community School (Oversubscribed) and St. Patricks Comprehensive School (Unknown subscription status)

## Appendix J Consent Form

“An investigation of the factors and processes involved in the choice of a Catholic post-primary school for parents in Mid-West of Ireland”

Principal Investigators: Dr. Sabrina Fitzsimons [sabrina.fitzsimons@dcu.ie](mailto:sabrina.fitzsimons@dcu.ie) and Dr Elaine McDonald [elaine.mcdonald@dcu.ie](mailto:elaine.mcdonald@dcu.ie)

Student Researcher: Jude Murphy Institute of Education DCU [jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie)

The purpose of my research study is to examine how parents make the school-choice decision of a post -primary Catholic school for their children.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to reply to this link (link with short questionnaire to be embedded here) I will then contact you and we will arrange a face to face or digital interview with me lasting approximately 20 minutes. The interview will be semi-structured in nature and recorded. Before the interview proceeds you will be asked to sign a consent form online.

After the interviews, the recording will be transcribed and the recording destroyed. The transcription will then be analysed. After the interviews have been transcribed and initial data has been analysed, 2 groups of 4 people (from those people who indicated an interest in the study) will be invited to participate in an online focus group lasting approximately 40 minutes. You will be furnished with a consent form prior to your participation. Participation in the project is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw at any point. If you decide to participate in the study your anonymity will be protected. No personal information such as first or second names or school or personal addresses is required in the study. At no point will you be identified, nor will your child’s school know that you have participated. Your details will be coded and stored securely in a password-protected DCU Google Drive folder by the student researcher (Jude Murphy) and principal investigators and research supervisors (Dr. Sabrina Fitzsimons and Dr. Elaine McDonald. All material emanating from the questionnaire and interview will be strictly confidential. However, the confidentiality of information provided cannot always be guaranteed by researchers. 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.

The data controller for this study is DCU. Please note the contact details for the DCU Data Protection Officer: Mr. Martin Ward Contact details: [data.protection@dcu.ie](mailto:data.protection@dcu.ie) Ph. (01)7005118/(01)7008257

### **Please confirm the following (Circle Yes or No for each question) Online.**

- |   |         |
|---|---------|
| I have read the Plain Language Statement  | Yes/No. |
| I understand I can withdraw from the Research study at any point  | Yes/No. |
| I understand the information provided   | Yes/No. |
| I have read and understand the arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations. | Yes/No. |
| I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions  | Yes/No. |
| I have read and understand confirmations relating to any other relevant information as indicated in the Plain Language Statement  | Yes/No. |
| I understand the information provided about data protection   | Yes/No. |

I consent to participate in the research study

Yes/No.

The data from this questionnaire and interview will be analysed and retained for a period of five years when it will be destroyed by the principal investigator and research supervisors (Dr Sabrina Fitzsimons and Dr Elaine McDonald) and researcher Jude Murphy.

I consent to the use of my data for future studies and publications.

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 K Interview Protocol and Alignment with Theoretical Framework

### Research Questions Theoretical Framework Interview Questions

Research Questions	Theoretical Framework	Interview Questions
<p><b>How do parents in the Mid-West of Ireland choose a Catholic post-primary school for their children?</b></p>	<p><b>Rational Choice theory Bourdieu's Theory of Capital</b></p>	
<p><b>What factors do parents consider when choosing a Catholic post-primary school for their children?</b></p>	<p><b>Parental Role Construction Theory and Rational choice theory Bourdieu's Theory of Capital</b></p>	<p><b>What type of school did your child previously attend? Did you choose his/ her post-primary school from among many others? What schools were available to you? Did you use a common application form? What are the most important things you want in a school? What factors did you consider when choosing your child's current school? Why did you choose a Catholic school for your Child? Thinking back, were these factors given equal weight?</b></p>

<p><b>How do parents gather information about the schools available to their children?</b></p>	<p><b>Parental Self-efficacy</b></p> <p><b>Bourdieu's Theory of Capital</b></p>	<p><b>How did you gather information about the schools available to your child? / What sources did you use? Did you consult league tables?</b></p> <p><b>How accessible was the information about the school?</b></p> <p><b>To what extent did you think your resources were reliable?</b></p> <p><b>Did you or your child's other parent attend a Catholic post-primary school?</b></p> <p><b>Do you expect your child's school to pass on the Catholic faith to your child?</b></p> <p><b>Are you a practicing Catholic?</b></p>
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<p><b>How do parents choose the school that best suits their children?</b></p>	<p><b>Rational choice theory, parental self-efficacy and parental role construction Theory</b></p> <p><b>Rational Choice Theory</b></p> <p><b>Bourdieu's Theory of Capital</b></p>	<p><b>How did you make the decision about the school that best fits your Preferences?</b></p> <p><b>What characteristics of your child aided your decision on this school? Describe the expectations you have for the school?</b></p>
--	--	---

	<p><b>Rational choice Theory and Parental self-efficacy</b></p> <p><b>Parental Role construction theory and parental self-efficacy</b></p> <p><b>Bourdieu's Theory of Capital</b></p>	<p><b>To what extent do you feel comfortable making decisions about your child's school?</b></p> <p><b>To what extent do you feel you made the right decision?</b></p> <p><b>Are you satisfied with the variety of school choices available to you?</b></p>
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## Appendix L Interview Protocol (Numbered)

### Final phrasing of Interview questions and numbered for explanatory purposes

1. Talk to me about when you first started considering post-primary and what it was like for you.
2. Tell me about what post-primary schools are available to you and why you picked the one they are now attending.
3. And are you satisfied with the variety of school choices that are available to parents?
4. Tell me about the process of filling the application form. (You may have filled the Common application form with the rankings)
5. What factors did you consider most important when choosing the school?
6. How did you gather information about the schools? (Prompts: open nights, websites, league tables, inspection reports)
7. Is it easy for parents to get hold of information about post-primary schools?
8. Do you think the sources of information are reliable? (Prompt: Are they accurate)?
9. What needs of your child did you consider when choosing the school?
10. What are your expectations for your child from this school?
11. Did you feel comfortable having to make decisions about your child's school?
12. You had a variety to choose from, how did you finally make the decision?
13. Do you feel you made the right decision?  
I know the school your child now attends is a Catholic school.
14. Do you expect the school to pass on the Catholic faith to your child?
15. Are you a practising Catholic?
16. Is there anything else you'd like to add that I haven't asked you about or commentary you'd like to make on the whole school choice process for parents in general.

## Appendix M Focus Group Protocol

All the people I have interviewed have chosen a Catholic Post -Primary school for their children and you have all chosen a Catholic post-primary school for your children. A few themes have emerged, and I would just like to get your opinions on them.

Q1. In your opinion what kind of research, if any, do you think parents do before choosing a Post-primary school for their child?

Q2. What do you think are the characteristics that attract parents to the chosen Catholic post-primary school? Some people have mentioned things like -proximity, academics, sports, size, new build. What do you think?

Q3. What expectations do you think parents have for their children in their chosen post-primary Catholic school? Some have said it is to build on the sacraments already received in primary school, or to get a general education. What are your views?

