The influence of the patronage and governance structures on Community Schools in the Republic of 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 is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and have conformed to the regulations on the use and declaration of Generative AI, 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. I hereby certify that no Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) tools have been used in the creation of the thesis.

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Dedication/Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the Community School principals who made this research possible through their participation in the survey and interviews, despite the many demands on their time.

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I dedicate this work to my parents, Paddy and Anna, whose belief in the power of education shaped my life and continues to inspire me.

'A school in the community for the community. That sounds a bit simplistic, but I think it is a very major part of the reality' (ST, 10).

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Acronyms

ACCS	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
AJP	Association of Joint Patrons and Trustees
AP	Assistant Principal (AP I or AP II)
CAQDAS	Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
C&C	Community and Comprehensive
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CEIST	Catholic Education Irish Schools Trust
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DCU	Dublin City University
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEY	Department of Education and Youth
EEC	European Economic Community
ERST	Edmund Rice Schools Trust
ETB	Education and Training Board
FREC	Faculty Research Ethics Committee
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GRACE	Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education
IIE	Investment in Education
JMB	Joint Managerial Body
LAOS	Looking at Our School
L2LP	Level 2 Learning Programmes
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NVivo	Qualitative data analysis software
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPPS	Online Patronage Process System
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RE	Religious Education
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SEN	Special Educational Needs
TY	Transition Year
UK	United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USA	United States of America
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
WSE/MLL	Whole School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning

Abstract

The influence of the patronage and governance structures on Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland

Áine O'Sullivan

This study investigates how school culture, ethos, climate and leadership practices in Community Schools are shaped by the model's patronage and governance structures. Following a thematic review of relevant policy documents and peer-reviewed literature, six broad themes emerged over the course of the research.

1. The joint patronage model
2. Evolving school ethos and identity
3. Leadership practices and autonomy
4. Board of management and governance relationships
5. Inclusion, diversity, and local context - building community engagement and sense of belonging
6. Student-centred schools

A mixed methods case study methodology was adopted, comprising three distinct phases. Phase One involved documentary analysis, identifying key documents related to the introduction and development of Community Schools in Ireland, providing contextual understanding of this model in Irish education. Phase Two utilised a qualitative online survey featuring open ended questions for current Community School principals that allowed for rich responses. Phase Three consisted of semi-structured interviews with ten principals and 14 system stakeholders, capturing their experiences and views.

The raw data was coded using NVivo software and the findings are presented acknowledging the implications and limitations of the study. Additional documentary analysis was carried out on all Inspectorate whole school and programme evaluations conducted in Community Schools over a two-year period from January 2024 to January 2026. A total of 12 Inspection Reports were included in this analysis.

The data analysis shows a broadly positive response from participants regarding the Community School model. The research shows that, while the model presents considerable opportunities, it is accompanied by challenges, including areas of tension and complexity, most evident at patronage level. Having addressed the research questions, recommendations that might help to develop and enhance the joint model are offered in respect of each of the identified themes.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to this study

This study focuses on the Community School model in the Republic of Ireland, an area on which little research has been done. It examines how the culture, ethos and leadership practices of Community Schools are shaped by their patronage and governance structures. Using a qualitative, exploratory case study design, the research engaged Community School principals and key stakeholders from across the Irish education system, foregrounding the voices of principals who practise leadership within these school communities. Coolahan (1981, pp. ix-x) emphasises the 'need to understand why it (the education system) is as it is', and this study seeks to trace the historical development of the Community School model within Irish education. This introductory chapter provides a brief historical and contemporary context for the model, clarifies key terms, and sets out the purpose, problem statement and outline of the thesis.

1.2 The post-primary system in Ireland

The term 'post-primary' is used throughout this study rather than 'secondary' education as a more inclusive and collective term for all second-level schools in Ireland. Post-primary education in the Republic of Ireland caters for students aged 12 years and above and consists of two cycles, junior and senior cycle, over a period of five or six years depending on whether students take the optional Transition Year at the beginning of senior cycle. Department of Education and Youth (DEY) data for the school year 2025/2026 indicate that there are 722 post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland catering for a total of 429,654 enrolments as of 30 September 2025 (DEY, 2026).

Although there is growing similarity in school life and pupil outcomes across post-primary education, three distinct sectors remain: Voluntary Secondary schools, Education and Training Board (ETB) schools, and Community and Comprehensive schools. Voluntary Secondary schools are privately owned and managed but are largely publicly funded, usually under the patronage of a religious congregation, charitable trust, or private charitable company. ETB schools are state schools under the sole patronage and management of the Education and Training Boards. Community Schools, which are the focus of this study, differ in that they are state schools operating under joint patronage, most commonly between religious denominations and ETBs, and in a small number of cases between Educate Together

and ETBs. Comprehensive Schools are owned by the Minister for Education in partnership with a religious authority, either Catholic or Church of Ireland/Protestant. All three sectors include schools with DEIS status (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), depending on their location and student intake. DEIS schools receive additional funding, resources and staffing and are generally recognised as serving economically deprived areas. Approximately 30% of Community Schools are recognised as DEIS schools. The next section briefly outlines the origins of the Community School.

1.3 Historical context of the Community School

> Traditionally, post-primary education operated on a bipartite system, with secondary schools offering a grammar-school education on Christian humanist lines and vocational schools offering a two-year continuation course with a practical orientation, as well as technical education for more senior students. From the 1960s, this changed dramatically with the policy of establishing post-primary schooling on comprehensive lines, through secondary and vocational schools and also through new types of institution, Comprehensive and Community Schools (Coolahan, 2017, pp. 141-142).

The preface to this story begins in May 1963 when the Minister for Education, Dr Patrick Hillery, announced that the State would undertake the building of post-primary schools called 'Comprehensive' Schools. Barber (1989) describes how schools built in areas that did not have vocational or secondary schools were framed as 'a step towards equality of educational opportunity' (p. 128). They were to be 'coeducational, open to all abilities and offer a wide curriculum to match the aptitude of their pupils' (Coolahan, 2017, p. 135).

The story of Community Schools begins seven years later, in October 1970, with the publication of the Department of Education (DE) working document known as the Community School Document (DE, 1970, reproduced in Randles, 1975, Appendix 5), which established the Community School model in Irish education and articulated its core purposes. In summary, the document envisaged Community Schools as providing free post-primary education without selection, offering comprehensive provision to cater for differing aptitudes, and making facilities available for adult education and for the wider community outside school hours (DE, 1970, in Randles, 1975).

A defining feature of the model was the reciprocal relationship between the school and its community, with the school serving not only young people but also the wider community through youth and adult education (Coolahan, 2017, p. 137). Chapter two returns to the historical development of the Community School model in more detail.

1.4 Purpose statement of this study

Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasise that the purpose statement provides the 'road map' for a qualitative study and, using their guidance (p. 199), the purpose statement for this study is as follows:

The purpose of this narrative study is to examine how far the combined patronage and governance structures of the Community School sector constitute a distinctive framework that shapes school culture, ethos and climate, and to explore how these structures influence the day-to-day leadership practices and sense of agency of school leaders. The central concern of the study is therefore the impact of patronage and governance structures on the experiences of the school community and on the day-to-day leadership practices and decision making of school principals.

1.5 The research question

A review of the literature identified very few studies on Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland and no published research that examines post-primary Community Schools as a distinctive sector in their own right. Building on themes identified in the literature on school culture, ethos, leadership and governance, this thesis examines how these dimensions are experienced and enacted in Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland, and whether they are shaped by the Community School model of patronage and governance.

Where Community Schools do appear in wider post-primary research, they are typically represented by one or two cases (Skerritt *et al.,* 2021; Skerritt, Brown and O'Hara, 2021), with limited attention to how the distinctive joint patronage model may shape culture, ethos, leadership and governance. This absence of Community School-focused scholarship highlights the need for the present study, which investigates these questions directly within the Community School context.

While several key texts provide important historical background, they do not examine Community Schools in depth beyond outlining the model's origins and evolution (Randles, 1975; Coolahan, 1981; O'Connor, 1986; McManus, 2014; Coolahan, 2017). Two sources are particularly valuable for this thesis: *O'Flaherty's Management and Control in Irish Education,* which offers the most sustained account of the governance and management arrangements of Community Schools (O'Flaherty, 1992), and Walsh's discussion in Chapter nine of *Essays in the History of Irish Education*, which situates the emergence of the model within wider policy and system change (Walsh, 2016). Taken together, the literature points to

a clear need for research that traces the evolution of this school model and examines how Community Schools operate in contemporary practice.

To address this gap, this study foregrounds the perspectives of Community School principals, focusing on whether (and how) patronage and governance structures shape their leadership experiences. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent is Community School culture influenced by joint patronage arrangements, in which more than one patron has come together to establish the school, agree the ethos and appoint the board of management?
2. What, if any, impact is evident in principals' leadership practices and sense of agency in their working relationship with DEY officials?
3. More broadly, to what extent does the joint patronage model remain fit for purpose in promoting multi-denominational education in contemporary Ireland, fifty years after its introduction?

By examining the experiences of Community School leaders, this study aims to extend knowledge of post-primary schooling in Ireland and to strengthen the evidence base on Community Schools as a distinctive governance model. It also seeks to provide insights that would enable professional practice to develop the joint patronage model and to strengthen its capability to provide multi-denominational education in increasingly pluralist society. The findings are intended to inform stakeholders across the sector, including the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS), patrons, boards of management, current and aspiring school leaders, and DEY personnel working with Community Schools on governance and related matters. The next section clarifies key terms used in the study.

1.6 The terminology

1.6.1 Patronage in schools

Patronage is deeply rooted in Irish educational and political history (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p. 1). This 'somewhat unusual' system, unique to Ireland, is a product of historical developments dating back to penal times (Raftery and Hout, 1993, p. 43) and has resulted in a denominational education system that developed with 'minimal state involvement' until the latter part of the nineteenth century (O'Flaherty, 1992, p. 7).

The Irish Constitution was enacted in 1937 (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937). Article 42 recognises the primary role of parents in educating their children while emphasising 'the subsidiary role of the State' in providing for education and giving aid to other agencies that choose to do so (DES, 2012, pp. 12-13). While school patrons are not explicitly referenced in the Constitution, they are provided for in Section 8 of the Education Act of 1998 as:

> the persons recognised by the Minister whose primary function is to establish and operate the school (Education Act 1998, 1998, Part II, Section 8(6)).

It follows that parents are constitutionally free to send their children to a school of their choice and that schools in Ireland, while funded by the State, are established and managed by patrons. Ó Buachalla (1985, p. 351) characterises this as 'an aided system' where the State makes provision 'for' education in assisting others in the provision 'of' education services.

The Education Act of 1998 was the first comprehensive piece of legislation to set out overall education policy (Education Act 1998). The Act established a clear framework within which the various stakeholders in the education system are expected to operate. In this context, the duties and responsibilities of patrons and management are identified, while subsequent legislation also applies.

Section 8(6) of the 1998 Education Act states:

> The patron of a school shall carry out the functions and exercise the powers conferred on the patron by this Act and such other functions and powers as may be conferred on the patron by any Act of the Oireachtas or instrument made thereunder, deed, charter, articles of management or other such instrument relating to the establishment or operation of the school (Education Act 1998, 1998, Part II, Section 8(6)).

Therefore, the key functions of the patron are to establish the school and to appoint a board of management to manage the school on its behalf. Over recent decades there has been an increase in the number of patrons involved in the provision of education, reflecting significant cultural and demographic change in Ireland (DES, 2012, p. 1). In this study, the terms patron and trustee are used interchangeably by the participants in the research. It is important to note, however, that there is a significant distinction between these two terms.

> The patron refers to the legal entity that operates the school, determines its ethos, appoints the board of management, and ensures compliance with statutory duties.
>
> The trustee is the legal owner of the school property. The role of the trustee is legally distinct from that of the patron. (Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools, 2026)

1.6.2 The Community School model

The Community School model examined in this research is specific to the Republic of Ireland and is not connected to Community Schools controlled by Local Education Authorities in the United Kingdom (UK), or to the publicly funded Community Schools in the United States of America (USA). The patronage structure of Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland is distinctive. The 1970 'Community School' document introduced a new concept in Irish

education, namely ‘the joint patronage model’. It provided that the board of these schools would be constituted by representatives of the secondary school managers and the local Vocational Education Committees (DE, 1970, in Randles, 1975). In essence, the Community School model reflects a partnership between two or more patrons involving the State and one or more denominational patrons. These schools are governed by a Deed of Trust dating from the 1970s and reflecting an earlier government policy of amalgamation and school closure (Randles, 1975). This produced the joint patronage model, bringing together the previously segregated secondary and vocational traditions in post-primary education within schools that are multi-denominational in ethos (ACCS, 2018). Although established by the patrons, the schools are owned by the Minister for Education, who vests ownership in the trustees-patrons (ACCS, 2018).

The Education Act of 1998 has little to say about ‘joint patronage’ other than in Section 8(5) where it provides that:

> Where two or more persons exercise the functions of a patron, they may be registered as joint patrons (Education Act 1998, 1998, Part II, Section 8(5)).

There is no further elaboration on how the functions are to be jointly exercised, or how the tasks of the patron are to be divided between several parties. This means that the joint patrons must decide how they will arrange this partnership.

For the purposes of this study, the term ‘multi-denominational’ is understood within the Community School model as an agreed characteristic spirit shaped by the combined intentions of the joint patrons, rather than as the ethos of any single patron. In the AJP template statement agreed between ETBs and Catholic patrons, Community Schools are described as schools which welcome, respect and support students of all religions and beliefs. The statement also recognises both the values of the ETB as a multi-denominational State body and the inherited traditions, Christian values and founding intentions of the Catholic bishop or religious congregation. In this sense, Catholic ethos is not presented as a dominant or exclusive identity of the school, but as one strand within a jointly agreed characteristic spirit whose core values include care, respect, community, inclusion, equality, justice and fairness. This aligns with the ETBI understanding of ethos as the values, beliefs and practices underpinning the life of the school, and with an equality-based multi-denominational approach in which students of all religions and beliefs are welcomed, respected and supported. The agreed model therefore expects school leaders to give practical expression to Catholic founding intentions through pastoral, liturgical and social outreach activities where

appropriate, while also ensuring that all students, regardless of religion or belief, are equally welcomed, respected and supported in the full life of the school. A small number of Community Schools, currently the two schools under the joint patronage of an ETB and Educate Together, articulate this multi-denominational ethos through an explicitly equality-based, learner-centred and democratic characteristic spirit.

1.6.3 The board of management and the governance structures in Community Schools

In 2016, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) issued the *Governance Manual for Community and Comprehensive Schools* (DES, 2016). This document sets out the responsibilities of the board in Community Schools to the Department and to the patrons of the school. The manual applies to all areas of school operation and is intended to be read in conjunction with the Deed of Trust and its schedules. The responsibilities of the board to the Minister are set out clearly:

> The Board of Management is responsible for the governance and direction of the school, the use of school resources and the management of budgetary allocations made to the school by the Minister. To discharge its duty in this regard, the Board should ensure that there is an adequate system of control, delegation and accountability in place to ensure the smooth and efficient operation of school services and school administration. While the Board may delegate many of its responsibilities to the principal and, in some circumstances, to sub-committees of the Board, it must remain aware of its responsibilities and of its accountability to the Minister (DES, 2016, p. 3).

The Governance Manual also sets out the board's duties to the patrons:

> It is the duty of the Board to manage the school on behalf of the Patrons. In carrying out this duty the board is obliged to consult with and keep the Patrons informed of decisions and proposals of the board (DES, 2016, p. 7).

It follows that the board has a high level of autonomy for decisions at a local level while remaining accountable to two authorities, the DES and the patrons.

1.6.4 School leadership in Community Schools

The Governance Manual for Community Schools states:

> The quality of school leadership in a school is central to setting direction in the school and achieving the best educational outcomes for pupils... Boards of Management must be cognisant of the importance of encouraging and facilitating the Principal and Deputy Principal and others in developing and effectively exercising this leadership role in the school... This can only be achieved through the co-operation of all the partners in the school and through the effective delegation of responsibility from the

> Board of Management to the Principal and from the principal to school personnel and to the students where possible (DES, 2016, p. 12).