Q4. Has a Catholic school got any advantage over other types of school? I have heard people say things like the school deals promptly with bullying, has a long history of education etc. Would you agree?

Q5. Do you think parents are comfortable with having to decide on a school for their child? Some say it is stressful, others are quite happy going through the process. Some people commented on ranking schools on the application form. I'd like to hear your views on the topic.

Q6. I have heard various reasons why parents have sent their child to a Catholic school. What factors do you think they consider?

Does anyone have something else they want to add?

## Appendix N Focus Group Letter of Consent

(Issued separately, to those invited to participate in the focus group)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a focus group based on the study: An investigation of the factors and processes involved in the choice of a Catholic post-primary school for parents in the Midwest of Ireland.

Principal Investigators: Dr. Sabrina Fitzsimons [sabrina.fitzsimons@dcu.ie](mailto:sabrina.fitzsimons@dcu.ie) and Dr. Elaine McDonald [elaine.mcdonald@dcu.ie](mailto:elaine.mcdonald@dcu.ie)

Student Researcher: Jude Murphy Institute of Education DCU [jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:jude.murphy277@mail.dcu.ie)

Your participation in the focus group will last approximately 40 minutes.

I do not anticipate any discomfort to you from being in the study and I will emphasize to all participants the importance of confidentiality. However, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group. I encourage you to be honest and open, but to remain aware of these limits in protecting confidentiality. Confidentiality of information provided cannot always be guaranteed by researchers. 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.

The data controller for this study is DCU. Please note the contact details for the DCU Data Protection Officer: Mr. Martin Ward Contact details: [data.protection@dcu.ie](mailto:data.protection@dcu.ie) Ph. (01)7005118/(01)7008257

In the focus groups questions are directed to the group, not to individuals. You have the right to: (a) not answer a question, (b) withdraw from the study at any time during the process.

The discussion will be recorded and retained for a period of 5 years and destroyed after analysis by the principal investigator and research supervisors (Dr Sabrina Fitzsimons and Dr Elaine McDonald) and researcher Jude Murphy.

Please confirm the following (Circle Yes or No for each question) Online

I have read the Plain Language Statement Yes/No.

I understand I can withdraw from the Research study at any point Yes/No.

I understand the information provided Yes/No.

I have read and understand the arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations Yes/No

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

I have read and understand confirmations relating to any other relevant information as indicated in the Plain Language Statement Yes/No.

I understand the information provided about data protection Yes/No.

I consent to the use of my data for future studies and publications.

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 a focus group.

Participants Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Name in Block Capitals: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix O Example of Audit Trail Notes

12 April 2023 Rearranging of questions from formal to less formal language. This was something I learned after a few interviews and especially for New Irish interviews.

Phase 1 Familiarising myself with data. -Rereading transcripts.

August 22, 2023- Phase 2 did the first manual auto coding of data. Word doc with 2 column 'code' and 'reason for inclusion' / definition. (called doc. Auto codes Respondent 1)

August 23rd, 2023- Started project on NWIVO. As I was using a Mac, slightly different from in-person workshops and I initially saved on iCloud docs instead of docs then iCloud backups. Tried to see if I could back up on Google Drive but would not allow me.

August 24th- Reassessed manual coding (of August 22nd) and changed headings to Open code, definition/rule for inclusion, data, Participant, and Memo as I felt it was not explanatory enough and it would make it more difficult to import to NWIVO. I wished to also do this as it has been said that one of the disadvantages of using CADQS is introducing new categories later. Called this doc. "Open Coding-Manual" and transferred auto codes respondent 1 to it)

August 25th Coding Participant 2 Questioning how to code 'watching kids'. Participant is a teacher and uses this as a method of information gathering, so do I put various codes e.g. Gathering info- watching, gathering info-gossip, gathering info-open nights?

August 31st- started NWivo coding and reassessments of codes. Had to keep in mind to code to answer research questions. Can 'pick up slack later.

## Appendix P Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (NVIVO)

Codes\\Phase 2 Systematic Data Coding (Generated August 27, 2024)

Name	Description	Files	References
'Apparent' choice	Parent does not think the choice of schools is as broad as it seems.	4	6
Academics and school choice	Academics a consideration in school choice	4	13
Anti- social behaviour	Parent expresses fear of anti-social behaviour	4	15
Application Timing	When parents first made application	1	1
Backup right of entry school	Parent refers to having right of entry to another school and is using it as a backup plan.	4	9
Catholic school - advantage	If a Catholic post-primary school has any advantage over any other type of post-primary school.	4	27
Catholic School -no advantage	If a Catholic post-primary school has no advantage over any other type of post-primary school or parent did not consider Catholicity of school when making their choice.	2	15
Certainty of getting a place	Parents knew that they could get place in a certain school.	14	20
Lack of certainty of place	Parents were uncertain of getting a place.	11	29
Child and parent decision	Parents and child made joint decision about school choice	10	22
Child decided	Parent refers to the fact that child made the school choice decision	8	19
Child did not decide	Child did not make the decision on school choice.	1	3
Child settled	Child has settled well in new school.	14	30
Child's needs	Parent considers the particular needs of the child when choosing the school.	13	25
Choices of schools available	Parent describes the range of choices available	14	35
Not satisfied with variety	Parent expresses non -satisfaction with the variety of schools available. (Q.3)	6	11
Satisfaction with variety of schools	Parent is satisfied with variety of schools available to parents	10	17
Comfortable having to make decision	Parent expresses feeling positive about having to choose a school for the child.	14	47

Comments re. study	Comments made by a parent in relation to the study (Q16)	2	2
Consulted others	Parent would have consulted / conferred with other parents/ family members	12	39
Consulted Past Pupils	Parents refers to consulting past pupils of the school of choice	6	11
Covid	How Covid impacted school choice	7	14
Deciding factor	Parent refers to the ultimate deciding factor in choosing the school.	15	40
Decision -right	Parent feels they made the right decision	14	41
Decisions-luck	Making a decision on choice of school can be arbitrary	7	18
Desired school	School that parents expressed a desire to get into.	7	23
Difficulty making decisions	Parent expresses difficulty with making decisions about child's school	14	70
Discipline	Parent refers to discipline systems in schools	4	7
Easy to get information	Easy to access information about post-primary schools	10	24
Need know-how	You need to know how to access information.	3	5
Not easy to get information	Not easy for parents to access information	5	9
Reliability of information	Parents discuss if information received about schools is reliable.	13	39
Expectations -culture	What the parent would like the culture of the school to be.	5	17
Expectations -Faith	Parent expects school to pass on the faith	16	55
Expectations -school	Expectations that parent has for the school	14	56
Expectations- academic	Academic expectations that they have for their children.	15	46
Expectations-character	Personal expectations for their child	8	19
Expectations-safety	Parent refers to child's safety in and around the school	5	8
Expectations-social	Parents social expectations for child e.g. happy, friends	8	20
Experience of older children	Parent had experience of school choice with older children	5	25
Extra-Curricular and school choice	School chosen due to its extracurricular activities	5	12

Friends going to post-primary	Reference to wanting to go with friends to post-primary school	10	24
Gathering Info -contact school	Parent refers to contacting the school with any queries	9	21
Gathering Info -Sports reputation		2	2
Gathering Info from the Primary schools	Information is gathered by parents from the primary schools	3	3
Gathering info- online	Gathering information online e.g. school websites	13	28
Gathering info- teachers	Parent referring to gathering information about/ from teachers.	7	11
Gathering info-Pamphlet	Reference to gathering or disseminating information through written means.	1	1
Gathering info-socially	Parent's reference to gathering information socially in the locality.	9	28
Gathering info-unintentionally	Parent refers to unconscious gathering of info re. Schools	6	9
Gathering information - Social media	Parent mentions getting information on social media like Twitter, Tik Tok, YouTube	1	2
Inspection reports	Parent has consulted inspection reports	5	10
Knowledge of child's character	Parent knowing their child i.e. character, personality	9	33
League Tables	Parent has consulted league tables	8	23
Less Traffic	Parent refers to less traffic going to school of choice	1	1
Most important factor of school	The factor that parent thinks is most important when choosing a school.	16	95
Not fitting Criteria	Parent felt child would not fit entry criteria	2	3
Open day attendance	Parent refers to Open day/night attendance	14	37
Opinion of current school	What parent thinks of the post-primary school the child is attending.	11	62
Other schools	Reference to schools that may have been considered but not chosen	11	20
Parent-co-educator	Reference to parent as co-educating the child with the school	2	3
Parents own faith	Parents reference to their own faith / spirituality	7	9

Parents role	References to ways in which parents believe they are fulfilling their roles	14	92
Parents work	Choice of school related to parents' workplace/ hours	6	15
Parents' religion	Parents reference to their religion based on Q. 15. 'Are you a practising Catholic?'	14	17
Parents-extraordinary means	Reference to parents going beyond the normal channels to get a place for their child.	6	13
PP school visit Primary	Reference to post-primary schools visiting the primary schools.	6	6
Proximity	Location of current school to home	8	18
Local school	Reference to acceptability of local school as a school choice	11	31
Schools further away	Schools that were considered further away	7	12
Satisfaction with local school		1	2
Range of Subject choice	Parent refers to subject choice	7	20
Lack of subject choice	Parent refers to lack of subject choices in some schools	1	2
Reputation of the school	Parents considered the reputation of the school in their choice	11	38
School size		5	31
Children Known in school	Children would be known individually by staff	3	5
Children not known	Children would not be known by staff	1	3
Schools -Co-ed	Parents views on Co-ed schools	4	9
Schools -new	Reference to a new school being a source of choice	5	11
Schools-Single-sex	Parents views on Single-sex Schools	5	15
Sibling rule	Parent refers to how the sibling rule affects choice	2	5
Sport and school choice	Sport being part of school choice decision	10	36
Starting search process	Reference to when parent first began the process searching for a post-primary school	15	32
Suitable location	The school is in a desirable location	3	5
Transport	Transport having a bearing on school choice.	8	35

Type application form	Parent refers to the type of application form filled.	6	8
Application form cost	Parent refers to a cost associated with application.	1	1
CAS	Limerick Area post-primary Schools Common Application System	12	44
Experience of filling form	Parent describes what the process of filling the form was like.	15	53
Number of applications made	Parent refers to the number of applications made to different schools	1	1
Unified Admissions Process (UAP)	Parent refers to UAP which is a ranked common application form first introduced by all post-primary schools in Ennis for first year entrants in September 2022 and continues today.	2	2
Unacceptable choices	A choice exists but none of the choices are considered acceptable options	7	16

## Appendix Q Codes\\Phase 3 Generating Initial themes from coded and collated data (10 September 2024)

Name	Description	Files	References
<b>Academics</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Academics and school choice</b>	<b>Academics a consideration in school choice</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Expectations-academic</b>	<b>Academic expectations that they have for their children.</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Lack of subject choice</b>	<b>Parent refers to lack of subject choices in some schools</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Range of Subject choice</b>	<b>Parent refers to subject choice</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Lack of subject choice</b>	<b>Parent refers to lack of subject choices in some schools</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Application process</b>	<b>How the application process is interpreted, perceived, encompassing restrictions, liberties, privileges.</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Application Timing</b>	<b>When parents first made application</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Starting search process</b>	<b>Reference to when parent first began the process searching for a post-primary school</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Type application form</b>	<b>Parent refers to the type of application form filled.</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Application form cost</b>	<b>Parent refers to a cost associated with application.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CAS</b>	<b>Limerick Area Post-primary Schools Common Application System</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Experience of filling form</b>	<b>Parent describes what the process of filling the form was like.</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Number of applications made</b>	<b>Parent refers to the number of applications made to different schools</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Unified Admissions Process (UAP)</b>	<b>Parent refers to UAP which is a ranked common application form first introduced by all Post-primary schools in Ennis for first year entrants in September 2022 and continues today.</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Choice</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>'Apparent' choice</b>	<b>Parent does not think the choice of schools is as broad as it seems.</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>

<b>Choices of schools available</b>	<b>Parent describes the range of choices available</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Not satisfied with variety</b>	<b>Parent expresses non -satisfaction with the variety of schools available. (Q.3)</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Satisfaction with variety of schools</b>	<b>Parent is satisfied with variety of schools available to parents</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Desired school</b>	<b>School that parents expressed a desire to get into.</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Not satisfied with variety</b>	<b>Parent expresses non -satisfaction with the variety of schools available. (Q.3)</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Other schools</b>	<b>Reference to schools that may have been considered but not chosen</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Satisfaction with variety of schools</b>	<b>Parent is satisfied with variety of schools available to parents</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Unacceptable choices</b>	<b>A choice exists but none of the choices are considered acceptable options</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Decision Time</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>369</b>
<b>Child and parent decision</b>	<b>Parents and child made joint decision about school choice</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Comfortable having to make decision</b>	<b>Parent expresses feeling positive about having to choose a school for the child.</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Deciding factor</b>	<b>Parent refers to the ultimate deciding factor in choosing the school.</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Decision -right</b>	<b>Parent feels they made the right decision</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Decisions-luck</b>	<b>Making a decision on choice of school can be arbitrary</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Difficulty making decisions</b>	<b>Parent expresses difficulty with making decisions about Childs school</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Most important factor of school</b>	<b>The factor that parent thinks is most important when choosing a school.</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Sport and school choice</b>	<b>Sport being part of school choice decision</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Expectations</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>Expectations -culture</b>	<b>What the parent would like the culture of the school to be.</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Catholic Standard of education</b>	<b>Parent expects the school to have a high standard of education of which they feel Catholic schools to have</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Good values</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>