The responsibilities of the principal are detailed in the Deed of Trust and Model Lease for Community Schools and include an obligation to carry out duties delegated by the board (ACCS, 2004). The principal is a non-voting member and acts as secretary to the board. In this role, the principal advises the board, keeps members informed of school matters, and manages the day-to-day operation of the school. While accountable to the board, the principal is afforded autonomy to liaise directly with Department of Education and Skills officials on school-related matters (DES, 2016).

1.6.5 The school chaplain

A chaplain is provided for in Community Schools where there is a religious joint patron (ACCS, 2004). Since 2014, all new appointees are appointed by the board and are required to be registered teachers working under an agreed contract. Scheduled class contact time for the chaplain is no more than four hours per week. Chaplaincy is regarded as a full-time pastoral position that supports school life and includes co-ordinating religious services, retreats and celebrations, as well as advising staff members and students in a pastoral care capacity.

The chaplain works closely with the Religious Education team, supporting the teaching of Religious Education and providing for liturgical and para-liturgical celebrations in the school.

The 2014 contract sets out the role and duties of the chaplain which include:

> … respond to the spiritual and religious needs of staff and students while respecting the freedom of the religious and personal conviction of each individual … ensure that the characteristic spirit of the school finds practical expression in faith formation as well as pastoral, liturgical, para-liturgical and outreach activities (ACCS, 2017).

State funding of chaplains in Community Schools was challenged as unconstitutional; the Supreme Court found that such funding did not amount to State endowment of religion in these schools, noting the State's role in assisting parents with the religious and moral formation of their children *(Campaign to Separate Church and State Ltd v Minister for Education [1998] 3 IR 343).* Although the role of chaplain in Community Schools is not the focus of this thesis, it is relevant as one means through which the characteristic spirit of the school may find expression in day-to-day school life.

1.6.6 The Characteristic Spirit Statement

The term 'characteristic spirit', understood here as 'ethos', was first introduced in the Education Act of 1998. The Act states that the patrons can hold the board accountable for:

> upholding the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school, and at all times act in accordance with any Act of the Oireachtas or instrument made thereunder, deed, charter, articles of management or other such instrument relating to the establishment or operation of the school (Education Act 1998, 1998, Part II, Section 15(2)(b)).

The term 'characteristic spirit' has replaced 'ethos' in legislation because it encompasses cultural, educational and linguistic values in addition to moral, spiritual and religious values commonly associated with ethos (Liddy, O'Flaherty and McCormack, 2019). At a general level, this understanding of ethos refers to the spirit that informs the informal interactions of those within the school community (McLaughlin, 2005; Liddy, O'Flaherty and McCormack, 2019).

Having established the school and appointed the board, another specific role assigned to the school patrons is to agree the characteristic spirit of the school, taking cognisance of its inherited tradition, values and founding intention. More recently, the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 requires schools to include a statement about ethos or characteristic spirit in their admission policies. In 2018, the joint patrons of the 83 Community Schools worked in partnership to agree a Characteristic Spirit Statement reflecting the founding intentions of the schools. This resulted in three statements: one governing the 81 schools with religious and ETB joint patrons, and the others governing the remaining two schools where Educate Together and the ETB are the joint patrons. These statements, agreed in recent years by those who represent the original patrons, replace earlier mission statements and seek to capture the founding intentions of the schools through a contemporary lens **(Appendix D).**

1.6.7 Religious Education and religious instruction

Finally in this section, the distinction between Religious Education and religious instruction is worth noting. The Deed of Trust (Second Schedule) only references religious instruction where it states that the Community School is:

> open to all the children of the community (ACCS, 2004, p.12) … the religious worship attended by any pupil at the school and the religious instruction given to any pupil shall be in accordance with the rites, practice and teaching of the religious denomination to which the pupil belongs (ACCS, 2004, p. 17).

Over time, this has come to mean that the Community School is open to all children in the local community, of all faiths and none. In 2018, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) issued two circulars, Circular 0013/2018 and Circular 0062/2018, setting out the

requirements for students studying Religious Education in Community Schools (DES, 2018a; DES, 2018b). These circulars draw a clear distinction between Religious Education and religious instruction and worship. For the purposes of this study, the distinction made by McCormack *et al*. (2019) between 'religious education in the curriculum' and 'religion in the life of the school' is useful. Religion in the life of the school relates to activities and 'worship events' within school life and beyond timetabled Religious Education classes (p. 169).

Schools schedule worship events as part of religion in the life of the school; however, the timing, frequency and form of these events are determined locally. This does not mean that a school may simply choose not to provide for worship events. Rather, the schedule should be agreed with the school community, including the board of management, and should be consistent with the Deed of Trust. Schools therefore have autonomy to decide the form these events will take and the schedule that best suits their context, while also informing parents and students of the arrangements and respecting the right to opt out through the process outlined in the Deed of Trust and the relevant circulars.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Religious Education programme, however, is the agreed programme for all students. It is not a denominational instruction programme and is written to encompass all faiths and none. In line with the Deed of Trust, it is provided to all year groups for two hours each week. In practice, the distinction between curriculum Religious Education and religion in the life of the school raises practical questions for schools and families, particularly in relation to opt-out arrangements for worship events and the supervision of students who do not participate.

1.6.8 The Department of Education

Since its establishment in 1924, the Department has operated under several titles, including the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Education and, currently, the Department of Education and Youth. In this chapter, references use the historically correct departmental title where relevant, while abbreviated forms such as DE, DES and DEY are used throughout the text and in in-text citations for readability.

Having clarified the terminology relating to this study, the remainder of this chapter outlines the organisation of the thesis.

1.7 The organisation of the thesis

This thesis is presented in seven chapters.

Chapter One introduces the study, provides a brief contextual background, defines key terminology, and sets out the purpose and problem statement.

Chapter Two provides a guide to the formative context in which the Comprehensive and Community School models emerged and developed, from the late 1950s to the present. The chapter traces the social, political and educational developments that shaped key decisions about provision, patronage and governance of the schools during this period.

Chapter Three offers a critical review of the literature relevant to the study and identifies the themes central to the research. These themes derive from research commissioned by ACCS in 2022/2023. Facilitated by Professor Tom Collins, this research explored the distinctive contribution of the Community School sector to Irish education through focus groups with patrons, boards of management, parents, staff and students. Conducted between October 2023 and April 2024, it identified three main areas: values enshrined in the Characteristic Spirit Statement, ethos, and school leadership. These areas shape the literature review and provide a structure for the chapter.

Chapter Four outlines the conceptual framework, the research design, the position of the researcher, and the methods of data collection and analysis used in the study. The chapter also addresses the ethical considerations, validity and limitations of the research.

Chapter Five presents the findings, beginning with the case study context and providing an overview of the profiles of the principals, schools and stakeholders who participated in this research. This is followed by analysis organised around six central themes and related sub-themes that were developed during the thematic analysis of the data from the surveys and interviews. It also reports on documentary analysis structured around the same themes. The chapter concludes by drawing together the themes and findings that have emerged from the analysis.

Chapter Six discusses the findings in the context of the broader literature and policy landscape, returning to the central question of whether patronage and governance structures shape culture, ethos and leadership practices in Community Schools.

Chapter Seven summarises the study and key findings, reflects on their significance, and presents conclusions, recommendations and implications for policy, practice and future research, acknowledging the study's strengths and limitations.

Chapter 2: The historical context

2.1 Introduction

> The formative influences on the system are related to current developments: as well as knowing about the education system, there is a need to understand why it is as it is and the parameters within which change and reform operate (Coolahan, 1981, pp. ix-x).

This chapter examines the historical and policy context in which the Comprehensive and Community School models emerged and developed in the Republic of Ireland from the late 1950s to the present. It is grounded in the study's central concern with how school culture, ethos, climate and leadership practices in Community Schools are shaped by governance and patronage structures. The 1960s marked a transformative period in Irish education, as the State adopted a more activist and expansionist policy approach that reshaped participation, school structures and the balance of power in education (Walsh, 2016, pp. 260-261). These developments, however, can only be properly understood against the policy context that preceded them (Fleming and Harford, 2014). The chapter therefore shows how, from the 1960s onwards, the State assumed a more active role in post-primary education and how debates about provision, control, patronage and management shaped the conditions under which these school models were established. It argues that these formative decisions continue to matter because they frame the organisational and cultural conditions within which Community Schools operate today.

2.2 The late 1950s

Ireland in the 1950s was in a state of economic crisis, marked by high inflation, industrial and agricultural decline, and mass emigration (Fleming and Harford, 2014). Education was perceived primarily as important in instilling national and cultural values in young people rather than as having a role in economic recovery (McManus, 2014, p. 91). Doyle (2000, p. 34) observes that, in the period leading up to the late 1950s, the role of the Minister for Education was that of a 'benign onlooker' in charge of a ministry with a 'dismal' and 'inward-looking' profile. This view was expressed clearly by General Richard Mulcahy, Minister for Education in 1956, who in a speech to the Dáil compared his role to that of a 'dungaree man, a plumber taking a knock out of the pipes, streamlining the forces of others and linking everything up' (Mulcahy, 1956, cited in O'Flaherty, 1992, p. 22).

At that time, the post-primary education system was characterised by 'two rigidly separated models of education, one controlled by the Church and the other administered by the Vocational Education Committees' (Colley, 1966, cited in Randles, 1975, pp. 338-342). The Vocational Education Committees (VECs), established under the 1930 Vocational Education Act, had a statutory role in providing education in the State. Each of the 38 VECs comprised 14 members, including locally elected councillors and 'other political supporters representing the majority interest on the relevant council', along with local employers, trade union representatives, or 'individuals with an interest and experience in education' (Coolahan, 1981, p. 96). One of the key senior officials in the Department, Seán O'Connor (1986, p. 11), describes how members of the clergy were frequently co-opted to the VECs, with most committees chaired by priests whom he characterises as 'intelligent men, eager to strengthen the social and economic fabric of the communities they served'. He notes that this arrangement was mutually advantageous: while the Church's interests in education were protected in the State system, these 'watchdogs of religion' also contributed significantly to the growth and development of the VECs (O'Connor, 1986, p. 11). Fleming and Harford (2014, p. 641) argue, however, that despite clerical involvement, the vocational system was viewed 'as second-class in terms of both social status and educational experience'. As O'Connor (1986, p. 11) explains:

> The limitations imposed by the Act (1930) with respect to content and duration of the courses provided were too great to be attractive to parents, who saw larger horizons for their children in the secondary schools.

In the late 1950s, the voluntary secondary school system under the control of the Catholic and Protestant religious bodies was the largest provider of education in the State, catering for the majority of post-primary pupils. O'Flaherty (1992, p. 7) describes the largely autonomous post-primary system established and developed in the decades leading up to the 1950s by the Catholic hierarchy without assistance from the State. He notes that the establishment of a denominational education system, largely built outside the 'agencies of the State', strengthened the place and power of the institutional Church in Irish public and social life.

Participation in post-primary education in the period leading up to the 1960s was low. Coolahan (1981, p. 79) observes that those attending post-primary schools represented only about 16 per cent of those enrolled in national schools. Dropout rates in both the secondary and vocational systems were also significant, as many children failed to complete the programmes on offer (Fleming and Harford, 2014). O'Sullivan (2005, p. 135) presents the

First Programme for Economic Expansion (1958) as signalling a wider policy reorientation in which educational participation became more closely linked to economic renewal and the revitalisation of rural Ireland. Within that changing policy context, Coolahan (1981) argues that reform over the following decades sought not only to expand participation among pupils of widely differing abilities and social backgrounds but also to reshape the form of post-primary provision itself. The old bipartite division between academically oriented secondary schools and vocational schools began to erode as vocational schools expanded their curriculum and a more comprehensive model of schooling was encouraged across both sectors. Over the following three decades, enrolment in both secondary and vocational schools almost trebled, reflecting not only rising participation but also significant structural change within the post-primary system (Coolahan, 1981, p. 134).

2.3 The 1960s

Fleming and Harford (2014) characterise the 1960s as a period of profound transformation in Irish education, representing a paradigm shift towards a more interventionist and strategic policy approach and a significant democratisation of provision, particularly at post-primary level. This transformation occurred against the background of a changing Ireland, influenced by Europe and by stronger links with international bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). With high hopes of joining the European Economic Community (EEC) in the early 1960s, Ireland became more outward-looking in its approach to policymaking (Coolahan, 1981, p. 132). Attitudes to, and interest in, educational matters were also changing as the public became better informed with the introduction of television in 1961, alongside increasing newspaper coverage of education. Coolahan (1981, p. 132) observes that the slogan of 'equality of educational opportunity' gained currency not only across post-war Europe but also in Ireland, as politicians found electoral appeal in this sentiment. In turn, he argues, voters came to view education as a 'social escalator' and a means to a better future for their children.

In 1959, Seán Lemass succeeded Éamon de Valera as Taoiseach. Lemass was the first Taoiseach to recognise 'the indispensable role education would play in the long-term economic development of the country' (McManus, 2014, p. 101). The Government's *White Paper on Economic Expansion*, published the previous year, emphasised education as an economic investment in developing an educated workforce that could help realise economic growth and stability (Coolahan, 1981, p. 131). During his term, Lemass actively supported

several ambitious younger Ministers for Education who would subsequently effect significant changes in policy and practice in post-primary education, with far-reaching consequences for the system (Fleming and Harford, 2014).

One of the first Ministers to take office in this reform period, Patrick Hillery (1959-65), would alter the course of education in Ireland and make one of the most important contributions to change in Irish education (O'Connor, 1986, p. 91). He did so by proposing a new school model, the Comprehensive School, as a response to existing weaknesses in the system, namely areas with no post-primary provision and the absence of connecting links between the two very different school models, the secondary and vocational schools. These two systems, between them, were unable to meet the needs of all pupils (O'Sullivan, 2005, pp. 255-256).

Hillery announced his proposals for the building of a new type of post-primary school, the Comprehensive School, in a statement to the press in May 1963. This greater ministerial involvement in post-primary education aroused suspicion among stakeholders, a suspicion deepened by the manner in which such a major development was announced and by the lack of detail in the statement, which left little scope for informed debate on the proposals (O'Flaherty, 1992, p. 24). Coolahan (1981, p. 133) observes that the announcement signified a new government approach 'that brought change as a result of government policy rather than in response to general demand'. Hillery, in effect, changed the role of the Minister for Education in policymaking, a role that up to that point had been dominated by private interests (Fleming and Harford, 2014). The 'dungaree man' with a benign influence was a thing of the past. This view is echoed by others. Randles (1975, pp. 124-125) suggests that Hillery was 'appropriating a great deal of power', treating educational organisations as 'outside bodies', while the lack of information accompanying the proposals made serious discussion impossible. She further argues that the delay in implementing the 1963 proposals fostered cynicism among observers, as major announcements had been made long before the details had been worked out.

2.4 The introduction of the Comprehensive School model

In the decade 1960 to 1970, the aim of Government policy was to enable all children to remain in full-time education until they reached fifteen years of age. Rather than focus on compulsory attendance, and the potential State financial burden this might bring, the Government consistently and successfully looked to increase voluntary participation through

increased facilities and greater provision of post-primary opportunities (Randles, 1975, p. 305).

In his press statement in May 1963, when introducing the Comprehensive School scheme, Hillery outlined in broad brush strokes his understanding of, and plan for, the new type of post-primary school. The Minister chose only to consult with the Catholic bishops before publicly announcing his plan, reportedly saying, 'the time for talking, I am sure, will come afterwards' (Randles, 1975, p. 119). O'Flaherty (1992, p. 26) attributes Hillery's success in this venture to his clear understanding of the weaknesses of the existing system and, most importantly, of the weaknesses of the organisations involved in the provision of post-primary education at the time.

The Comprehensive Schools were to be fully funded State schools, situated in places where there was no post-primary provision and managed by a committee representing the three main interests in Irish education, the Minister, represented by a departmental inspector, the local VEC, and the local bishop (Coolahan, 1981, p. 193). The Protestant Comprehensive Schools differed in number of denominational representatives appointed to the management committee and eventually a five-person board emerged in these schools. Shortly afterwards, a similar model emerged in the Crescent Comprehensive School established by the Jesuits in Limerick (O'Flaherty, 1992, p. 24). Coolahan (1981, p. 218) comments that the schools were non-selective and co-educational, serving pupils within a 10-mile radius, offered free transport and although the schools were denominational, children could not be excluded because of their faith.