<b>New experiences</b>	<b>Cultural Expectation of the school would be child is introduced to new experiences.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Sporty</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Supportive</b>	<b>Expectation would be that the school had a supportive culture</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Tolerant</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Expectations -school</b>	<b>Expectations that parent has for the school</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Conducive learning environment</b>	<b>That the school would create a conducive learning environment</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Creates safe environment</b>	<b>Parent expects school to cultivate a safe environment</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Good teachers</b>	<b>Parents expects school to have good teachers</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Guided</b>	<b>That the school will guide the child.</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Inclusive</b>	<b>Parent expects school to be inclusive</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Instil Catholic Ethos</b>	<b>Parent hopes the school will instil Catholic ethos/ values of mutual kindness</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Nurture happiness</b>	<b>Parents expect the school to make child happy</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Pathway to college</b>	<b>That school would prepare child for college</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Remain small</b>	<b>That school remains small</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Socially responsible</b>	<b>Parent expects school to be socially responsible</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Supported in sports</b>	<b>That school would support his interest in sport</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Expectations-character (5)</b>	<b>Personal expectations for their child</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Expectations-safety</b>	<b>Parent refers to child's safety in and around the school</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Expectations-social</b>	<b>Parents social expectations for child e.g. happy, friends</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Extra-Curricular and school choice</b>	<b>School chosen due to its extra-curricular activities</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Guarantees</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Backup right of entry school</b>	<b>Parent refers to having right of entry to another school and is using it as a backup plan.</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Certainty of getting a place</b>	<b>Parents knew that they could get place in a certain school.</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>20</b>

<b>Lack of certainty of place</b>	<b>Parents were uncertain of getting a place.</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Lack of certainty of place</b>	<b>Parents were uncertain of getting a place.</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Reliability of information</b>	<b>Parents discuss if information received about schools is reliable.</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Location</b>		<b>13</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Local school</b>	<b>Reference to acceptability of local school as a school choice</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Proximity</b>	<b>Location of current school to home</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Local school</b>	<b>Reference to acceptability of local school as a school choice</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Schools further away</b>	<b>Schools that were considered further away</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Satisfaction with local school</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Schools further away</b>	<b>Schools that were considered further away</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Satisfaction with local school</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Suitable location</b>	<b>The school is in a desirable location</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Past Experiences</b>		<b>9</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Covid</b>	<b>How Covid impacted school choice</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Experience of older children</b>	<b>Parent had experience of school choice with older children</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Religion</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Catholic school - advantage</b>	<b>If a Catholic post-primary school has any advantage over any other type of post-primary school.</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Catholic School -no advantage</b>	<b>If a Catholic post-primary school has no advantage over any other type of post-primary school or parent did not consider Catholicity of school when making their choice.</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Expectations -Faith</b>	<b>Parent expects school to pass on the faith</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Parents own faith</b>	<b>Parents reference to their own faith / spirituality</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Parents' religion</b>	<b>Parents reference to their religion based on Q. 15. 'Are you a practicing Catholic?'</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Role of child</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>76</b>

<b>Child decided</b>	<b>Parent refers to the fact that child made the school choice decision</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Child did not decide</b>	<b>Child did not make the decision on school choice.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Child settled</b>	<b>Child has settled well in new school.</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Friends going to post-primary</b>	<b>Reference to wanting to go with friends to post-primary school</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Role of Parent</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>166</b>
<b>Child's needs</b>	<b>Parent considers the particular needs of the child when choosing the school.</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Knowledge of child's character (2)</b>	<b>Parent knowing their child i.e. character, personality</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Parent-co-educator</b>	<b>Reference to parent as co-educating the child with the school</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Parents role</b>	<b>References to ways in which parents believe they are fulfilling their roles</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Parents-extra ordinary means</b>	<b>Reference to parents going beyond the normal channels to get a place for their child.</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Rules</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Not fitting Criteria</b>	<b>Parent felt child would not fit entry criteria</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Sibling rule</b>	<b>Parent refers to how the sibling rule effects choice</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Safety</b>		<b>14</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Anti- social behaviour</b>	<b>Parent expresses fear of anti-social behaviour</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Children Known in school</b>	<b>Children would be known individually by staff</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Children not known</b>	<b>Children would not be known by staff</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Parent refers to discipline systems in schools</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Opinion of current school</b>	<b>What parent thinks of the post-primary school the child is attending.</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>School size</b>		<b>5</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Children Known in school</b>	<b>Children would be known individually by staff</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Children not known</b>	<b>Children would not be known by staff</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>School Type</b>		<b>9</b>	<b>35</b>

<b>Schools -Co-Ed</b>	<b>Parents views on Co-Ed schools</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Schools -new</b>	<b>Reference to a new school being a source of choice</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Schools-Single-sex</b>	<b>Parents views on Single-sex Schools</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Sources of Information</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>332</b>
<b>Consulted others</b>	<b>Parent would have consulted / conferred with other parents/ family members</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Consulted Past Pupils</b>	<b>Parents refers to consulting past pupils of the school of choice</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Easy to get information</b>	<b>Easy to access information about post-primary schools</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Need know-how</b>	<b>You need to know how to access information.</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Not easy to get information</b>	<b>Not easy for parents to access information</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Reliability of information</b>	<b>Parents discuss if information received about schools is reliable.</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Experience of older children</b>	<b>Parent had past experience of school choice with older children</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Gathering Info - contact school</b>	<b>Parent refers to contacting the school with any queries</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Gathering Info - Sports reputation</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Gathering Info from the Primary schools</b>	<b>Information is gathered by parents from the primary schools</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Gathering info- online</b>	<b>Gathering information online e.g. school websites</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Gathering info- teachers</b>	<b>Parent referring to gathering information about/ from teachers.</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Gathering info- Pamphlet</b>	<b>Reference to gathering or disseminating information through written means.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Gathering info- socially</b>	<b>Parents reference to gathering information socially in the locality.</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Gathering info- unintentionally</b>	<b>Parent refers to unconscious gathering of info re. Schools</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Gathering information -Social media</b>	<b>Parent mentions getting information on social media like Twitter, Tik Tok, YouTube</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Inspection reports</b>	<b>Parent has consulted inspection reports</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>

<b>League Tables</b>	<b>Parent has consulted league tables</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Need know-how</b>	<b>You need to know how to access information.</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Not easy to get information</b>	<b>Not easy for parents to access information</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Open day attendance</b>	<b>Parent refers to Open day/night attendance</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>PP school visit Primary</b>	<b>Reference to post-primary schools visiting the primary schools.</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Reputation of the school</b>	<b>Parents considered the reputation of the school in their choice</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Travel Logistics</b>		<b>9</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Less Traffic</b>	<b>Parent refers to less traffic going to school of choice</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Transport</b>	<b>Transport having a bearing on school choice.</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>35</b>

## Appendix R Phase 5 Refining and Defining Themes (Listed)

**Theme 1 Factors**

**Theme 2 Expectations of a Catholic School**

**Theme 3 Accessibility**

**Theme 4 Role of the Parent**

Name	Memo Link	Files	References	Created on	Created by	Modified on	Modified by
<b>T1- Factors</b>		16	556	15 Feb 2024 at 11:13:38	JM	17 Feb 2024 at 12:53:45	JM
T1.2Difficulties		16	390	15 Feb 2024 at 11:15:32	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 16:47:06	JM
Role of child		16	76	18 Feb 2024 at 16:33:20	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:05:31	JM
Child settled		14	30	18 Feb 2024 at 16:33:20	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 16:26:57	JM
Friends going to post-primary		10	24	18 Feb 2024 at 16:33:20	JM	13 Oct 2023 at 11:08:06	JM