The new venture would take time, and the first three Comprehensive Schools planned for Carraroe, Co. Galway, Cootehill, Co. Cavan, and Shannon, Co. Clare, did not open until three years after Hillery had left office in 1966. O'Connor (1986, pp. 95-96) suggests that the delay was due less to any real opposition to the concept of State schools than to the Catholic hierarchy's lack of acceptance of co-education.

2.5 The Investment in Education (IIE) report 1965

The appointment of George Colley as Minister for Education in 1965 brought a change of approach and strategy. McManus (2014, p. 127) notes that he sought to build positive working relationships with the organisations involved in education, while O'Flaherty (1992, p. 29) similarly describes him as favouring 'a strategy of cooperation over imposition'. The publication in the same year of the *Investment in Education report* proved pivotal. O'Connor

(1986, pp. 110-111) argues that it was a ‘fascinating study of a system that for long years lacked positive direction, ignored research, and neglected any adequate self-assessment’, and later commentators have widely treated it as a landmark study: McManus (2014, p. 128) describes it as a ‘landmark’ work, while O’Sullivan (2005, p. 129) sees it as a ‘major modernising force in Irish society’.

O’Connor (1986, p. 120) describes the impact of this rigorous study, which laid bare the faults and failings of the system, leaving those engaged with it shocked by the magnitude of its findings. Its originality lay in its rigorous, evidence-based analysis, grounded for the first time in comprehensive statistical data on education in the Irish State (Walsh, 2016, p. 244) and moving policymaking beyond what Randles (1975, p. 185) called ‘the realm of the lucky guess’. As Hyland (2014), a research assistant to the team, recalls, it was the first time a professional statistician had been employed in the Department of Education. The report found that the two post-primary systems remained rigidly separated, participation rates were still low, and dropout was especially acute in the vocational sector, where 44 per cent of an entry cohort left without sitting the Group Certificate (Coolahan, 1981, p. 166).

Educational provision remained uneven across the country, curricula were narrow, and many teachers were teaching subjects for which they were unqualified (O’Connor, 1986, pp. 117-119). In response, Colley established the Development Branch to survey existing provision and prepare a national plan for post-primary facilities. O’Connor (1986, p. 95) notes that one of the Minister’s main objectives was ‘the pooling of facilities in the secondary and vocational systems, so as to improve the educational opportunity for every pupil’. His January 1966 letter to secondary and vocational authorities, urging cooperation and the ‘pooling of forces’ to enhance ‘equality of opportunity for all pupils’ (Colley, 1966, cited in Randles, 1975, pp. 338-342), reflected this consultative approach and, as Randles (1975, pp. 195-196) suggests, was a ‘good tactical move’ likely to generate ‘much good will’.

Yet despite the welcome initially accorded to the Minister’s consultative approach, the collaboration sought between the secondary and vocational sectors failed to develop. Department-facilitated meetings in local areas brought the authorities of the two school types together, in many cases for the first time, but these discussions were often marked by caution and hesitancy rather than shared purpose. What followed were prolonged and frequently inconclusive exchanges, as a series of practical difficulties emerged, including the distance between schools, insurance concerns, timetabling constraints and unresolved questions

around co-education. These difficulties reflected more than administrative inconvenience. They revealed the extent to which the two sectors remained institutionally and culturally distinct, making it difficult for those involved to recognise either the value or the necessity of the changes being proposed. As a result, Colley's letter did little to secure the progress or cooperation it had envisaged.

2.6 The free education scheme 1967

1966 heralded the appointment of another new Minister as Donagh O'Malley (1966-68) took over the Education portfolio following a cabinet reshuffle by Lemass. O'Malley, who had served one year as Minister for Health, already had the reputation for 'getting things done quickly and efficiently' and his appointment was a key one for Lemass to ensure that his education reform programme would be completed 'without delay' (Fleming and Harford, 2014, p. 647). This view reflects that of O'Connor (1986, p. 139), who describes O'Malley as having a reputation as 'a hell-raiser', noting that the officials in the Department of Education expected 'fast and furious' action although they had little indication of 'where his interests lay'.

O'Malley's interest lay in free education including the provision of free transport to schools, and, in his first major speech as Minister for Education, he outlined dramatic plans for a scheme of free education for all children (O'Connor, 1986, p. 141). McManus (2014, pp. 146-147) notes that it later became apparent that O'Malley had made the announcement without approval from the Department of Finance or consultation with stakeholders. Despite serious objections from within and beyond the Government Cabinet, the scheme introduced one year later, in 1967, proved highly successful with a significant increase in the numbers of students of mixed ability attending full-time education up to the age of 15 and beyond into senior cycle (Fleming and Harford, 2014).

2.7 The Comprehensive School (1966-1987)

The IIE report showed clearly that the education system was inadequate in both economic and social terms and was the catalyst for the policy decision by the State to deliver its own schools (O'Flaherty, 1992, p. 42). The first draft Deed of Trust and schedule specifying the responsibilities and functions of the board of management of the Comprehensive Schools was prepared by the Department of Education in 1966. The board was to consist of three members: a nominee of the local bishop, a nominee of the Department of Education and a nominee of the local VEC, normally the Chief Executive Officer (Coolahan, 1981, p. 193).

O'Flaherty (1992, pp. 32-33) notes that the document was not made available for general circulation and, as such, generated little discussion among teacher unions and other stakeholders. He suggests that a 'dominant position was negotiated by the bishops' in the control of these new schools during 'their private discussions with the Minister and his officials' and that, over time, the schools were established according to local arrangements rather than as part of a fully thought-out national plan.

Between 1966 and 1973, the majority of the Comprehensive Schools were established. Five Catholic Comprehensive Schools were opened in Glenties, Co. Donegal (1968), Manorhamilton, Co. Leitrim (1972), Boherbui, Co. Cork (1973), Crescent, Co. Limerick (1973), and Tarbert, Co. Kerry (1973). Two single-sex Catholic Comprehensive Schools, built for approximately 750 pupils each, opened in Ballymun in 1970 and 1971. The Minister's decision to establish two separate single-sex schools in Ballymun instead of one co-educational school was based on numbers, as it was considered that these would otherwise form an 'enormous school' (Randles, 1975, p. 283). A few years later, a new school was built across the road to accommodate senior students from the two junior schools. The new Senior Comprehensive School was co-educational and catered for 500 pupils to Leaving Certificate level. In 2005, the three Comprehensive Schools amalgamated to form a single co-educational school under the name Trinity Comprehensive School. O'Flaherty (1999, p. 59) highlights the co-education aspect of the debate as significant, observing that during this period the Catholic Church 'seemed to have overcome its objections to co-education'. Instead, he argues, the critical factor in the provision of second-level education became the issue of who would control the ethos and philosophy of the school.

The first of the five Protestant Comprehensive Schools opened in 1971 in Raphoe, Co. Donegal. This was followed in the next year by three Protestant Comprehensive Schools, two in Dublin, Mount Temple and Newpark, and one in Cork, Ashton Comprehensive School. Many years later, during Gemma Hussey's term as Minister for Education in 1987, East Glendalough School in Co. Wicklow opened as the most recent addition to the Comprehensive Schools. This may, according to Doyle (2000, p. 37), have appeared an 'odd decision', but it was in fact the only 'logical possibility'. She attributes it to the positive relations between Church and State, arguing that the State wished to recognise and support the needs of a minority church. At the time, the Church of Ireland rejected the by then well-established Community School model and instead opted for the model with which it was most familiar: the Comprehensive School.

Doyle (2000, p. 38) notes that the Comprehensive School scheme, confined to just 14 schools, did not expand and has therefore tended to be overlooked in accounts of Irish education. She argues, however, that the model was of considerable significance: it marked the State's first direct entry into post-primary education and introduced a board of management structure that would eventually supersede the older single-manager model. Most importantly, Comprehensive Schools served as an effective point of liaison between Church and State in both policy formation and institutional relations.

2.8 The Community School (1972)

The origins of the Community School model can be traced to Seán O'Connor's 1968 article, *Post-Primary Education Now and in the Future,* published in the Autumn edition of *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* (O'Connor, 1968). The article signalled the Department of Education's intention to pursue further rationalisation and a new relationship with religious authorities. Although presented as a personal contribution, it was widely read as indicating official policy and intensified concern that the State was seeking to expand its influence in education. Randles (1975, pp. 290-291) observes that public opinion 'rightly' recognised these views, written by one who held such a senior position linked to policy making, as reflecting the official plans of the Department of Education.

In that article, O'Connor (1968) described the educational system as a 'hodge podge of very small units' at primary and post-primary level and reviewed policy developments since Dr Hillery's 1963 announcement, tracing the Department's programme of rationalisation in its effort to ensure equal opportunities for all. In his final paragraph, O'Connor (1968) stressed the need to establish a new relationship with the religious in education, 'as partners, not always as masters', a statement that hinted at a very different role for the religious in future. Randles (1975, p. 293) observes that this wording caused 'a great polarisation between the religious and the Department of Education, which was accused of attempting to nationalise the schools by stealth'. The move by the State to challenge the status quo was interpreted by many of the religious as a significant threat to their position in the educational system (Wickham, 1980). Writing from his senior position within the Department of Education, O'Connor set out the Department's programme of rationalisation as part of a wider effort to secure greater equality of opportunity and to reduce the wastage of resources in staffing and facilities. Within this context, he emphasised the need for larger, more viable schools and, in doing so, introduced the idea of the 'Community School'. The term itself was not fully

explained, but it suggested a new model of post-primary provision more closely connected to its local community.

Under Pádraig Faulkner, who was Minister for Education from July 1969 to March 1973, these ideas were developed in *The Community School Document* (Department of Education, 1970, cited in Randles, 1975, pp. 347-349), issued by the Department of Education as a plan for the next phase of post-primary reorganisation. Randles (1975, p. 302) describes it as 'the blueprint for the Department's next move in the restructuring of the Irish post-primary educational system'. The model proposed free, non-selective schooling of a comprehensive type for defined catchment areas and envisaged larger schools, extensive community use of facilities, adult education provision, and, where necessary, amalgamations of existing secondary and vocational schools or the creation of new greenfield schools (Coolahan, 1981, p. 195; McManus, 2014, p. 199). Yet, as with the earlier Comprehensive School scheme, the document was broad and left crucial questions unresolved.

O'Flaherty (1992, pp. 48-49) notes in particular the lack of clarity around ownership and governance. The text, which had been sent to the Catholic hierarchy a few weeks earlier, was published in *The Irish Times* on Thursday, 12 November 1970, under the headline *Far reaching post-primary reorganisation planned* (Spelman and Doherty, 1970, p. 4). The article drew attention to the document's brevity, stating that it 'leaves all sorts of vital questions unanswered', and observed that the absence of any advance publicity was 'noteworthy' given its implications for Church-State relations.

This ambiguity contributed to widespread opposition among religious authorities, VEC interests and parents. Troddyn (1970, p. 342) argued that the proposals were 'vague and sketchy' and that too much remained undefined for such a significant restructuring of post-primary education. Randles (1975, p. 303) similarly notes that parents insisted on 'the primacy of their natural and constitutional rights in education' and were 'unafraid to use the ballot box as a weapon in the landscape of democracy'. The 1975 pamphlet *Have the Snakes Come Back?* further amplified this opposition. Walsh (2008) notes that its authors presented the 'snakes' as Department officials, politicians, economists and international experts, while O'Flaherty (1992, pp. 62-63) shows that the pamphlet framed the expanding role of the State in education as a direct threat to the family and warned that Community Schools would be secular and would weaken the role of the Catholic Church. As Wickham (1980) argues, such claims also reflected wider suspicions about UNESCO, the World Bank and international

influence on Irish educational policy. At the same time, opponents feared that the State was attempting to ‘take over’ or ‘supersede’ existing secondary and vocational schools, while later critics of the emerging model argued that Catholic interests continued to receive preferential treatment in management structures despite the predominance of public funding (Wickham, 1980; McManus, 2014, p. 12).

Despite these tensions, the first Community Schools opened in 1972 in Tallaght, Coolmine and Carna, and numbers had grown to 26 by 1979 (Coolahan, 1981, p. 219). Their early development was marked by ad hoc governance arrangements and prolonged negotiation over control and representation, tensions only partially resolved with the Deed of Trust agreed in 1981. As O’Flaherty (1992, p. 73) notes, the final draft Deed signed for the first Community Schools in 1981 addressed property and trusteeship, board composition, school operations and the provision of religious instruction and, significantly, provided for the election of teacher and parent representatives to boards of management.

The draft Deed of Trust contained a number of highly contested provisions designed to protect continuing religious involvement in Community Schools. Coolahan (1981, p. 219) notes that certain posts were reserved for nominees of the religious order involved in the school, provided that their qualifications were satisfactory. O’Flaherty (1992, pp. 71-72) shows that this issue was accompanied by wider dispute over provisions relating to religious instruction and the protection of the school’s denominational ethos, including expectations that teachers should not undermine the religious belief or moral formation of pupils. These clauses became a major source of opposition from teacher unions and others, raising questions about representation, teachers’ rights and the extent of religious influence within a formally shared governance model. The final position was a negotiated compromise rather than the removal of the contested religious provisions: the 1981 Deed of Trust retained explicit provision for religious instruction, religious worship and the protection of the school’s characteristic spirit, while also placing these within a joint patron and board of management structure that included State, religious, teacher and parent representation. The long delay before agreement is significant because it underlines that Community Schools emerged not from a settled consensus but from contested negotiation, a legacy that continues to shape patronage, governance and characteristic spirit in the model today.

2.9 The Community College (1976-2013)

The development of the Community College reflected the determination of the VECs to retain their place in post-primary provision at a time when Community Schools were expanding. As Coolahan (1981, p. 196) notes, the VECs were concerned to protect their role in the system. The Vocational Education (Amendment) Act 1970 enabled greater cooperation with other agencies in the provision of schools and allowed for the establishment of management boards, creating the conditions for a new model within the vocational sector (Randles, 1975, p. 301). By the 1980s, some VECs adopted the title 'Community College' rather than 'vocational school', partly because, as McManus (2014, p. 233) suggests, the term 'vocational' did not carry sufficient status for the middle-class parents they hoped to attract.

Representatives of the Catholic bishops were invited onto the boards of these schools, a development which O'Flaherty (1999, p. 62) argues extended Church influence into the vocational sector. Following negotiations between Archbishop Dermot Ryan and Co. Dublin VEC in 1980, the Community College emerged as an alternative model of provision in Dublin. As O'Flaherty (1992, p. 82) observes, the model mirrored aspects of the Community School structure but did not become a single standardised national form, since each school was developed locally through VEC-level arrangements and model agreements rather than through a common deed. The schools remained under VEC patronage, with boards of management structurally tied to the VEC.

The reconstitution of the VEC system into 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in 2013 preserved this legacy. Community Colleges now exist in both designated and non-designated forms, with the former reflecting local agreements involving religious representation and the latter operating solely under ETB patronage. The Catholic Schools Partnership (2014, p. 13) identified 48 designated Community Colleges and 206 non-designated Community Colleges under ETB patronage. In more recent years, the ETBs have opened schools without agreement with the local bishop. These are formally recognised as non-designated ETB Community Colleges.

2.10 The Community School (1980-2024)

The Green Paper *Education for a Changing World,* which would eventually lead to the Education Act 1998, was published in 1992 during Séamus Brennan's (1992-1993) ministry (McManus, 2014, p. 275). Interestingly, the influence of the IIE report remained evident in the Green Paper (Department of Education, 1992), which, according to many, proposed an

education system that lacked a vision of society and continued to place an emphasis on human capital (O'Flaherty *et al.,* 2018). In its response to the Green Paper (ACCS, 1993, p. 14), prepared by Dr Kevin Williams, the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS) criticised this legacy of the sixties, arguing that the education system was seen as 'in some way responsible for the current state of unemployment in the country'. The Association argued that this assumption, expressed in consumerist language, represented a limiting and narrow view of education and of life. The consultation process that followed extended beyond Brennan's term in office into that of Niamh Breathnach and included the National Education Convention in Dublin Castle in 1993. There, familiar questions resurfaced about the roles of patrons, boards of management, principals and middle management structures, again revealing how governance and control remained central to system development (Coolahan, 1993). As O'Flaherty *et al*. (2018) argue, these debates often prioritised structures of power over deeper philosophical questions about the purposes of education. The extensive and intensive discussions that attended the National Education Convention (commenced October 1993) allowed substantial criticisms of Minister Brennan's Green Paper *(Education for a Changing World 1992)* to be voiced and worked through by a wide range of representative interests. The *Report on the National Education Convention* (1994) captured the unprecedented degree of consensus that emerged and enabled the White Paper of 1995 *(Charting our Education Future)* to receive a wide and warm welcome, including the five key principles of Pluralism, Equality, Partnership, Quality, Accountability. These developments led to the framing and enactment of the Education Act 1998.

At the same time, 43 Community Schools were established between 1980 and 2000, after which growth slowed markedly. Since 2010, only five new Community Schools have been established: Kildare Town, Co. Kildare (2011), Celbridge, Co. Kildare (2015), Ballymakenny College, Co. Louth (2015), Skibbereen, Co. Cork (2016) and, more recently, Ennistymon Community School, Co. Clare (2023), which emerged from a prolonged amalgamation process involving three existing schools. The Ennistymon case is significant because it demonstrates the continuing evolution of the Community School model. Three years after the school opened, its Deed of Trust has yet to be signed by the Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board and the Educational Trusts, Catholic Education Irish Schools Trust (CEIST) and Edmund Rice Schools Trust (ERST), representing the founding religious congregations. This is the first Community School draft deed in which educational trusts, rather than religious congregations that operated the original schools in the area, are listed as

parties. The current negotiations point to how the transfer of patronage functions from religious congregations to educational trusts should be incorporated into a revised Deed of Trust. As these increasingly replace religious congregations in the Community School model, the revised deed will be central to clarifying future patronage responsibilities and arrangements.

2.11 The Education Act 1998

The enactment of the Education Act 1998 during Micheál Martin's term as Minister for Education marked an important stage in the formalisation of arrangements that had evolved over the previous decades. For Community Schools in particular, its significance lies in the fact that the role of the joint patrons must be understood through both the Act and the Deed of Trust. Read together, these documents provided the statutory and contractual framework within which patronage, school governance and characteristic spirit were thereafter exercised, stabilising arrangements that had previously developed through prolonged negotiation and practice.

2.12 The Community School: amalgamations, mergers and greenfield schools

Following the establishment of the initial tranche of Community Schools, debate in the following decade focused more on rationalisation than on the creation of new schools. The *Investment in Education* report had established a strong link between education and the economy and, as O'Sullivan (2005) argues, helped to redefine the role of the education system in Ireland. Yet Randles (1975, p. 192) suggests that, although the report foregrounded efficiency and the more effective use of resources, it also showed an important understanding of social context by recognising that different areas required different solutions. In her view, that sensitivity was often absent from the Department's subsequent efforts to reorganise post-primary provision. She further argues that officials failed to appreciate how the closure of an established local school affected the wider community and that successful restructuring would have required goodwill, a thorough information programme and calm discussion (Randles, 1975, pp. 316-317). Many proposals therefore met resistance because communities were not convinced that reorganisation would provide a better service, while the Department's insistence on numbers 'frustrated and irritated' parents who saw their children as 'real people'.

These concerns were echoed by Frank Murray, executive chairperson of the Commission on School Accommodation, 25 years later in the *Report on the Amalgamation of Second Level Schools.* In his introduction, Murray states that successful amalgamation required 'a comprehensive process of amalgamation, an investment of a range of resources and commitment to resolution of difficult issues' (Commission on School Accommodation, 2001, p. 7). The report describes the 'haphazard' nature of many processes, noting that prolonged discussions and delays in funding often created 'instability' in schools. It also highlights the 'grief' experienced by communities and patrons over 'the loss of identity' when a school closed, concluding that some amalgamations suffered from 'a lack of planning, a lack of management, lack of finance and lack of support' (Commission on School Accommodation, 2001, p. 12).

The Commission further identified practical issues that had to be addressed in any amalgamation process, including school type and size, the decline in the number of religious involved in education, and staff concerns relating to working conditions, posts of responsibility, teacher allocation and student welfare. It proposed a three-stage framework and made clear that, although initiatives for amalgamation might come from staff, boards of management or the Department, the final decision was essentially one for the patrons (Commission on School Accommodation, 2001, p. 33). This is significant because it underlines the extent to which governance, patronage and identity were embedded in the formation of many Community Schools. As Murray's report makes clear, amalgamation was not simply a technical exercise in rationalisation, but a process shaped by institutional loyalties, local histories and contested authority. Of the current 83 Community Schools, 57 were established either through the amalgamation of existing secondary and vocational schools or through mergers in which an existing secondary school entered joint trusteeship with the VEC or ETB on becoming a Community School, while 26 were established on greenfield sites in rapidly expanding urban areas **(Appendix A).** That distinction remains important because amalgamated, merged and greenfield schools began from different institutional inheritances and therefore potentially different starting points for leadership, culture and ethos formation.

2.13 Parental choice: a change in policy (2011)

In June 2011, Minister Ruairí Quinn announced 'new arrangements for the recognition of new schools' (DES, 2011). This represented a change in policy direction that 'placed a particular emphasis on parental demand for plurality and diversity of patronage' for the first

time, and clearly reflected the objectives set out in the Programme for Government (Government of Ireland, 2010). Patrons were invited to make application to the Department of Education and Skills once they could establish demand for their type of school in an area (DES, 2011). The policy relied on patrons choosing to engage in a competition in the area where the new school was proposed. Where patrons decided not to engage, this ultimately reduced the choice available to parents. In this way, the patrons retained significant influence over which school model would be available in an area.

The current policy is a further development of that established in 2011. Demand for new school places is now established by a demographic review carried out by the Department of Education rather than by the patrons (Department of Education, 2020). The Department sets out the criteria which patrons must address when making an application for their school type to be considered in the process (DE, 2020). Parent preferences are captured on a new Online Patronage Process System (OPPS) website which the Department has developed so that parents can access 'objective information' which allows them to make 'an informed decision' about their preferred model of patronage for their child's education (DE, 2020a). On the website, the information available to parents is mainly about the technical process and there is little about patronage or school models to inform this aspect of their decision-making.

In practice, patrons are awarded schools on the basis of how many parental preferences they receive in the competition. The Minister launched the process and invited eligible parents to engage by expressing their patronage preferences through the OPPS website (DE, 2020a). This system has been widely criticised, as in some cases school patronage has been awarded on a handful of votes representing a minority of parents. Furthermore, although the Community School model is listed on the OPPS website (DE, 2020a), in practice the system does not include a facility for parents to express a preference for a new Community School because it accommodates only single-patron applicants. Over time, this Department of Education policy has contributed to the decline in the growth of the sector referenced earlier in the chapter. The current policy fails to recognise the joint patronage model that established Community Schools in the first instance.

2.14 The Community and Comprehensive Schools: a question of ethos

> Though impalpable, ethos is nonetheless something real. When most of what we have learned at school has dropped into the deep well of human forgetfulness, a sense of

> the ethos of the school we attended remains part of our consciousness (Williams, 2000, p. 3).

The question of ethos has been central to both the Community and Comprehensive School models, but it has been resolved differently in each. Comprehensive Schools are generally understood as denominational in ethos, albeit with local variation in governance. Community Schools emerged from a more contested process. Religious congregations feared that the model would become a non-denominational form of State schooling. Randles (1975, p. 303) comments on the omission of any reference to religion in *The Community School Document* (Department of Education, 1970, cited in Randles, 1975, pp. 347-349), which she argues was 'not accidental' because, in her view, these schools were always intended to be non-denominational. Meanwhile, other stakeholders, including the VECs, parents and teacher unions, feared the opposite, believing that these schools would ultimately emerge as Catholic schools because of the influence of the Catholic Church. O'Flaherty (1992, p. 73), reflecting on the final draft Deed of Trust which emerged in 1981, states that these schools were 'essentially' Catholic schools to be used 'almost exclusively' by Catholic children. This interpretation rested not only on the fact that most pupils were Catholic, but also on governance arrangements that protected religious instruction, chaplaincy, reserved places and denominational ethos. Catholic influence, therefore, remained materially embedded in the model in practice.

What emerged was a jointly managed model now recognised as having a multi-denominational ethos, but one in which Catholic patrons have continued to exercise significant influence through governance structures, religious provision, and chaplaincy arrangements. These are non-selective schools that serve the whole community, and Religious Education is provided for all children in accord with their religious tradition. An ex-quota school chaplain, that is, one appointed in addition to the school's allocation of whole-time teacher equivalents, is employed in these schools (The Catholic Schools Partnership, 2014, p. 36). There are 52 Catholic patrons represented on the boards of management across the 81 schools and, within this number, 34 religious congregations, the majority of whom have transferred their functions of patronage for these schools to trust bodies such as Le Chéile (established in 2004) and CEIST (established in 2007). There are two Community Schools which have Educate Together as their joint patrons and these schools, while still recognised as having a multi-denominational ethos deliver an Ethics

curriculum and do not have a staffing allocation for an ex-quota chaplain. The other nominees on the 10-person boards are local ETB nominees, teachers and parents.

In Community Schools, ethos is agreed by the joint patrons; in Comprehensive Schools, it is determined by the relevant bishop or religious authority. Under the Education Act 1998, patrons establish and promote the official ethos of the school. Williams (2000), however, notes in his essay *Understanding Ethos: A Philosophical and Literary Exploration* that ethos cannot be imposed on a school community; rather, it must be given expression through teachers, students and parents working together in that community. McLaughlin (2005) similarly argues that ethos speaks for itself, is taken for granted as a way of being, can withstand isolated examples of exceptional behaviour without being undermined, and does not require constant articulation by those in the school community. It is not independent of the organisation but emerges from the interactions and interpretations of individuals and groups in the organisation (Darmody, Smyth and McCoy, 2012). This does not mean that boards of management are entitled to renegotiate or redefine the official ethos independently of the joint patrons. Their role is to give practical expression to the stated formal ethos in the context of their own school. In increasingly diverse school communities, this requires them to implement the agreed characteristic spirit in ways that remain faithful to the expectations of the joint patrons while also responding appropriately to the lived realities of students, staff and families (Liddy, O'Flaherty and McCormack, 2019).

2.15 The Community School: in-school management

Kenneth Brennan's (2003) account of the early Community Schools provides an important perspective on the leadership demands of the model. Writing as a former Community School principal, he describes the first principals as a diverse group, appointed on merit and in open competition, who brought experience from religious secondary schools, vocational schools, inspection and work abroad. In a context where, as Brennan notes, there was little more than a two-page departmental document to guide the new model, these leaders were required not simply to administer schools but to define their roles and shape new organisations from the outset. For that reason, Brennan (2003, pp. 13-15) suggests that many would regard them as pioneers, 'leading the way in a major modernisation of Irish second-level schooling'. He also highlights the strength of the early in-school management teams, describing the 'camaraderie between principals and vice principals' as unique, characterised by shared problem-solving and a strong sense of common purpose.

In his book, Brennan (2003) further suggests that these leaders were operating with unusual latitude and responsibility in schools that had to create many of their own structures and practices from the beginning. Doyle (2000, p. 181) argues that Community Schools began from a different starting point than voluntary secondary schools because the principal and deputy principal were appointed to explicit developmental roles. As she notes, 'the very newness of the Community Schools enabled the first principals and boards to create structures - they were not handicapped by an inherited system'. This is significant because it suggests that leadership in Community Schools was formative as well as administrative: principals and boards were involved in creating organisational structures, establishing practices and shaping school culture in conditions of institutional newness. Brennan's wider conclusion is that these schools were pupil-centred schools where pupils and their welfare were of paramount concern. He also highlights the importance of the introduction of adult education in these schools, which were and still are 'of' and 'for' their communities. In addition, he notes the significance of the establishment of a professional association for the good of its members, which in turn played a major role in professionalising school leadership and in the creation of efficient school administration (Brennan, 2003, pp. 140-144).

2.16 Press coverage: a social history in headlines

Newspaper accounts are valuable for researchers and historians because they capture how events were reported and understood at the time, revealing different interpretations as a story unfolded. Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p. 167) categorise newspapers as sources of 'public data that are especially good sources for dealing with questions about some aspect of society at a given time', offering a practical means of tracking social change. In this study, *The Irish Times* provides a commentary and parallel record to the historian accounts and policy documents, tracking moments of momentum and prolonged periods of contestation as negotiations over governance, ownership, ethos and denominational control unfolded **(Appendix B)**. Read alongside the historians' accounts, these articles illuminate how power, patronage and ethos were contested in public as well as in policy, reinforcing the chapter's central argument that governance arrangements were central to the evolution of the Community and Comprehensive School models.

2.17 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the development of the Comprehensive and Community School models formed part of a significant reconfiguration of Irish post-primary education from the

1960s onwards, as the State assumed a more active role in provision, organisation and governance. This was not a simple process of rational modernisation, however, but involved prolonged and often contested negotiation between the State, religious authorities and the vocational and ETB sectors over issues of ownership, control, representation and ethos. The resulting structures reflected compromise and did not produce a unified post-primary system. Instead, they contributed to the continuation of a tripartite system in which different sectors developed along distinct historical, managerial and patronage lines. Further to this, as Barber (1989, p. 130) notes, differences within each sector can be as pronounced as differences between sectors.

A striking feature of this history is that the central debates were often less concerned with the educational experience of children and young people than with questions of management and institutional power. McManus (2014, p. 12) suggests that 'the distribution and sharing of power proved too challenging for those who previously held all the power in the management and control of schools', while Coolahan (1981, p. 146) similarly describes much of this process as 'jockeying for power'. In this sense, schools appear not only as educational institutions but also as sites of political contestation and organisational experimentation. For Community Schools in particular, the chapter has demonstrated that governance and patronage arrangements, formalised through the Deed of Trust and later reinforced through the Education Act 1998 requirement to uphold characteristic spirit, remain central to understanding the model. Although Community Schools have shown adaptability, including in recent efforts to articulate a more multi-denominational ethos, their historical formation continues to shape the conditions within which school culture, ethos, climate and leadership practices are interpreted and experienced today.

The next chapter presents the literature review. The literature reviewed there also provides the basis for the study's conceptual framework, bringing together the key concepts and relationships identified in the scholarship and offering an organising lens for examining how governance and patronage structures may shape school culture, ethos, climate and leadership practices in Community Schools. In this way, it connects the historical and policy context outlined here with the empirical analysis that follows.

Chapter 3: Literature review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter critically reviews literature relevant to the research which explores whether school culture, ethos and leadership practices in Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland are shaped by the model's patronage and governance structures. A literature review is significant as it gives readers an 'up-to-date and well-structured overview' of existing research, making gaps in the research explicit (Van Wee and Banister, 2016, p. 278). It is an essential part of the research process, highlighting the main issues and debates relevant to the topic (Hart, 1998), identifying relationships between facts that help the researcher to construct a theoretical framework (Bell, 2010). The review identified several studies relating to school culture, ethos and leadership practices in other sectors in the Republic of Ireland including the Education and Training Board (ETB) Designated Community College model, the Voluntary Secondary model and primary schools. There is little published research addressing these themes in the context of Community Schools. Even when tracing the origins and development of the model in Chapter two, the available historical sources were largely system-level focused with little research-based analysis focused specifically on Community Schools. Although dated, O'Meara (1985) study of four large Community Schools warrants inclusion as one of the few sector-specific studies on the organisational life of Community Schools in Ireland. Similarly, O'Flaherty's *Management and Control in Irish Education* offers the most sustained account of the governance and management arrangements of Community Schools (O'Flaherty, 1992), while Walsh's discussion in Chapter nine of *Essays in the History of Irish Education* situates the emergence of the model within wider policy and system change (Walsh, 2016). This lacuna highlights a significant gap and highlights the need for a study such as the present one on Community Schools.

The review adopts a narrative review approach (Clark *et al.,* 2021, p. 84), aiming to summarise literature relevant to the main themes identified during the research. The methodology used for the review is detailed in **Appendix C** and includes searches using key words, as well as the snowballing technique for locating additional studies (Van Wee and Banister, 2016). The original themes for the research study were derived from research commissioned by the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS) in the academic year 2022/2023. This research, facilitated by Professor Tom Collins, sought to explore the distinctive contribution of the Community School sector to Irish education

through focus groups comprising patrons, boards of management, parents, staff and students from Community Schools. The emerging themes from that study were considered alongside the Characteristic Spirit Statement and the wider academic and policy literature. The three categories below therefore do not replace the formal values of the Characteristic Spirit Statement; rather, they reflect how those values were articulated by stakeholders in school practice and provide broader interpretive lenses through which the formal values can be examined.