Child made the choice		8	19	18 Feb 2024 at 16:33:20	JM	15 Feb 2024 at 11:06:11	JM
Child did not decide		1	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:33:20	JM	8 Sep 2023 at 17:20:59	JM
Difficulty making decisions	Yes	14	70	17 Feb 2024 at 16:35:45	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:16:23	JM
Ignorant of system		2	7	17 Feb 2024 at 16:35:45	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:17:12	JM
Fear		5	6	17 Feb 2024 at 16:35:45	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:31:05	JM
Child's difficulties		1	4	17 Feb 2024 at 16:35:45	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:25:11	JM
Conflict Parent child		2	3	17 Feb 2024 at 16:35:45	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:31:21	JM
Life consequences		3	3	17 Feb 2024 at 16:35:45	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:32:24	JM

Urban areas		2	2	17 Feb 2024 at 16:35:45	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:20:17	JM
Minefield		1	2	17 Feb 2024 at 16:35:45	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:32:40	JM
Unsure of accommodation		1	1	17 Feb 2024 at 16:35:45	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 11:49:57	JM
Transport		1	1	17 Feb 2024 at 16:35:45	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:13:33	JM
Impact on family		1	1	17 Feb 2024 at 16:35:45	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:29:49	JM
Location		13	66	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:05:31	JM
Local school	Yes	11	31	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 16:39:17	JM
Nearest		3	5	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 16:57:13	JM

Obligatory wish		1	5	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:13:37	JM
Convenience		3	4	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 16:58:50	JM
Most popular choice		3	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:00:47	JM
Not all positive		1	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:13:19	JM
Not a choice		3	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:02:07	JM
Easiest access		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:00:26	JM
As good		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:01:33	JM
No travel		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 16:43:38	JM

Home alone		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 16:48:59	JM
Better control		0	0	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 16:39:05	JM
Proximity		8	18	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	6 Nov 2023 at 12:46:24	JM
Local school	Yes	11	31	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	13 Oct 2023 at 11:52:07	JM
Schools further away		7	12	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Oct 2023 at 12:00:24	JM
Satisfaction with local school		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	5 Sep 2023 at 13:10:06	JM
Schools further away		7	12	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Oct 2023 at 12:00:24	JM
Satisfaction with local school		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	5 Sep 2023 at 13:10:06	JM

Suitable location		3	5	18 Feb 2024 at 16:38:15	JM	9 Oct 2023 at 12:02:06	JM
Comfortable having to make decision		14	47	17 Feb 2024 at 16:37:01	JM	13 Oct 2023 at 11:08:55	JM
Decision - right		14	41	17 Feb 2024 at 16:38:02	JM	9 Oct 2023 at 12:32:00	JM
Travel Logistics		9	36	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:50	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:05:30	JM
Transport		8	35	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:50	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 15:08:01	JM
Ease of Transport		2	13	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:50	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 16:55:47	JM
Limited bus transport		1	7	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:50	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 16:23:53	JM
Work constraints		3	5	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:51	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 16:55:20	JM

Bus Co. Dictates		1	4	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:50	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 16:30:31	JM
A worry		3	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:50	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 16:42:03	JM
Shortest Bus journey too long		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:50	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 16:53:47	JM
Worth the travel		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:51	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 16:48:16	JM
Safety of car		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:51	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 16:18:32	JM
Isolation of bus travel		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:51	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 16:45:23	JM
Difficulty of transport		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:50	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 16:50:42	JM
Children dispersed		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:51	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 16:37:56	JM

Less Traffic		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:39:51	JM	5 Sep 2023 at 12:01:37	JM
Child and parent decision		10	22	18 Feb 2024 at 16:30:13	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 16:31:41	JM
Decisions-luck		7	18	17 Feb 2024 at 16:39:43	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 10:32:17	JM
Not easy to get information		5	9	18 Feb 2024 at 16:44:29	JM	4 Oct 2023 at 14:06:13	JM
Need technology		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:44:29	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:41:54	JM
Timing		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:44:29	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:41:32	JM
Not an insider		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:44:29	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:47:43	JM
Need to be literate		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:44:29	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:38:12	JM

Confusing		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:44:29	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:51:24	JM
Not easy to find		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:44:29	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:43:28	JM
Lack of detail from school		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:44:29	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:50:07	JM
Few social contacts		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:44:29	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:53:40	JM
Need know-how		3	5	18 Feb 2024 at 16:47:06	JM	7 Nov 2023 at 16:12:44	JM
T1.1- Prioritising Factors		16	130	15 Feb 2024 at 11:14:24	JM	17 Feb 2024 at 15:36:56	JM
Most important factor of school	Yes	16	130	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	15 Feb 2024 at 11:22:27	JM
Academically oriented		6	15	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 13:14:51	JM

Religious tolerance		6	13	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 13:13:35	JM
Proximity		8	11	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 13:14:40	JM
Sport		6	11	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 13:08:21	JM
Safety		4	11	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 13:13:05	JM
Vibe of school		6	9	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 13:11:21	JM
Teachers		3	9	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 13:09:35	JM
Sporty school		3	7	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:28:31	JM
Subject choice		5	5	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 13:12:10	JM

Child's desired preference		3	4	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:18:33	JM
No other option		1	4	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 15:31:27	JM
Good name		3	4	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:17:51	JM
Size		3	3	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 13:13:41	JM
Ease of Transport		1	3	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:41:48	JM
Friends going		2	3	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:26:36	JM
Single-sex school		2	2	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:45:35	JM

Safe school		2	2	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:34:15	JM
Newness of school		1	2	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	14 Nov 2023 at 17:01:28	JM
Familiarity		1	2	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:41:31	JM
Friendship		2	2	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 13:00:29	JM
Small school		2	2	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:27:10	JM
Academic reputation		2	2	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:28:21	JM
Co-ed		2	2	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 13:06:04	JM

Convenience		2	2	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 13:44:44	JM
Received desired choice		1	1	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 15:34:13	JM
Guarantee of place		1	1	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 13:43:02	JM
Availability of transport		1	1	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 12:38:00	JM
First Impressions		1	1	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:45:25	JM
Nice facilities		1	1	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	14 Nov 2023 at 17:03:37	JM
Coeducational		1	1	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:39:22	JM

Co-ed and religious		1	1	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:54	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 15:44:18	JM
Religion a lesser factor		0	0	15 Feb 2024 at 11:23:53	JM	23 Nov 2023 at 16:49:06	JM
T1.3-Sport		10	36	15 Feb 2024 at 11:16:18	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 16:03:57	JM
Sport and school choice		10	36	17 Feb 2024 at 16:42:27	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 14:57:50	JM
<b>T2-Expectations of a Catholic School</b>		16	479	17 Feb 2024 at 16:18:28	JM	17 Feb 2024 at 16:18:59	JM
T2.1-Schooling		16	248	17 Feb 2024 at 16:19:07	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 17:19:54	JM
Expectations		16	132	18 Feb 2024 at 17:05:42	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:05:30	JM
Expectations - school		14	56	18 Feb 2024 at 17:05:42	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 16:26:38	JM