As a thematic study, this research uses the three categories below to define the scope of the research question and structure the literature review while recognising that concepts such as belonging, student-centred practice, active participation, ethos and governance are practical expressions of the formal values of care, respect, community, inclusion, equality, justice and fairness.

Table 3.1 Overview of the three themes

Theme A	Values enshrined in the Characteristic Spirit Statement: inclusion, building community engagement and sense of belonging, and fostering active learners and child-centred schools.
Theme B	Evolving ethos and identity.
Theme C	Board of management and in-school leadership, governance, distributed leadership and autonomy.

The Characteristic Spirit Statements, agreed upon by the joint patrons, which direct Community Schools and underpins their values, ethos and governance, are central to this study **(Appendix D**). Section 3.2 explores values enshrined in the Characteristic Spirit Statements: inclusion, sense of belonging and the importance of student participation in schools. Section 3.3 of the review examines the concept of ethos while the fourth section focuses on governance relationships within the school context. The chapter concludes by framing the rationale for the research study in relation to the selected wider literature.

3.2 Values enshrined in the Characteristic Spirit Statements

Building on Theme A above, this section examines literature relating to the three priorities central to the Characteristic Spirit Statements. These include fostering a sense of belonging, engaging with local context, fostering inclusion, and supporting student voice and participation. The following extracts are taken from the Characteristic Spirit Statements included as an appendix to the *ACCS Guidelines on the Role of Trustees/Patrons in Community Schools* and, since 2018, this statement has been required for inclusion in all Community School admissions policies:

> Our school provides all our students with equal opportunities to engage with the curriculum, school life and the local community… Our school (school XX) provides a safe physical and social environment that reinforces a sense of belonging to the school community and wider society…

AND

> Our vision is for an equality-based model of second-level school; one that places the student at its centre and is run as a participatory democracy…. We aim to create a vibrant, welcoming school community with positive teacher-student relationships, in which every student feels a real sense of belonging….provide an education that will enable all students to contribute meaningfully to their communities, embrace the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society… (ACCS, 2018)

The remainder of this section considers how these commitments are enacted in the context of wider literature, beginning with belonging and community, then inclusion and finally, exploring student voice and participation.

3.2.1 Community: a sense of belonging

The founding vision for the Community Schools was to serve all students in their local community, regardless of ability or background, and to act as centres of lifelong learning and community engagement, as set out in The Community School Document (Department of Education, 1970, cited in Randles, 1975, pp. 347-349). Governance structures were designed to reflect local interests, ensuring these schools would represent and serve their local community. Osterman (2000, p. 324), referencing Dewey (1958), highlights that education is fundamentally a social endeavour and students thrive in environments where they experience a sense of belonging and emotional connection. Riley (2022, p. 41) describes how young people's sense of belonging in school is shaped by their histories and their day-to-day realities, but also by the schools' practices and expectations. This study will investigate the extent to which the vision outlined in the Characteristic Spirit Statement has been realised,

focusing on how Community Schools act as safe places that foster belonging for young people.

International and national policy documents stress the importance of positive school climate for student belonging (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2019; OECD, 2019). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) report notes that although school climate is challenging to measure and define, it is observable in relationships and interactions between stakeholders in the school community (OECD, 2019). Rohatgi and Scherer (2020) describe this sense of belonging as intrinsic to school climate. Where a sense of belonging is evident, young people report that they are connected to others in a community, are accepted and liked by their peers, and have genuine interpersonal relationships and social connections with others outside their family units (OECD, 2019). In the school context, this sense of 'connectedness' is positively associated with mental health and wellbeing (Craggs and Kelly, 2018; DES, 2019; Byrne, Carthy and McGilloway, 2020; Korpershoek *et al.,* 2020).

The Department of Education and Skills' *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2019) uses Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model of human development to highlight belonging and connection as central to wellbeing and advocates a whole-school approach including partnerships with families and the community. The model is a useful one as it provides a system-based approach to understanding the wellbeing concept, demonstrating that humans are relational, and wellbeing is always realised with others. The policy, similar to the OECD findings, advocates a whole-school approach, describing wellbeing as a 'shared community responsibility' and 'everybody's business', acknowledging that schools, situated in a wider community, are powerful contexts for the healthy development of young people in providing a place to respectfully encounter diversity and to develop social networks (DES, 2019, p. 12).

These principles are reflected in recent Department of Education (DE) policy publications including *Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* (DE, 2022a) and *Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (DE, 2024a). The Chief Inspector's Report (DE, 2022) also recognises that wellbeing is enhanced when schools work positively within their communities and in effective partnership with the families they serve. Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) caution that school communities interpret policy through their own experiences and values, meaning

that policy makers cannot ever fully control how policy will be received or interpreted by practitioners. While the vision of the Community School model is consistent with the policy documents, it will be interesting to explore in this study how policy concepts such as wellbeing and belonging are enacted in Community Schools.

Numerous studies across a wide range of jurisdictions report that schools can actively create a sense of belonging and connectedness for young people (Osterman, 2000; O'Gorman, Salmon and Murphy, 2016; Dukynaitė and Dudaitė, 2017; Allen *et al.,* 2018; Riley, Coates and Martinez, 2018; Byrne, Carthy and McGilloway, 2020; Sime, Gilligan and Scholtz, 2021; Brown *et al.,* 2022; Riley, 2022). Riley (2022, p. 37) argues, in this regard, that for many young people schools represent a place of stability and continuity in their lives and must foster trust, emotional and physical safety, and positive relationships to support belonging. She further suggests that belonging is dynamic and shaped by students' own experiences inside and outside school. Where belonging is absent, or where students feel excluded, they may seek connection elsewhere through unhealthy means, including forms of extremism or gang membership.

Greenwood and Kelly (2019) report that a strong sense of community, supported by a robust network of staff, is closely associated with students' sense of belonging and is sustained by the perception of the school community as a family unit with a strong identity, reinforced through extracurricular activities that encourage relationships to flourish beyond the classroom. They further conclude that leadership commitment, a whole-school approach and authentic partnership among staff, students and parents are essential prerequisites for developing a sense of belonging. These findings are relevant to this study, as Community Schools in the sector often identify as family units, supporting each other and learning collaboratively through ACCS. The study will explore how this family metaphor is reflected in individual schools.

Hampden-Thompson *et al*. (2015) found that teachers generally perceived most students as feeling a sense of belonging to both their school and local community, with students also identifying with a range of community groups. The researchers, however, caution that staff views may not always reflect students' actual experiences, highlighting the importance of researching students' perspectives. Skerritt, O'Hara and Brown (2021) likewise note a disconnect between senior leaders and teachers regarding student voice practices in Irish post-primary schools. In discussing how teachers and senior leaders can experience

consultation differently, they draw on Morgan's (2011) study in England, which showed that a stated whole-school commitment to pupil consultation did not necessarily translate into classroom practice. Although senior management presented consultation as embedded in the school's culture, teachers did not appear to regard whole-school approaches as a model for their classroom work, and student consultation remained marginal for many teachers because it competed with other pressing priorities such as curriculum delivery and external examinations (Morgan, 2011, cited in Skerritt, O'Hara and Brown, 2021, p. 6). Awareness of these stakeholder differences is important when considering findings on Community School experiences.

Fargas-Malet and Bagley (2022) review literature conducted on small schools in Europe, highlighting the school's role in the community and the impact of school closures on communities. They identify positive school relationships as a strength and distinguish between community ignorant schools that have no links with the wider community, community passive schools that use the local community for teaching and learning and community active schools where there are active links with the local community. For Community Schools, the quality of school-community relationships is particularly relevant. School principals play an essential role in anchoring the school in the community, with leaders who understand local realities building necessary social capital (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008, p. 20; Riley, 2022, p. 79). Hampden-Thompson *et al.* (2015) concur that schools can foster community cohesion that can enhance a student's sense of belonging. Encouraging parental and local involvement can break down barriers and build trust (Engel, Kington and Mleczko, 2013). Tutunaru (2015) also emphasises the school's central role in the community and the importance of developing mutually beneficial relationships between school and local community. This study will examine Community School principals' perceptions of their role in this regard.

Högberg and Lindgren (2023) highlight how educational reforms in Sweden, including extensive national testing, stricter eligibility criteria and a greater emphasis on outputs and results, led to a decline in student wellbeing and sense of belonging, particularly among marginalised students. The emphasis on grades encouraged schools to value higher achieving students more and impacted inclusion and the right to belong. These findings are echoed by Porter *et al.* (2024), who note that school belonging is reflected in a sense of personal safety and in recognition beyond results in examinations. Lodge and Lynch (2002, p. 129) further observe that students in co-educational classrooms cite 'concerns about academic pressure'

less than those attending all-girls schools. This study will examine whether the Community School model supports both holistic development and academic achievement.

O'Gorman, Salmon and Murphy (2016) conceptualise schools as potential sanctuaries in their systematic review of research examining factors influencing early school leaving. Synthesising findings from 24 studies, the authors demonstrate that schools which foster a sense of community and belonging by prioritising relationships and care, can function as supportive sanctuaries for marginalised young people. Across the studies reviewed, such environments were characterised by increased student engagement, a stronger sense of safety and greater likelihood of retention, pointing to the central role of schools in shaping educational pathways and success in adulthood. Taken together, the literature in this section establishes the importance of belonging, positive school climate and constructive engagement with community partners within the ethos of Community Schools. The following section builds on this foundation by examining how belonging is further promoted through child-centred approaches and active learning methodologies in schools.

3.2.2 Active learners and child-centred schools

Aydilek Çiftçi and Yücesan (2023, p. 690) describe 'student participation' as children making their own decisions and 'influencing change in society'. Research also suggests that consulting young people can improve decision making, strengthen democratic participation, and enhance engagement in learning (Czerniawski, 2012). Additionally, Riley (2022, p. 86) notes that school cultures which promote student voice support belonging by acknowledging identity and enabling students to be agents in their schooling experience. This view is echoed by Allen *et al.* (2022), who highlight the relationship between students' feelings of self-efficacy and their sense of belonging in school. In this context, student voice is presented as an essential dimension of child-centred schooling, where students are positioned at the centre of the school experience and active learning is promoted.

A central argument in literature for promoting student voice in schools relates to the legal obligation enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which affirms each student's right to be heard (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; Lundy, 2007; Fleming, 2013, 2015; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2016; Flynn and Hayes, 2021). Research also emphasises students' perspectives as a key source of evidence about how school policies are experienced, highlighting the importance for schools of capturing this perspective in order to understand and enhance students' learning experiences (O'Brien,

2009; Smyth, 2016; Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaitė, 2017, p. 29; Flynn, 2019; Brown *et al.,* 2020).

In Ireland, government policy on student participation and child-centred approaches in schools is articulated across several key documents published in recent years. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) published its *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making* in 2015. The Strategy emphasised the places and spaces that young people are entitled to have a voice in decisions affecting their lives, including school and local community. An important development that followed was the publication of the *National Implementation Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making (*the *Framework)* by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), developed in collaboration with Professor Laura Lundy (DCEDIY, 2021). The *Framework* underpins the more recent Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying which states 'Schools will be required to engage with their pupils and students to support and promote pupil and student led anti-bullying and wellbeing initiatives… in accordance with the *Framework*' (DE, 2022b, p. 35). More recently, the establishment of the Department of Education Student Participation Unit in 2023 and the subsequent *Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation* (DE, 2024) demonstrate a strong commitment to the authentic participation of young people in education policy development. Recommendations from the Expert Group challenge the DE to actively support student voice in schools and emphasise DE accountability in ensuring students are informed about the outcome of their input.

In practice, student-led and experiential approaches are often most visible in the project-based learning associated with the Transition Year (TY) Programme (Bough, 2023). Situated between junior and senior cycle, TY programmes typically reflect school context, include work placements, volunteering, and community-based projects, supporting student-centred learning, autonomy and a greater sense of ownership over their own learning (Bough, 2023). TY programmes often allow space for community-based projects where students work on projects designed to enhance local facilities. Such opportunities for active citizenship can also provide ways to celebrate the talents of the student in their community (Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaitė, 2017, p. 40).

In August 2024, the DE issued the *NCCA Transition Year Programme Statement* for introduction across all schools in 2025 (DE, 2024b). The statement offers guidance on how to

develop a TY programme that is ‘inclusive and embraces diversity’, including experiences such as ‘individual and team projects, competitions, and other activities that are appropriately challenging’ and opportunities for students to become active agents in designing their own educational experiences. While schools are given ‘the autonomy and flexibility to design their own TY programme’ (DE, 2024b, p. 7), the statement does not address resourcing or the cost barriers that can limit participation. Similar concerns apply to some extracurricular activities which, while intended to strengthen connection with school, may be exclusionary for children who cannot afford to participate (Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaitė, 2017, pp. 41-42).

Conversely, low engagement is associated with higher levels of early school leaving and research suggests that students who are least successful in schools may also receive the most meaningless and mundane tasks, further undermining connection and participation (Levin, 2000). Squires, Kalambouka and Bragg (2016, p. 3) similarly report that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can be more likely to describe school as boring, while students with special educational needs (SEN) may be more at risk of feeling out of place than students without SEN. These findings underline the importance for policy makers and schools alike to understand the reality of school engagement for some students, particularly as it can be crucial in assisting young people to complete their educational journey (Coolahan *et al*., 2017; Fenwick, Kinsella and Harford, 2022).

This holistic nature of learning underpins *Looking at Our School 2022* (DE, 2022a), advocating that learning experiences for all students should be ‘responsive to individual needs’ and that students, as ‘active agents’ in their learning, are afforded opportunities for purposeful and meaningful experiences (DE, 2022a, p. 9). Despite an obvious commitment to active learning by policy makers and schools, as noted earlier (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992), there can be a gap between the ideal and its practical implementation. Similarly, Skerritt, O’Hara and Brown (2021) highlight this point, describing the varied ways schools interpret and implement policy depending on their individual context and values. Given the wide scope of DE policy, achieving these goals in a system-wide manner is challenging. Examining how the Community School model supports authentic student voice and holistic learning approaches will be an important focus of this study.

Literature also highlights constraints on students’ contributions, including unequal power relations and the dominance of certain voices, with some students remaining unheard,

especially those who feel excluded in school communities (Fleming, 2013; Smyth, 2016; Flynn and Hayes, 2021; Horgan, Kenny and Flynn, 2023). In this regard, many studies observe that only the connected, the confident and the most articulate voices are typically heard, while the most vulnerable and disconnected remain silent (Sinclair, 2004; Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Czerniawski, 2012; Tisdall, 2017; Brown *et al.,* 2020). Critics therefore caution that student voice initiatives can be reduced to consultation, where adults collect children's views but exclude them from meaningful dialogue, provide little feedback, and allow minimal influence over decisions or outcomes (Tisdall, 2017).

By contrast, O'Brien *et al.* (2022) provide an Irish example of student participation extending beyond consultation. Their case study shows students acting as co-researchers in school self-evaluation, contributing to evidence gathering, dialogue and school improvement planning. While the study highlights the potential of this approach to strengthen democratic practice and school improvement, it also underlines the time, preparation and structural support needed if student voice is to move beyond an instrumental or compliance-based model.

Against this backdrop, this study will assess how Community Schools provide space for authentic dialogue and diverse participation in policy decisions, especially regarding behaviour, uniform and subject choice. Skerritt, O'Hara and Brown (2021) note that while student voice is a popular research area, findings are inconsistent and often influenced by how closely the researcher works with students. The concept of voice, seen by Flutter (2007) as a means for constructive criticism and teacher development, can, according to Skerritt, O'Hara and Brown (2021), be perceived as a threat by teachers working directly with students. Concerns include losing control and experiencing shifts in power dynamics (McNamara *et al.,* 2020), with some teachers fearing becoming marginalised where student voice gains more prominence (Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaitė, 2017, p. 38). In a comparative study of seven schools, including two Community Schools, Skerritt, O'Hara and Brown (2021) found that student voice was used both in classrooms and in management-led consultations. School context is crucial, with Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) schools focussing more on genuine consultation. Informal conversations, especially among post holders and senior leaders, were more common than formal methods such as interviews or questionnaires to garner students' opinions, particularly in ETB and Community Schools with DEIS status. These findings are relevant to this research, which will examine multiple Community Schools to determine if such practices are widespread across the sector.

Research shows the power of informal conversations in strengthening relationships between staff and students. Lodge and Lynch (2002, p. 2) argue that a supportive learning environment begins with teachers feeling valued by management and colleagues, as a lack of positive staff culture reduces the likelihood of strong staff-student relationships. Many studies agree that authentic dialogue, which fosters student connection to the school, relies on respectful and caring relationships between students and teachers and among staff (Flutter, 2007; Benner, Brown and Jeffrey, 2019; Flynn and Hayes, 2021; McCormack, O'Flaherty and Liddy, 2021). Flynn (2019, p. 38) adds that authentic student voice work goes beyond listening, requiring a 'shared experience of understanding and a co-construction of language' that empowers students to participate more meaningfully and promotes a more balanced relationship between young people and adults.

Taken together, this literature suggests that student voice and active learning can strengthen engagement and belonging when they are enacted as authentic, relational practices rather than as isolated initiatives. It also highlights that participation is not experienced equally and that the voices most readily heard may reproduce advantage, while leaving some students further disconnected. The next section on inclusion therefore extends this discussion by examining what the literature shows about how schools interpret and enact inclusive practices so that belonging and participation are experienced by all students, particularly those most at risk of marginalisation.

3.2.3 Inclusion

This section reviews literature and policy documents concerning inclusion. In Irish education policy, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) defines inclusion as a dynamic process of change, restructuring school systems to enhance their ability to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners (NCSE, 2024). According to the NCSE, a fully inclusive education system should ensure that every student, regardless of ability or need, can access education in their local school alongside their peers. This approach is intended to foster understanding of differences, build empathy among young people, and contribute to a more inclusive society (NCSE, 2024, p. 115).

For this study, the NCSE definition, as we apply it to students with special educational needs, is somewhat narrow, as it centres solely on learners' abilities and does not take account of other variables shaping communities and the growing diversity within schools and classrooms. Irish education policy, like that of many nations, is influenced by global trends

such as demographic shifts, migration and refugee crises, technological developments, rising inequalities and social and political trends (OECD, 2023). Cerna *et al*. (2021) adopt a broader definition of inclusive education, noting that, although several countries associate inclusion with special needs, most countries now view inclusion as encompassing 'all' students, and define inclusive education as follows:

> an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination (Cerna *et al.,* 2021, pp. 12-13).

Inclusion as a 'process' is significant as Winter and O'Raw (2010) emphasise, because it positions inclusion as a dynamic and evolving approach to school improvement. The responsibility rests with the school to modify structures to accommodate students' needs and abilities. According to the literature reviewed, successful inclusive schools require an understanding of the evolving nature of the process, an adaptable and stimulating curriculum, strong partnership among stakeholders, effective professional development for staff, and a school culture that embraces the diversity of its learners (Winter and O'Raw, 2010, p. 24).

In *Equity and inclusion in education: Finding strength through diversity,* the OECD defines diversity, closely linked to inclusion, as the multiple ways in which people may perceive themselves, or be perceived by others, as different, including in relation to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, culture, religion, class and ability (OECD, 2023, p. 31). The report also highlights the importance of positive student relationships in supporting wellbeing, while recognising that addressing the challenges of diversity requires more than positive relationships alone (OECD, 2023, p. 214). In school settings, these differences can intersect with structural inequalities, meaning that some students from diverse backgrounds may be more vulnerable to disadvantage or exclusion.

Policy guidelines (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2006), often introduced with limited resources, including insufficient professional development for staff, further complicate matters. Bryan (2010, p. 266) offers a more searching critique of intercultural policy, arguing that schools can be asked to manage diversity in ways that remain superficial and under-resourced. Rather than challenging structural inequalities or dominant assumptions about national identity, such approaches can amount to an 'add diversity and stir' model in which difference is acknowledged without transforming the norms, power relations and exclusions that shape school life. In this way, Bryan contends,

policy may preserve rather than disrupt the binary between 'Irish' and 'other', leaving schools with responsibility for inclusion but without the deeper structural change required to realise it fully.

Research indicates that to foster an appreciation and respect for diversity, schools must engage with the wider environment, including families and local community to increase awareness and counter discriminatory beliefs that may exist outside the classroom (OECD, 2023, p. 216). Smith and Barr (2008) show that successful schools build social connections within and outside the classroom, with students, parents, and communities serving as valuable resources when collaboration, dialogue, and mutual dependence are prioritised. As noted earlier, societal and policy ideals play a crucial role in shaping how inclusion is approached and funded in schools (Arduin, 2015; Banks *et al*., 2023). When migrants are viewed mainly through the lens of how they will contribute to the majority culture, as seen in national policy, schools face greater challenges in fostering genuine respect for diversity (Bryan, 2010).

Research on inclusive schools often overlooks the experiences of the students themselves (Kleeberg-Niepage *et al.,* 2024). Squires, Kalambouka and Bragg (2016, p. 3), in their report *A Study of the Experiences of Post Primary Students with Special Educational Needs,* similarly emphasise that hearing all student voices is crucial for policy makers and those implementing policy. Drawing on students' views in Irish post-primary education, they highlight the importance of positive student-teacher relationships and show that students value teachers who are sensitive to their needs and adopt a holistic approach that supports both strengths and difficulties.

Brown *et al.* (2022) observe that as communities become more diverse, a greater focus on inclusion is needed, especially since most school leaders and staff in Ireland come from the majority background. While frameworks like Looking at Our School 2022 promote inclusion and holistic student development, realising these aims is challenging. Schools must become more culturally responsive to ensure all students, including immigrants, feel they belong and are empowered to succeed. Addressing diversity requires structured professional learning for school leaders and staff and recognition from policy makers of the importance of culture and cultural diversity (Sancho *et al.,* 2024).

Other studies highlight the integral role teachers play in overcoming barriers to inclusion (Arduin, 2015; Coolahan *et al.,* 2017). Vekic (2014) found that multi-ethnic students are

more likely to attend DEIS urban schools where staff turnover and absenteeism is higher than in non-DEIS schools. Teacher quality is also unevenly distributed, with more qualified teachers more likely to choose schools with higher academic performance (Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaitė, 2017, p. 27). These issues emphasise the need for ongoing professional development for staff, given the teacher's pivotal role in creating inclusive school cultures.

3.3 Evolving ethos and identity

Following the structure established earlier in this chapter, this section explores relevant literature on the complex and dynamic nature of ethos within schools. Building on the previous analysis of the values underpinning the Characteristic Spirit Statement, the focus now turns to how ethos and identity are continually shaped by the beliefs, practices and interactions of school communities. The literature highlights the multifaceted character of ethos, its role in fostering inclusion and belonging, and the ways in which ethos is both formally articulated and informally experienced within the school environment. The arguments, while particularly pertinent to Community Schools, apply strongly across all sectors including faith and multi-denominational schools, as Irish schools contain substantial internal diversity among students and staff, regardless of patronage. This section considers three aspects of ethos and identity that are particularly salient for Community Schools. First, it reviews literature on values and lived ethos; second, it examines literature about Religious Education and the specific obligations arising from the Deed of Trust; third, it reviews research on chaplaincy, focusing on the chaplain's pastoral as well as spiritual role.

3.3.1 Values and lived ethos

Ethos is closely linked with earlier themes of inclusion and belonging within a caring community (Meehan, 2022). The concept of 'ethos' is difficult to define and is frequently described through related terms such as 'culture' and used to capture a 'wide range' of features of school life, including symbols, ceremonies and interpersonal relationships (McLaughlin, 2005, pp. 308-309). Many researchers characterise ethos as a 'nebulous' concept, referring to the 'atmosphere' or 'philosophy' of an organisation and best understood as a social process made visible through its structures and activities (Donnelly, 2000, p. 134). From this perspective, ethos may be understood either as the formal articulation of an organisation's aims and objectives (a positivist view) or as the informal expression of evolving social interactions among its members (an anti-positivist view); in either case, it is inseparable from both the organisation and its members (Donnelly, 2000). This understanding is consistent with Hogan's claim that ethos is not primarily located in formal statements but

emerges as ‘the natural outcome of what actually goes on in school from day to day’, shaped through relationships and shared practices (Hogan, 1984, p. 697).

Williams (2000, p. 76) suggests that ethos ‘remains in our consciousness’ long after our school days and cannot simply be imposed; rather, it arises from the beliefs and aspirations of the school community. Coolahan *et al.* (2017) similarly argue that daily experiences in school are often more enduring than curriculum content, explaining:

> It is in the tenor of these experiences, moreover, that the real significance of the classical Greek notion of ethos can be found in education. To become aware of this is also to realise how mistaken it is to associate the term ethos mainly with the powers, privileges or prerogatives of any of the patron bodies in education (Coolahan *et al.,* 2017, p. 10).

Taken together, Williams (2000) and Coolahan *et al.* (2017) emphasise ethos as something experienced and remembered, rather than something owned by patrons or reducible to formal statements. While ethos may be agreed by patrons, it does not remain solely under their control and may diverge from original intent. Fischer (2016) cautions that the legal and governance frameworks within which schools operate continue to privilege patron-defined values, shaping the parameters within which reinterpretation can occur. Hogan (1984, p. 695) illustrates this constraint in his description of a ‘custodial’ conception of ethos, in which boards and principals view themselves primarily as guardians of patron-defined values; this stance can encourage compliance while limiting dialogue and school-level reinterpretation of values. In their ownership and governance roles, patrons therefore face ongoing challenges in promoting equality and inclusion and in supporting a widening range of student needs in increasingly diverse communities (Coolahan *et al.,* 2017; Connolly, James and Murtagh, 2023).

From a multi-denominational perspective, Williams (2000) argues that such schools are defined by tolerance and respect for all faiths. In his essay *‘Understanding Ethos: A Philosophical and Literary Exploration’*, he argues that a school ethos cannot be imposed but develops organically through sustained interaction between teachers, students and parents. McLaughlin (2005) similarly suggests that ethos is an inherent part of school life, often taken for granted and resilient in the face of isolated incidents. It emerges through the ongoing interactions and interpretations of individuals and groups within the organisation (Darmody, Smyth and McCoy, 2012; Moran, 2014). Fischer (2016), however, complicates this account by arguing that, in Irish education, ethos also functions as a normative ideal and a governance instrument: it can shape which values are legitimised in policy and practice and potentially

constrain whose voices are recognised within school communities. Ethos therefore operates simultaneously as a negotiated social process and as a structural feature of governance, with implications for inclusion in increasingly diverse schools.

This governance dimension is evident in the statutory duties assigned to boards of management. Under Section 15(b) of the Education Act 1998, boards must uphold the characteristic spirit of the school, ensuring that the Characteristic Spirit Statement is manifest in everyday school life (Education Act, 1998). Recent empirical evidence suggests that this responsibility is frequently under-supported in practice, with GRACE Report 6, part of the Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (GRACE) national research project concluding that:

> If proper education and training in matters of ethos are not provided for Boards of Management, it is very hard to expect that Boards of Management will be in any significant position to oversee the expression of ethos in the life of the school. (Duffy *et al.,* 2024, p. 3)

This responsibility is increasingly challenging as school communities diversify, including new arrivals from Europe, Africa and elsewhere (O'Flaherty, Liddy and McCormack, 2018; Liddy, O'Flaherty and McCormack, 2019). Lumby and Mac Ruairc (2021) highlight the tensions boards and school leaders face in maintaining ethos amid conflicting stakeholder expectations. There is clear potential for a gap between intended ethos, as articulated in the Characteristic Spirit Statement, and the ethos experienced in daily school life (Donnelly, 2000).

McCormack, O'Flaherty and Conboy (2024) examine conditions that support schools to embed values and highlight the difficulty of translating Characteristic Spirit Statements into lived practice. In diverse school communities, they argue, a gap can emerge between intended values and everyday reality, particularly in multicultural societies that present 'problems that have no parallel in history' (McLaughlin, 2008, p. 137). Tensions are especially evident in contexts with significant numbers of ethnic minority students (Tamadoni, Hosseingholizadeh and Bellibaş, 2024). The literature also indicates that a supportive culture is essential: when schools develop a shared vision and make values visible through policy, relationships and stakeholder engagement, these values are more likely to be realised (McCormack, O'Flaherty and Conboy, 2024). At the same time, research cautions that defaulting to Catholic practices, without due consideration for other faiths, can generate tensions and raises questions about whether schools can truly uphold a multi-denominational ethos (McCormack *et al.,* 2019;

McCormack, O'Flaherty and Conboy, 2024, p. 664). In this sense, when ethos is viewed as a process, Barry (2022) explains, it becomes a negotiated reality reflecting the contemporary values of the wider school community.

Ethos is therefore enacted not only through governance structures but also through the daily choices and example set by professionals in the school. McLaughlin (2008, p. 225) likens education to 'a conversation between the generations', highlighting the influence teachers have, not merely through their knowledge and skills but also through their personal conduct. Society expects teachers to act responsibly, serve in *loco parentis*, and model behaviour consistent with the aims of the Characteristic Spirit Statement, even when these differ from their own values. McLaughlin (2005, p. 315) argues that ethos works subtly, making it important for school communities to reflect on the intended ethos versus the actual ethos that emerges. School leaders, through their vision and values, are central to ensuring the characteristic spirit and ethos are realised within the school (Lumby and Mac Ruairc, 2021; Foley, Faas and Darmody, 2023; Mulpeter, McCormack and O'Flaherty, 2024). Fischer (2016) captures this active safeguarding of ethos, and the custodial responsibilities of boards and teachers, in the following observation:

> School boards have a legal obligation to promote the 'characteristic spirit' of their school, while teachers and pupils are expected at the very least not to undermine this largely predetermined school ethos. (Fischer, 2016, p. 183)

In summary, the literature establishes ethos as lived and negotiated in practice, while also shaped by governance and legal frameworks. The review turns now to one area where ethos is enacted and contested: Religious Education and related governance obligations.

3.3.2 Religious Education and the Deed of Trust obligations

In 2007, the Council of Europe 'affirmed the place of religion' in European societies and identified schools as essential places for intercultural dialogue (Colton, 2009, p. 268). Faas, Smith and Darmody (2019) note that schools are often framed as sites for social cohesion and integration, with school practices directly influencing the degree of inclusion achieved. In Community Schools, the Deed of Trust mandates two hours of religious education weekly, with an opt-out from religious instruction and worship (ACCS, 2004). The ACCS advises schools to include the NCCA Religious Education programme in junior cycle, which the NCCA describes as follows:

> Religious Education aims to develop knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values to enable young people to come to an understanding of religion and its

> relevance to life, relationships, society and the wider world. It aims to develop the students' ability to examine questions of meaning, purpose and relationships, to help students understand, respect and appreciate people's expression of beliefs, and to facilitate dialogue and reflection on the diversity of beliefs and values that inform responsible decision-making and ways of living. (NCCA, 2019, p. 7)

Hogan (2017, p. 90) argues that the importance of Religious Education lies in bringing 'an illuminating and disciplined awareness of the inescapability of the religious in any account of human experience that hopes to be adequate'. From this perspective, Religious Education is justified by its educational value in helping students to interpret human experience more fully, engage critically with religious traditions, and encounter diverse voices through dialogue and reflection. In pluralist societies, Hogan further maintains that Religious Education:

> can cultivate forms of religious literacy that advance mutual understanding and respect. A well-designed and well taught programme of religious education, far from nurturing exclusionary antagonisms or furthering institutionalised interests, illuminates human experience in transformative ways, thus realising some of the most admirable possibilities of humanity. (Hogan, 2017, p. 98)

The NCCA programme is non-denominational and is written to encompass all faiths and none. Meehan (2019) concurs with Hogan, arguing that the NCCA programme provides a safe place for student wellbeing, and when delivered well by qualified teachers, can go beyond the teaching of religion and enhance wellbeing. She emphasises that participation does not require affiliation to any faith, allowing students to learn about themselves and others, and engage critically with ethical and moral issues to support their decision making. Religion and its relationship with young people and their values is a growing area in research (García-Segura, Martínez-Carmona and Gil-Pino, 2022). These authors conducted a literature review on studies which highlight that Religious Education shapes collective identity, and while religion can foster a culture in religious freedom, educators face challenges in promoting peaceful coexistence among students with diverse beliefs (p. 8). Recent doctoral research studies also support the provision of religion in schools, emphasising the importance of acknowledging a plurality of beliefs (Niens *et al*., 2013; Mullally, 2018; Stapleton, 2018; Meehan and Laffan, 2021; Regan, 2024).