Expectations-social		8	20	18 Feb 2024 at 17:05:42	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 13:09:19	JM
Expectations-character (5)		8	19	18 Feb 2024 at 17:05:42	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 12:43:19	JM
Expectations - culture		5	17	18 Feb 2024 at 17:05:42	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 16:29:27	JM
Extra-Curricular and school choice		5	12	18 Feb 2024 at 17:05:42	JM	13 Oct 2023 at 13:14:09	JM
Expectations-safety		5	8	18 Feb 2024 at 17:05:42	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 12:48:05	JM
Academics		16	81	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:04:18	JM
Expectations-academic		15	46	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 16:30:35	JM
Go to college		8	17	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 17:25:08	JM

Stimulated		5	10	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 17:24:09	JM
School a guide		4	4	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 17:19:41	JM
Study well		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 17:11:22	JM
Certificate of Education		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 17:24:25	JM
Range of Subject choice		7	20	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	9 Oct 2023 at 12:14:29	JM
Academics and school choice		4	13	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 15:06:46	JM
Exam results		2	4	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 16:44:51	JM
Good education		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	3 Feb 2024 at 16:58:09	JM

Lack of subject choice		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:06:30	JM	6 Sep 2023 at 12:19:03	JM
School Type		9	35	18 Feb 2024 at 17:19:54	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:05:31	JM
Schools- Single-sex		5	15	18 Feb 2024 at 17:19:54	JM	9 Oct 2023 at 11:58:36	JM
Schools - new		5	11	18 Feb 2024 at 17:19:54	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 11:19:15	JM
Schools - CoEd		4	9	18 Feb 2024 at 17:19:54	JM	6 Nov 2023 at 12:49:06	JM
T2.2- Security		14	123	17 Feb 2024 at 16:19:39	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 17:07:38	JM
Safety		14	123	18 Feb 2024 at 17:07:37	JM	26 Nov 2023 at 15:54:17	JM
Opinion of current school		11	62	18 Feb 2024 at 17:07:37	JM	26 Nov 2023 at 15:54:17	JM

School size		5	31	18 Feb 2024 at 17:07:37	JM	26 Nov 2023 at 15:54:17	JM
Children Known in school		3	5	18 Feb 2024 at 17:07:37	JM	13 Sep 2023 at 16:17:12	JM
Children not known		1	3	18 Feb 2024 at 17:07:37	JM	5 Sep 2023 at 13:17:34	JM
Anti-social behaviour		4	15	18 Feb 2024 at 17:07:38	JM	26 Nov 2023 at 15:54:17	JM
Discipline		4	7	18 Feb 2024 at 17:07:38	JM	26 Nov 2023 at 15:54:17	JM
Children Known in school		3	5	18 Feb 2024 at 17:07:38	JM	26 Nov 2023 at 15:54:17	JM
Children not known		1	3	18 Feb 2024 at 17:07:38	JM	26 Nov 2023 at 15:54:17	JM

T2.3-Faith		16	108	17 Feb 2024 at 16:20:25	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 17:10:22	JM
Religion		16	108	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:28	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:05:30	JM
Expectations - Faith	Yes	16	55	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	10 Feb 2024 at 14:13:10	JM
Appreciates transmission of Cath. Values		5	11	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	10 Feb 2024 at 15:13:14	JM
Not a priority		3	11	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	10 Feb 2024 at 15:15:31	JM
Emerge with a faith		7	11	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	10 Feb 2024 at 15:14:55	JM
Will maintain own religion		4	6	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	10 Feb 2024 at 14:50:10	JM
Not schools job		5	6	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	10 Feb 2024 at 15:13:48	JM

Teach Religious knowledge		4	5	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	10 Feb 2024 at 14:51:09	JM
Don't know		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	10 Feb 2024 at 14:10:01	JM
Catholic school - advantage		4	27	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	7 Nov 2023 at 16:02:38	JM
Good morals		2	4	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:47:51	JM
Smaller		2	4	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:47:25	JM
Enhances Catholic previous Education		1	4	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:47:05	JM
Experienced educators		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:46:39	JM
Inclusive		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:31:56	JM

Highly regarded		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:35:25	JM
Good academics		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:45:42	JM
Confronts bullying		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:31:33	JM
Single-sex		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	9 Feb 2024 at 17:39:54	JM
Parents' religion		14	17	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	30 Oct 2023 at 15:23:21	JM
Parents own faith		7	9	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	13 Feb 2024 at 22:07:12	JM
Catholic School -no advantage		2	15	18 Feb 2024 at 17:08:29	JM	30 Oct 2023 at 15:15:08	JM
<b>T4-Parental role and Responsibility</b>		16	446	17 Feb 2024 at 16:22:17	JM	17 Feb 2024 at 16:23:28	JM

T4.1-Role of Parent		16	264	17 Feb 2024 at 16:23:35	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM
Role of Parent		16	166	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:50	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:05:31	JM
Judgement of the parental role		14	92	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:12:48	JM
Lack of autonomy		5	15	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:40:21	JM
Duty		4	11	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	26 Nov 2023 at 15:55:32	JM
Doing your best		6	10	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:43:59	JM
Tenacious		5	8	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:34:42	JM

Mapping a path		5	7	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:41:07	JM
Difficult task		5	6	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:40:48	JM
Family guardian		3	5	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:35:43	JM
Self-doubt		3	4	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	26 Nov 2023 at 16:02:09	JM
Strategist		4	4	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:44:20	JM
Fulfilled		2	4	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	26 Nov 2023 at 16:03:40	JM
Instiller		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	26 Nov 2023 at 15:34:33	JM

Huge responsibility		1	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:43:27	JM
Relieved		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 13:44:57	JM
Constant overseer		3	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:16:45	JM
Relaxed		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:39:21	JM
Comforter		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:44:29	JM
Gut instinct		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 14:36:26	JM
Knowledge of childs character (2)	Yes	9	33	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:50	JM	13 Oct 2023 at 11:30:40	JM

Child's needs		13	25	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:50	JM	21 Sep 2023 at 17:51:18	JM
Academic challenge		4	4	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:50	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 15:10:56	JM
Happiness		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 14:39:29	JM
Sportiness		3	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 15:11:08	JM
Sibling support		1	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:50	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 14:48:05	JM
Stability		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:50	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 15:10:18	JM
Needs protection		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 14:24:47	JM

Religious freedom		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 14:46:12	JM
Naivete		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:50	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 14:13:31	JM
Extroversion		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 14:27:31	JM
Creative opportunity		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 15:02:06	JM
Dyslexia accommodation		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 15:09:34	JM
Deafness accommodation		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 15:08:37	JM
Exposure to mixed school		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:51	JM	25 Nov 2023 at 14:32:26	JM

Parents-extra ordinary means		6	13	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:50	JM	30 Oct 2023 at 15:10:30	JM
Parent-coeducator		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:50:50	JM	30 Oct 2023 at 14:51:53	JM
Role of child		16	76	18 Feb 2024 at 16:33:41	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:05:31	JM
Child settled		14	30	18 Feb 2024 at 16:33:41	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 16:26:57	JM
Friends going to post-primary		10	24	18 Feb 2024 at 16:33:41	JM	13 Oct 2023 at 11:08:06	JM
Child made the choice		8	19	18 Feb 2024 at 16:33:41	JM	15 Feb 2024 at 11:06:11	JM
Child did not decide		1	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:33:41	JM	8 Sep 2023 at 17:20:59	JM
Child and parent decision		10	22	18 Feb 2024 at 16:30:49	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 16:31:41	JM

T4.2- Role of Applying and Admission criteria		16	143	17 Feb 2024 at 16:24:55	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 17:18:03	JM
Guarantees		16	97	18 Feb 2024 at 17:17:23	JM	6 Feb 2024 at 17:13:49	JM
Reliability of information		13	39	18 Feb 2024 at 17:17:23	JM	21 Sep 2023 at 17:38:02	JM
Lack of certainty of place		11	29	18 Feb 2024 at 17:17:23	JM	5 Oct 2023 at 11:36:52	JM
Certainty of getting a place		14	20	18 Feb 2024 at 17:17:23	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 15:47:10	JM
Lack of certainty of place		11	29	18 Feb 2024 at 17:17:23	JM	5 Oct 2023 at 11:36:52	JM
Backup right of entry school		4	9	18 Feb 2024 at 17:17:23	JM	13 Oct 2023 at 10:26:17	JM
Application process		15	41	18 Feb 2024 at 17:18:03	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:05:31	JM

Starting search process	Yes	15	32	18 Feb 2024 at 17:18:03	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 10:22:12	JM
Type application form		6	8	18 Feb 2024 at 17:18:03	JM	30 Oct 2023 at 14:56:40	JM
Experience of filling form		15	53	18 Feb 2024 at 17:18:03	JM	13 Oct 2023 at 10:46:06	JM
CAS		12	44	18 Feb 2024 at 17:18:03	JM	13 Oct 2023 at 10:57:22	JM
Unified Admissions Process (UAP)		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:18:03	JM	8 Sep 2023 at 17:19:21	JM
Application form cost		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:18:03	JM	6 Sep 2023 at 12:13:53	JM
Number of applications made		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:18:03	JM	5 Sep 2023 at 12:28:53	JM
Application Timing		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:18:03	JM	4 Sep 2023 at 12:36:14	JM

Need know-how		3	5	18 Feb 2024 at 16:47:24	JM	7 Nov 2023 at 16:12:44	JM
T4.3-Past Experiences		9	39	17 Feb 2024 at 16:26:01	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 17:19:07	JM
Experiences		9	39	18 Feb 2024 at 17:19:07	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 15:50:23	JM
Experience of older children		5	25	18 Feb 2024 at 17:19:07	JM	13 Oct 2023 at 10:29:52	JM
Covid		7	14	18 Feb 2024 at 17:19:07	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 10:26:07	JM
T3-Accessibility		16	440	17 Feb 2024 at 16:10:47	JM	17 Feb 2024 at 16:13:03	JM
T3.1-Gathering Methods		16	332	17 Feb 2024 at 16:15:59	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:25	JM
Sources of Information		16	332	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:05:30	JM

Consulted others		12	39	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:25	JM	21 Sep 2023 at 17:29:27	JM
Reputation of the school		11	38	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 16:36:43	JM
Open day attendance		14	37	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 10:24:51	JM
Gathering info-socially		9	28	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:25	JM	7 Nov 2023 at 16:13:47	JM
Gathering info- online		13	28	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 10:29:54	JM
Experience of older children		5	25	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	13 Oct 2023 at 10:29:52	JM
Easy to get information		10	24	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	21 Sep 2023 at 17:36:35	JM
Reliability of information		13	39	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	21 Sep 2023 at 17:38:02	JM

Not easy to get information		5	9	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	4 Oct 2023 at 14:06:13	JM
Need know-how		3	5	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	7 Nov 2023 at 16:12:44	JM
League Tables		8	23	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:25	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 10:21:04	JM
Gathering Info -contact school		9	21	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:25	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 10:30:57	JM
Consulted Past Pupils		6	11	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:25	JM	20 Sep 2023 at 20:54:44	JM
Gathering info- teachers		7	11	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:25	JM	5 Oct 2023 at 13:23:29	JM
Inspection reports		5	10	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:25	JM	6 Oct 2023 at 10:54:20	JM
Gathering info- unintentionally		6	9	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:25	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 10:24:11	JM

Not easy to get information		5	9	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	4 Oct 2023 at 14:06:13	JM
Need technology		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:41:54	JM
Timing		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:41:32	JM
Confusing		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:51:24	JM
Need to be literate		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:38:12	JM
Few social contacts		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:53:40	JM
Lack of detail from school		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:50:07	JM
Not an insider		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:47:43	JM

Not easy to find		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	11 Feb 2024 at 15:43:28	JM
PP school visit Primary		6	6	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	30 Oct 2023 at 16:19:43	JM
Need know-how		3	5	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	7 Nov 2023 at 16:12:44	JM
Gathering Info from Primary schools		3	3	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	10 Feb 2024 at 15:41:56	JM
Gathering Info -Sports reputation		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:24	JM	21 Sep 2023 at 17:00:51	JM
Gathering -Social media		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:25	JM	27 Nov 2023 at 18:30:05	JM
Gathering info-Pamphlet		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 16:48:25	JM	30 Oct 2023 at 15:57:42	JM
T3.2-Choice		16	108	17 Feb 2024 at 16:16:41	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 17:28:13	JM

Options		16	100	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	18 Feb 2024 at 17:15:19	JM
Choices of schools available		14	35	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	10 Oct 2023 at 11:27:41	JM
Satisfaction with variety of schools		10	17	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	9 Oct 2023 at 10:26:03	JM
Not satisfied with variety		6	11	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	6 Oct 2023 at 11:03:02	JM
Desired school		7	23	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	16 Oct 2023 at 15:45:28	JM
Firm focus		2	4	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 11:35:54	JM
Got offer		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 11:33:40	JM
No offer		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 11:21:37	JM

Will reapply		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 11:18:42	JM
Friends attending		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 11:32:03	JM
Nearest		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 11:05:44	JM
Visited beforehand		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 11:14:47	JM
Inequalities acknowledgment		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 11:31:42	JM
Disappointment		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 11:18:34	JM
Co-ed Catholic		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 11:20:58	JM
Better school		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 11:35:18	JM

Other schools		11	20	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:38:05	JM
No go areas		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 16:01:40	JM
No chance of a place		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:42:56	JM
No friends		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 16:02:16	JM
Unfavourably bigger		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:29:31	JM
Further away		2	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:50:31	JM
Science competition		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:46:08	JM
Anti-Social behaviour		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 16:05:13	JM

Unknown		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:52:07	JM
Nearest		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:47:54	JM
All Irish		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:44:01	JM
Didnt fit criteria		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:31:20	JM
Open to consideration		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:26:14	JM
Child not challenged		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 16:00:31	JM
Good reputation		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:36:18	JM
Other parish availability		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 16:08:35	JM