As Ireland's religious landscape becomes increasingly complex against a backdrop of growing negativity towards religion, schools must address how to manage multi-denominational enrolments while remaining faithful to their founding intentions (Colton, 2009; Connolly, James and Murtagh, 2023). Patrons and schools must also balance the

characteristic spirit with the needs of both religious and non-religious students (Faas, Foster and Smith, 2020). Fischer (2016) observes that moves towards pluralism may broaden recognition of difference without fully displacing the structural authority embedded in existing governance arrangements, raising questions about who ultimately shapes school ethos. Contemporary research echoes this tension, with findings highlighting the increasing pressure on school leaders to reconcile founding visions with growing religious, cultural and ideological diversity, often in contexts where commitment to explicit faith formation among staff and leaders is uneven (Meehan and O'Connell, 2024). Establishing shared values therefore requires strong and sensitive leadership (O'Flaherty, Liddy and McCormack, 2018). This study will examine if the values set out in the Characteristic Spirit Statement remain relevant to daily life in Community Schools in contemporary Ireland, and how principals perceive their role in upholding, developing or redefining these values with current stakeholders and in consultation with patrons or founders. In doing so, particular attention will be given to the ongoing tension identified by Fischer (2016), who notes that principals must foster an inclusive and dynamic culture, while working within an institutional characteristic spirit shaped by established authority. Alongside curriculum and governance obligations, the chaplain's role is often presented in the literature as a mechanism through which ethos is mediated in daily school life. The next section reviews two Irish studies, one of which (Moran, 2014) is a comparative study that includes research conducted in Community Schools.

3.3.3 Chaplaincy: pastoral and spiritual dimensions

Barry (2022), in her doctoral study on chaplaincy in ETB Designated Community Colleges, argues that values and ethos arise from school culture and shape identity and mindset. An essential challenge for Community Schools is whether they can maintain shared values across diverse communities, ensuring these are reflected in school policies and daily practices. Barry (2022, p. 33) observes that the practicalities of 'celebrating all religions while remaining faithful to denominational bodies such as the Catholic Church' present significant implications for chaplains in these schools. In Moran's (2014) study, ethos is similarly shown as a negotiated reality, with chaplaincy operating primarily through relational and pastoral support that can help translate stated values into everyday school experience. This study therefore examines how values influence principals' management and leadership of Community Schools. The study will also consider how the chaplain role has evolved and the impact of their contribution to the schools.

Overall, the literature highlights how ethos is both formally articulated and informally experienced. Principals and boards act as custodians, balancing the founding intentions of the Characteristic Spirit Statement with the realities of contemporary Irish society. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that ethos is best understood not as a static inheritance to be safeguarded, but as a negotiated and dialogical reality, sustained through leadership, reflective practice and ongoing interpretation within school communities (Hogan, 1984; Meehan, 2022). Against this backdrop, the next section examines governance structures that can support principals and boards to navigate these and other practical complexities and explores relevant literature on school governance structures that support healthy leadership practices built on autonomy, accountability and subsidiarity.

3.4 Board of management and in-school leadership, governance, distributed leadership and autonomy

The Community Schools support distributed leadership with some of the middle leaders in these schools receiving an alleviation of time weekly to fulfil their leadership and management responsibilities. Principals in the Community Schools collaborate directly with DEY personnel, on behalf of the board of management, exercising autonomy and subsidiarity that enable timely, tailored decisions for their school communities while maintaining accountability to both DEY and the board of management. This section examines literature on governance matters and on leadership and management structures in schools. It explores distributed leadership in policy and in practice in Irish post-primary schools and examines how roles and responsibilities are negotiated between boards of management and principals, especially at the oversight operational interface. The review begins with the international policy trend that positioned school leadership as a lever for school improvement and accountability and then shows how this agenda has been translated into Irish policy and enacted in school-level leadership structures.

Over the past fifty years, trends in perceptions of school leadership are reflected in how policy makers have labelled and conceptualised the practice (Gunter, 2004). From the 1980s onwards, increased scrutiny of public sector practices led to calls for greater accountability and responsibility, linking school leadership to performance and the drive for change and improvement. School leaders are now expected to address significant challenges that demand new approaches (Fullan, 2001, pp. 2-3) and leadership is viewed as the capacity to effect change (Gunter, 2004, p. 29). A substantial body of literature explores school leadership's impact on learning outcomes and the conditions for learning, including school culture and the

learning climate (Harris and Muijs, 2005; Hogan *et al.,* 2007; Peterson and Deal, 2009; Hallinger and Huber, 2012; Bush and Glover, 2014; Gumus *et al.,* 2018; Fullan, 2019; Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020).

Research demonstrates that school leadership is inherently complex and subjective, and the concept itself is difficult to define (Antonakis and Day, 2018, p. 5). Gumus *et al.,* citing Bush (2008), note the absence of a single definition for leadership in the literature. Yukl (2019, p. 18) asserts that universal agreement is unattainable, as leaders often define leadership according to their own perspective. In practice these perspectives are formed through daily interactions. Thus, leadership is best understood as an activity or practice 'distributed over leaders, followers and their situation rather than viewed as a skill, charisma and/or behaviour' (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2004, p. 11).

In the early 1990s, the Irish education system was largely characterised by a post of responsibility structure that created what Bush and Glover (2014) describe as a managerial leadership style that focused on functions, tasks and facilitating the work of others. The term 'middle management' referred to teachers formally appointed to assistant principal or special duties posts, who received an allowance for additional responsibilities alongside their teaching. O'Rourke (2022, p. 12) argues that the term 'post of responsibility' was misleading, as although duties were devolved, ultimate responsibility remained with the principal. Management posts in schools were not automatically granted dedicated time to carry out their tasks, with schools left to allocate such time from existing resources, although the Department of Education and Science (2002) recognised in Circular 29/2002 that timetable alleviation 'could' be necessary for an effective in-school management system.

Importantly, the discourse around educational management in Irish schools was characterised by references to seniority and entitlement in *Circular 32/2000* and *Circular 29/2002* (Department of Education and Science, 2000, 2002), with selection criteria based on length of service and calculated seniority set out in *Circular 29/2002* (Department of Education and Science, 2002). Frequently, the most senior member of staff was the sole applicant for a post, regardless of ability or skill level. As Connolly, James and Fertig (2019, p. 504) note, 'educational management entails carrying the responsibility for the proper functioning of a system in an educational institution in which others participate'. To enhance organisational efficiency, tasks such as managing lockers or overseeing house exams were delegated to postholders. These responsibilities were often carried out independently, without

collaboration with other postholders or teaching colleagues. This type of limited interaction among staff can restrict leadership effectiveness in schools. An OECD report by Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008), based on research across 22 education systems, highlights the importance of 'distributed leadership' to strengthen management and enhance school effectiveness. While the report defines leadership broadly, it overlooks national and local political, economic, social and cultural differences (Mac Ruairc, 2010). Nevertheless, it positions leadership as a social activity, involving influence and participation across various organisational roles:

> School leadership has become a priority in education policy agendas internationally. It plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the school climate and environment. Effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008, p. 9).

Since the early 1980s, many OECD systems have adopted governance reforms stressing decentralisation, school autonomy, parental and community control, shared decision-making, outcomes-based assessment and school choice. As Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008, p. 23) observe, these reforms rest on the assumption that autonomy and accountability can respond more effectively to local needs and have often been accompanied by greater staff empowerment and decision-making authority within schools. At the same time, greater autonomy has not reduced external scrutiny; rather, it has often coincided with intensified monitoring and accountability, increasing the visibility of teachers and school leaders within contemporary school systems (Skerritt, 2020).

Critics caution, however, that school autonomy does not necessarily lead to greater local decision-making capacity in practice. In the Irish context, Skerritt and Salokangas (2020) argue that the movement towards autonomy is shaped by strong market principles and may contribute to the corporatisation of schools, with schools increasingly expected to behave in more business-like ways.

In June 2020, the OECD's *Education Policy Outlook in Ireland* identified a key strength of the system as its 'well-developed autonomy for schools' that is 'conducive to fostering professionals and institutions which are responsive to the needs of their students and communities' (OECD, 2020, p. 18). Greater autonomy demands more local responsibility (Neeleman, 2019). Skerritt (2019, 2020) notes that local autonomy and decision-making are now commonplace in school improvement debates and are closely linked to accountability. The policy trend towards central frameworks or standards, for example *Looking at Our*

School 2022 (DE, 2022a), and expanded inspection models has heightened principals' accountability, requiring documented evidence of improvement and compliance with legislation such as Admissions (Department of Education and Youth [DEY], 2025a), Child Protection Procedures (DE, 2023), and *Bí Cineálta* procedures (DE, 2024a). The increasingly complex role and administrative workload have contributed to reports of increased prevalence of stress and burnout, negatively impacting mental health and wellbeing (Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara, 2024).

This shift towards staff empowerment is also reflected in earlier work on democratic school life. Williams (1985, p. 73) argues that teachers should have 'a real and significant voice in making decisions within the schools in which they teach'. This is relevant here because it connects governance structures to the legitimacy of authority and the enactment of school ethos. In Community Schools, where governance is shared and ethos is shaped through relationships and organisational practice, this perspective usefully highlights participation, consent and voice as influences on both school culture and the lived expression of ethos.

An early Irish example of this connection between participation, organisational relationships and school climate can be seen in Community School research. Although dated, O'Meara's (1985) study of four large Community Schools is worth including as one of the relatively few sector-specific studies available on the organisational life of Community Schools in Ireland. Its discussion of communication, planning, teacher participation and the principal's leadership behaviour suggests that school climate was already understood as shaped by organisational and relational factors. The study must, however, be treated cautiously, given the substantial changes in Irish educational policy, leadership structures and school contexts since it was conducted. This early emphasis on participation and relational leadership was later reinforced by international policy discourse that linked school autonomy, professional responsibility and school improvement.

In recent years there has been a shift in focus in the Irish education system from educational management to educational leadership, now seen as a collective, social process that seeks to include and influence others (DES, 2018; Günzel-Jensen, Jain and Kjeldsen, 2018; DE, 2022a). Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara (2026) highlight that policy makers have adopted the distributed leadership model, as reflected in documents such as *Circular 03/2018: Leadership and Management in Post-Primary Schools* (DES, 2018) and *Looking at Our School 2022* (DE, 2022a), both of which emphasise the role of school leaders. As Harris

(2005) describes it, distributed leadership best captures the evolving approach in schools, where leadership is shared among teams rather than vested in a single individual. Simmie and Sheehan (2022), however, caution that the model's widespread endorsement as unequivocally positive in Irish policy and practice may conceal hidden risks. Similarly, Forde *et al.* (2019) warn against reducing middle leaders' roles to mere task management, urging recognition of their complex, multifaceted responsibilities. *Circular 03/2018* has been particularly influential, introducing redefined posts of responsibility, removing seniority from appointments, promoting ongoing professional development, and implementing competency-based recruitment consistent with the *Looking at Our School (LAOS)* framework. The circular emphasises the strategic importance of middle leaders and the distributed nature of leadership as 'a key support for student learning' (DES, 2018). Murphy and Brennan (2022, p. 15) describe this move towards distributed leadership as a 'radical departure' from previous managerial and hierarchical styles.

Postholders do not receive a time allocation under *Circular 03/2018,* leading to variation in time dedicated to middle management responsibilities between schools and sectors. O'Rourke (2022) notes that this lack of additional time is seen as an obstacle to developing distributed leadership while other research recognises that clear roles and contextual understanding among leadership teams are crucial to organisational success (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008, p. 73; O'Donovan, 2015; Kavanagh, Sexton and Fitzsimons, 2021; Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara, 2023). Although Community Schools receive the same allocation as other sectors, they assign four hours weekly for each Assistant Principal (AP), known in the sector as an Assistant Principal I (API), to support robust leadership practices. This timetable alleviation enables school leadership teams to establish clear roles and responsibilities, facilitate time for meetings, support teamwork, and embed distributed leadership practices.

In the Community School, the principal manages operational matters directly with DE officials, on behalf of the board of management. While the principal is primarily responsible for 'giving concrete expression to the educational vision' this is shared with the deputy principal(s) (The ACCS Response to the Department of Education on the Green Paper, Education for a Changing World, 1993, p. 8). Team-based leadership has been integral since the inception of the sector, shaping leadership practices. In January 2014, the moratorium on filling posts of responsibility was partially lifted for the duration of the Haddington Road agreement (DES, 2014). Shortly after, ACCS and the Joint Managerial Body (JMB), assisted

by the Work Research Centre, collaboratively proposed new middle management structures based on school needs to DES (JMB/ACCS, 2014).

> Principals need to be able to delegate leadership roles effectively so that they can concentrate their efforts on developing leadership within the schools. Distributive leadership with a flexible structure in schools allows for such delegation in an effective and meaningful way. Teachers need to have exposure to taking on such leadership responsibilities, gaining experience, competencies and the confidence required in order to take on senior management roles in the future. (Joint Managerial Body/Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools: A Proposal for Management Structures for Post-Primary Schools, 2014, p. 4)

O'Rourke (2022) notes that this proposal formed the basis for dialogue between the management bodies and DES and is now central to policy as articulated in *Circular 03/2018.* Team leadership is strengthened in the Community and Comprehensive sector by the introduction of a bespoke Middle Leaders Training Programme since 2019. The ACCS programme engages participants in reflective practice and action research to improve teaching and learning. The programme blends theory and practice and is based on international and national research. It involves a tiered team of school leaders from each school who share learning within their own schools and across the schools in the ACCS network, supporting individual and collective learning opportunities. The programme aims to foster leadership cultures and is consistent with *Circular 03/2018, Looking at Our School 2022* and School Self-Evaluation.

Leadership wellbeing and sustainability are increasingly prominent concerns in the literature. Harris and West-Burnham (2018, p. 86) argue that effective school leadership is deeply rewarding but highly demanding, requiring significant reserves of emotional, physical and intellectual stamina; leaders must replenish their 'personal reservoirs' through self-care, reflection and quality engagement with others, such as colleagues, mentors and friends. West-Burnham (2009, p. 87) adds that sustainability and resilience are enhanced through quality engagement and relationships with other principals, including mentoring relationships such as the Celtic concept of the 'anam cara' or soul friend and collective learning experiences, including conferences and informal gatherings with peers. This study will examine how the network of schools in the sector can support individual principals and whether that support impacts their wellbeing and resilience.

While leadership has become more challenging in some respects, it has also been facilitated by two important review mechanisms situated in *Circular 03/2018.* Firstly, every three years, schools must review their leadership and management needs and priorities through a

consultative process (DES, 2018). This brings transparency and collective ownership to leadership, allowing roles and responsibilities to be adapted in response to changing priorities. Secondly, all postholders must engage in an annual review meeting focused on progress and professional development, which may result in reassignment within the leadership team (DES, 2018). These reflective conversations, supported by annual reports, help embed genuine distributed leadership in schools and inform the principal's report to the board.

Research supports this negotiated approach, indicating that authentic distributed leadership is achieved through negotiation and collaboration among leaders across the organisation (Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara, 2023). Despite the growing popularity of this leadership style, the authors contend that the lack of a universally agreed definition remains a challenge. Harris, Jones and Ismail (2022) and Gumus *et al.* (2018) confirm the growing interest in, and extensive research on, distributed leadership, despite its relative newness. Hargreaves and Fink (2006, p. 97) maintain that to distribute leadership is 'the morally responsible thing to do', distinguishing distributed leadership from delegation. Authentic distributed leadership, they explain, relies on the contributions of many, flows throughout the organisation, and constitutes a shared responsibility involving both formal and informal leaders. Harris, Jones and Ismail (2022) further note that distributed leadership has endured, attracting significant attention and debate. They acknowledge criticisms raised by Gunter (2004), who questions whether those 'distributing' leadership are merely delegating tasks or passing on governmental duties. Rather than fostering collaboration, some argue that such approaches can become coercive. In the Irish context, Murphy *et al.* (2009) argue that the strong norm of classroom autonomy can act as a barrier to distributed leadership and collaboration. These concerns are echoed by King and Stevenson (2017) and Lárusdóttir and O'Connor (2017), who question the extent to which genuine agency is afforded to teachers, emphasising the importance of trust and leaders' willingness to relinquish control and build others' self-efficacy, thereby enabling them to lead. Taken together, the literature and policy developments discussed above show how distributed leadership and team-based leadership are framed at system level and enacted through local structures, time and professional learning.