Limited subject choice		0	0	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 15:37:51	JM
Unacceptable choices		7	16	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	30 Oct 2023 at 15:20:49	JM
Forced Decision		6	6	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 16:54:56	JM
Not wanted		2	5	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 16:52:07	JM
Undesirable Calibre of student		1	2	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 16:41:55	JM
Cannot avail of choice		1	1	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	4 Feb 2024 at 16:34:24	JM
'Apparent' choice		4	6	18 Feb 2024 at 17:11:21	JM	21 Sep 2023 at 16:12:18	JM
Rules		4	8	18 Feb 2024 at 17:28:13	JM	13 Nov 2023 at 11:05:29	JM

Sibling rule		2	5	18 Feb 2024 at 17:28:13	JM	13 Sep 2023 at 13:34:43	JM
Not fitting Criteria		2	3	18 Feb 2024 at 17:28:13	JM	9 Sep 2023 at 17:24:58	JM

## Appendix S Factors Effecting Choice x Gender

	A: Rs Profiles: Gender = Female	B: Rs Profiles: Gender = Male
1: Academic reputation	2	0
2: Academically oriented	14	1
3: Availability of transport	1	0
4: Child's desired preference	3	1
5: Co-ed	2	0
6: Co-ed and religious	1	0
7: Co-educational	1	0
8: Convenience	1	1
9: Ease of Transport	1	2
10: Familiarity	0	2
11: First Impressions	1	0
12: Friends going	3	0
13: Friendship	1	1
14: Good name	3	1
15: Guarantee of place	0	1
16: Newness of school	2	0
17: Nice facilities	1	0
18: No other option	0	4
19: Proximity	9	2
20: Received desired choice	1	0
21: Religion a lesser factor	0	0
22: Religious tolerance	10	3
23: Safe school	1	1
24: Safety	10	1
25: Single-sex school	1	1
26: Size	3	0

<b>27: Small school</b>	2	0
<b>28: Sport</b>	8	3
<b>29: Sporty school</b>	2	5
<b>30: Subject choice</b>	4	1
<b>31: Teachers</b>	0	9
<b>32: Vibe of school</b>	3	6

## Appendix T Rubric for Quantifying the Qualitative Data

<b>Qualifying Term</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<b>Few</b>	<b>Less than 10% of participants</b>
<b>Several</b>	<b>Less than 20%</b>
<b>Some</b>	<b>More than 20%</b>
<b>Many</b>	<b>Nearly 50%</b>
<b>Majority</b>	<b>More than 50%, but fewer than 75%</b>
<b>Most</b>	<b>More than 75%</b>
<b>Vast majority</b>	<b>Nearly all participants</b>
<b>Unanimous or almost all</b>	<b>All participants, or the vast majority</b>

## Appendix U Subscription level of school participant's child attends

Name of participant	Location of Home	Type of School child attends	Status of school subscription/CAS/Ex CAS	DEIS/ NON DEIS
Clare	Rural	SSR	Unknown (Ex CAS)	Non-DEIS
Talullah	Rural	MR	Oversubscribed (Ex CAS)	Non-DEIS
Breda	Rural	MU	Oversubscribed (CAS)	Non-DEIS
Donal	Rural	MR	Undersubscribed (Ex CAS)	Non-DEIS
Laura	Rural	SSU	Oversubscribed (CAS)	Non-DEIS
Paula	Rural	SSU	Oversubscribed (CAS)	Non-DEIS
Ursula	Rural	SSU	Oversubscribed (Ex CAS)	Non-DEIS
Emma	Rural	MR	Oversubscribed (Ex CAS)	Non-DEIS
Lucy	Rural	SSU	Oversubscribed (CAS)	Non-DEIS
Cathy	Rural	MR	Oversubscribed (Ex CAS)	Non-DEIS
Saaim	Urban	SSUD	Unknown (CAS)	DEIS
Zuka	Urban	SSUD	Unknown (CAS)	DEIS
Fatisha	Urban	SSUD	Unknown (CAS)	DEIS

Abbreviations: SSR/U=Single-sex Rural/Urban. MU/R = Mixed Urban/Rural SSUD = Single-sex Urban DEIS

Appendix U Subscription level of school participant's child attends

## Appendix V Demographic Data of Focus Groups

Name	Age	Gender	Educational Level	Religion	Location of home	School child attends	Region of Birth	Marital Status	Nationality
Speaker 1R	51-55	M	3rd Level	RC	Rural	MR	W. Europe	M	Irish
Speaker 2R	45-50	M	3rd Level	RC	Rural	MR	W. Europe	M	Irish
Speaker 3R	45-50	F	3rd Level	RC	Rural	MR	W. Europe	M	Irish
Speaker 4R	45-50	F	3rd Level	C of I	Rural	MR	W. Europe	M	Irish
Speaker 1U	45-50	F	3rd Level	RC	Urban	SSU	W. Europe	M	Irish
Speaker 2U	45-50	F	3rd Level	RC	Urban	SSU	W. Europe	M	Irish
Speaker 3U	51-55	F	3rd Level	RC	Urban	MU	W. Europe	M	Irish
Speaker 4U	51-55	M	3rd Level	RC	Urban	MU	W. Europe	M	Irish
Speaker NI1	51-55	M	2nd Level	Islam	Urban	SSU	Asia	M	New Irish
Speaker NI2	45-50	F	3rd Level	Islam	Urban	SSU	Africa	M	New Irish
Speaker NI3	35-40	F	1st Level	Islam	Urban	SSU	Asia	M	New Irish
Speaker NI4	45-50	M	3rd Level	Islam	Urban	SSU	Asia	M	New Irish

**Appendix V. Demographic Data of Focus Groups** (Abbreviations: SSR:/U=Single-sex Rural/Urban. MU/R = Mixed Urban/Rural SSUD = Single-sex Urban DEIS)

**Table 1 Ensuring rigour (Table adapted from Merriam and Grenier (2019, p.31))**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Description of Measures taken in this study</b>
<b>Triangulation</b>	Using multiple investigators, sources of data, and /or collection methods to confirm emerging findings	Researcher conducted three focus groups after semi-structured interviews
<b>Peer review/Examination</b>	Discussions with colleagues regarding the process of the study, the congruence of emerging findings with the raw data and tentative interpretations	Researcher discussed initial findings with supervisors
<b>Researchers position or reflexivity</b>	Critical self- reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation	This was heavily considered before during and after project
<b>Adequate engagement in data collection</b>	Adequate time spent collecting data such that the data become “saturated”; this may involve seeking discrepant or negative cases the phenomenon	Researcher had initial sample of seven but expanded to ensure that saturation (Charmaz, 2006) was occurring
<b>Maximum Variation</b>	Purposefully seeking variation or diversity in	Contacted all 40 schools in the chosen region i.e.

	sample selection to allow for a greater range of application of the findings by consumers of the research	Midwest Ireland
<b>Audit Trail</b>	A detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out the study	Conducted from the beginning and recorded on NVIVO
<b>Rich Thick descriptions</b>	Providing enough description to contextualise the study for readers to determine the extent to which their situation matches the research context, and hence, whether findings can be transferred	Description of methodology

Tables 2 and 3 in the Body of the Text