This section focuses on school governance, considering how board level arrangements enable or constrain leadership practice. While board performance is central to school direction and outcomes, leadership literature often concentrates on in-school leadership and gives less

attention to the board of management as the key governance body linking the patron and the school leadership team. The section foregrounds the literature on the board of management as the place where authority, accountability and educational purpose are negotiated.

Coolahan *et al.* (2017, p. 184) highlight weaknesses in Irish school governance and administration, arguing that without an effective middle tier, schools are overburdened and genuine educational leadership is not possible. The Chief Inspector's Report (DE, 2022) similarly questions the sustainability of voluntary boards as responsibilities expand, while also reporting that governance was 'good' or 'very good' in 80% of post-primary schools inspected between 2016 and 2020. In that report, effective boards are described as well informed, bringing a broad range of expertise, and clearly committed to school improvement.

MacKenzie (2012, p. 9) defines an effective board as one that embraces 'diversity of opinion, experience, and expertise' and makes decisions in the best interests of the school rather than narrow constituencies. Board effectiveness depends on balancing diverse voices, maintaining confidentiality and integrity, and understanding the far-reaching consequences of decisions. The board is not merely an external accountability mechanism; it forms part of the school's leadership architecture, shaping purpose, culture and strategic direction through dialogue with the principal while remaining appropriately removed from day-to-day operational management (DES, 2016). Brennan (2011) similarly emphasises that board success rests on both clear roles and responsibilities and on the quality of relationships and power sharing around the board table, with the chairperson and principal especially influential.

In the United Kingdom (UK), Gann (2015, p. 114) frames governance as work at the interface of strategic and operational roles, arguing that the quality of board leader interaction shapes governance, understanding and engagement, and that principals increasingly support board professionalism. Ranson *et al.* (2005) and Sheard and Avis (2011) also caution that formal stakeholder representation, including parent membership, does not in itself guarantee democratic or community responsive governance. Brennan (2011) further recommends clear, written terms of reference so members understand expectations, boundaries and protocols and can contribute effectively.

Boards of management operate in most OECD systems to support good governance and connect schools with their local communities. They typically include parents, teachers and patron nominees, many of whom come from outside education and may have concerns about their capacity and training to meet growing governance requirements. In Ireland, members

serve voluntarily yet carry significant legal responsibilities. Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008, pp. 87-94) emphasise that unclear boundaries between oversight and operational matters can create tension between boards and principals, underlining the need for support, role clarity and training.

West-Burnham (2009) frames governance as 'professionalised' volunteering, arguing that volunteers are not 'amateurs' and that strategic responsibility requires professional knowledge and skill. Voluntary boards can therefore be a system strength where expectations are clear, and governors are supported through trust-based relationships and development rather than burdensome human resources style bureaucracy. His focus on clarifying mutual obligations and enabling structures is also consistent with the Chief Inspector's (DE, 2022) concern about sustainability amid expanding statutory duties, pointing to the need for deliberate investment in capacity, role clarity and supports that sustain motivation while ensuring accountability (West-Burnham, 2009).

In Ireland, in a bid to meet the acute governance challenges in small primary schools as legislative and administrative burdens increase, DE introduced an initiative in 2021 to support clustering and collaboration at board of management level. *The Small Schools Report* (DEY, 2025b) highlights how these schools often struggle to recruit skilled volunteers, with principals consequently carrying much of the governance, financial and compliance workload. The challenges are compounded in rural communities by a limited pool of parents and local nominees. The report notes stakeholder unease about potential models such as shared governance, 'super principals' and compliance officer roles, and recommends that future phases test new approaches, deepen board and parent involvement, and draw on international learning to strengthen sustainability and effectiveness. As Brennan (2011) rightly points out, governance is onerous and demanding, involving board members who act in a voluntary and unremunerated capacity, so any initiatives that seek to support boards in carrying out their functions in a robust manner are to be welcomed.

In summary, the literature shows a shift from managerial, task-oriented conceptions towards leadership as shared practice, reflected in Irish policy promoting distributed leadership and competency-based middle leadership structures. The review also notes the importance of time as a resource for leadership. In terms of governance matters, it positions the board of management as integral to the school's leadership architecture, requiring clear roles and a

constructive partnership with the principal at the operational-oversight interface where accountability and autonomy are continually negotiated.

3.5 Conclusion

This literature review has provided valuable insights into a set of themes that are central to understanding school culture, ethos, leadership and governance. This thesis examines how the Community School model of patronage and governance shapes these dimensions in Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland. Several points emerge from the literature. First, a positive school climate is central to students' sense of belonging, with research highlighting actions schools can take to help create a place of belonging where young people can flourish. Establishing structures where all students have a voice is crucial and is closely linked to the quality of relationships within schools. Authentic dialogue, reinforced by respectful and caring connections between students, teachers and parents, strengthens students' engagement with the school community (Flutter, 2007; Benner, Brown and Jeffrey, 2019; Flynn and Hayes, 2021; McCormack, O'Flaherty and Liddy, 2021).

Second, the literature suggests a reciprocal relationship between schools and local communities, each dependent on the other's success. Principals play a pivotal role in embedding the school in the community, and authentic partnerships can enhance outcomes for both. Third, the literature highlights the significance of holistic education, active learning and child-centred approaches, as promoted in policy. Fourth, establishing shared values across school communities can be challenging, reflecting the ethos set by the joint patrons. Ethos, viewed as a negotiated and lived process, mirrors the evolving values of the school community (Barry, 2022). The literature also points to the need for pluralistic religious education and highlights the tensions boards may face between commitments to founders and an increasingly diverse student body, and this tension is worthy of further investigation

Finally, the review considers distributed leadership and questions whether it can, at times, as Gunter suggests, simply transfer responsibilities and work onto others without proper recognition as suggested by Gunter (2004). The principal's role is central, yet literature rarely addresses their perspective on distributed leadership. The school principal must encourage, motivate and bring together the right people in the right areas of the organisation if real distributed leadership is to flourish (O'Rourke, 2022). Across these significant themes, this literature review failed to identify any studies that focus specifically on Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland. Where Community Schools appear in wider post-primary studies,

such as Skerritt, Brown and O'Hara (2021), they are represented by one or two cases only, with limited attention to how the distinctive model of patronage may shape culture, ethos, leadership and governance practices. This concern is reinforced by Skerritt *et al.* (2021) and Skerritt, O'Hara and Brown (2021), who caution against treating Irish post-primary schools as homogeneous settings and argue that greater attention to school type and other contextual conditions is essential for meaningful interpretation of practice. This lack of Community School-specific research underlines the need for the present study, which seeks to address this gap by examining these questions directly in the Community School context. The next chapter presents the research methodology for the study.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This study investigates to what extent school culture, ethos, climate and leadership practices in Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland are shaped by the Community School model of patronage and governance.

4.2 Conceptual framework

This chapter examines philosophical considerations concerning the research design and its justification, the researcher's positionality, the case study design, and the methods of data collection and analysis. It also addresses ethical considerations, research integrity, and the limitations of the study. The problem and purpose statements are set out first, as they guide the overall design and selection of methods (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 157).

4.3 Problem statement

Educational research, like all research, aims to add to an existing body of knowledge. Queirós, Faria and Almeida (2017, p. 383) describe research studies as expanding 'the horizons of theories' and 'fundamental to' explaining phenomena. A review of the literature identified very few studies on Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland. Where Community Schools feature in research, the data often relate to only one or two schools, as in Skerritt, Brown and O'Hara (2021). In this sense, the literature on Community Schools and on the sector remains limited, demonstrating a clear need for further research.

Is the joint patronage model described in Chapter one fit for purpose in contemporary Ireland, 50 years after it was first introduced into Irish education? How is the culture of the Community School influenced by the joint patronage model where more than one patron has come together to establish the school, to agree the ethos and to appoint the board of management of the school? What, if any, impact is evident in the management practices and sense of agency of Community School principals in their close working relationship with officials in the Department of Education and Youth (DEY)?

Research on Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland remains limited, particularly from the perspective of school principals. This study addresses that gap by examining how joint patronage and governance structures may shape school culture, ethos, leadership practice and principal agency. In doing so, it contributes to knowledge of post-primary

schooling in Ireland and offers insights relevant to patrons, boards of management, school leaders, aspiring leaders and the DEY.

4.4 Purpose statement

According to Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 199), the most important statement in a research study is the purpose statement, as it provides the 'road map' for the study. Using the script they provide, it is set out explicitly for this study as follows:

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which the combined patronage and governance structures of Community Schools create a distinctive framework that shapes school culture, ethos, climate and leadership practice. The central phenomenon is the influence of these structures on the experiences of the school community and on principals' day-to-day leadership and decision making.

4.5 Position of researcher

The role of the researcher is critical to the success of the study (Saidin and Aizan, 2016). I have worked in the Community and Comprehensive sector for over 27 years and have a particular interest in this study because it relates directly to my work. I have a professional commitment to the joint patronage model, to its regular review and improvement and to the multidenominational goals articulated in the agreed Characteristic Spirit Statement. That commitment is not incidental to the study and is stated explicitly here because it is part of the professional and value position from which the research is undertaken.

I serve as General Secretary of the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS), one of the three management bodies in post-primary education in Ireland. Prior to my secondment to ACCS, I held senior leadership positions in a Community School for 21 years - seven as Deputy Principal and 14 as Principal. In my current role, I closely advise and support the 83 Community Schools that are the focus of this study. I am therefore aware that this positions me as an insider researcher (Saidin and Aizan, 2016, p. 849). Mercer (2007, p. 13) argues that the relationship between researcher and participants is fluid and dynamic, bringing advantages including an established shared frame of reference. Rossman and Rallis (2016, p. 131) similarly suggest that participants who are familiar with the researcher may be more willing to trust them and share their experiences.

Morris *et al.* (1999) argue that the dual roles of insider (emic) and researcher (etic) require careful balance. As an insider, my position is predominantly emic, giving me a rich

understanding of the structures and practices that characterise Community Schools. Equally, however, as Bhattacharya (2017, p. 117) notes, 'the researcher position implies a gaze on a group of people, which automatically puts the researcher in an outsider position'. This etic perspective allows the researcher to bring greater critical distance to the study. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) therefore emphasise the importance of navigating both perspectives and being transparent about positionality throughout the research process.

My professional commitment is to the joint patronage model as a distinctive and valuable form of school governance and to its regular review and improvement. This matters because the study does not approach the joint model as a neutral abstraction, nor as a reality created only by participants' perspectives. It examines a legally recognised governance arrangement, rooted in foundational instruments such as the Deed of Trust and expressed through the lived practices of Community Schools. The purpose of declaring my position is therefore not to remove values from the research, which would be neither possible nor desirable, but to make them visible so that the reader can evaluate the analysis and recommendations that follow.

To guard against bias, I adopt an explicit reflexive stance, engaging in ongoing critical reflection on how my role, assumptions, professional commitments and decisions may shape the research throughout data collection and analysis. I also use strategies including triangulation, member checking, and a transparent audit trail supported by NVivo qualitative data analysis software (Lumivero, version 14) to strengthen the credibility, dependability and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 2016; Creswell, 1998; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Lumivero, 2025). These strategies are important because the study depends on gaining an accurate and representative account of participants' considered judgements, while also remaining open to critique, complexity and disagreement.

4.6 Philosophical Considerations

This section explains and justifies the research design adopted in this study. The central research task is to investigate how the joint patronage model is faring as an approach to governance in Community Schools, and how that model shapes ethos, culture, climate and leadership practices. The study is concerned with both formal governance arrangements and the considered judgements of those who work within them, and therefore the design must gather different kinds of evidence from different sources.

The joint patronage model is not treated here as a reality merely constructed by participants' perceptions. It is an independent and legally recognised governance arrangement, given

institutional expression through documents, structures, policies and practices. The Deed of Trust, patronage arrangements, inspection reports and related documentary sources therefore provide important evidence about the formal and historical character of the model. At the same time, these documents cannot by themselves disclose how the model is experienced, interpreted, or negotiated by school leaders and other relevant stakeholders. The design must therefore place documentary evidence alongside participant accounts.

For this reason, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach that is mainly qualitative in design. The survey combines closed questions, which allow patterns to be identified across participants, with open questions, which invite more developed reflection. Documentary analysis provides a further source of evidence, primarily qualitative but capable of supporting descriptive and contextual comparison. Semi-structured interviews form a major part of the study because they allow participants to explain their judgements, clarify meanings, identify tensions and describe experiences that may not be fully visible in documentary or survey data alone.

The design is carefully tailored to the requirements of the research task. Quantitative elements are used where they help to establish patterns. Qualitative elements are used where the research requires depth, interpretation, explanation and attention to context. The main weight of the study remains qualitative because its central concern is not measurement alone, but the professional meaning and practical significance of governance arrangements in multi-denominational and pluralist school settings.

The validity of the study depends on the coherence of this design and on the care with which it is conducted. The stakes are high because the findings are intended to support analysis in the discussion chapter and warranted recommendations in the final chapter. It is therefore essential that participants are enabled to provide thoughtful and considered responses. Cursory answers to open survey questions, or evasive engagement in interviews, would weaken the evidential basis of the study. For that reason, gaining the trust of participants is not simply an ethical requirement; it is also a methodological necessity.

The researcher's positionality is central to this task. My role in ACCS may support trust because participants know that I understand the sector, its language, its governance arrangements and its practical demands. It may also create risks if participants feel constrained in what they can say or if I interpret responses too readily through assumptions formed by professional experience. The study therefore requires a careful balance between

familiarity and critical distance. Interviewing must be sufficiently rigorous to test meanings and clarify claims, but not so forceful that it closes down unforced disclosure, especially where participants are voicing hopes, disappointments, concerns or reservations that may not previously have been articulated.

Questions of objectivity and warrant are addressed in this study through transparency, reflexivity and the careful relationship between evidence and interpretation. The aim is not to suggest that all participants will experience the joint patronage model in the same way. Rather, the aim is to present an accurate and representative account of a range of judgements about the model, to identify where those judgements converge or diverge, and to consider what those patterns disclose about governance, ethos and leadership in Community Schools.

This approach also recognises that different sources of evidence require different forms of interpretation. Documents can establish formal arrangements, stated principles, historical commitments and institutional expectations. Human participants can disclose how those arrangements are understood and lived in practice, including areas of confidence, ambiguity, frustration or aspiration. The study's contribution to knowledge is therefore primarily a contribution to professional knowledge. It seeks to deepen understanding of school governance in multi-denominational, pluralist settings.

Accordingly, the philosophical basis of the study acknowledges that the joint patronage model and its legal and institutional instruments exist independently of any one participant's view of them, while also recognising that their significance for school life can only be understood by attending carefully to the experiences and judgements of those who work within them. This provides the basis for the later analysis where the findings are presented as warranted interpretations grounded in documentary evidence, survey responses, interview data and reflexive engagement with the researcher's own professional position.

4.7 The case study approach

> At best, we are documenting what we are able to understand, gather, interpret, analyse, in the moments of time we have shared with the participant and are invested in reporting the results of our inquiry. Our understanding changes over time, which implies that so does the understanding of the participants of their own lives. (Bhattacharya, 2017, pp. 109-110)

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p. 23), there are six common qualitative research designs: basic qualitative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative analysis, and qualitative case study. For some reason they don't include action research or

arts-based approaches. In any event, they point out that the first five types of research are defined by the topic of investigation or the focus of the study rather than by the unit of analysis. The case study, on the other hand, is characterised by a bounded system. Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p. 38) state that 'the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study'.

Bhattacharya (2017, p. 110) agrees that 'a case is a bounded system, and it is up to the researcher to create the boundary of what a case ought to be with justification from existing literature and theoretical perspectives'. In this study, the bounded system is the Community School sector in the Republic of Ireland, and the case under investigation is how governance and patronage structures affect leadership practices, culture and ethos within that sector. The unit of analysis is the experiences of school principals working across multiple Community Schools. This is not an unlimited population, as there are only 83 schools, which clearly defines the parameters of the study. Furthermore, Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p. 40) explain that case studies can be historical, describing the history of an organisation. In this study, that includes the history of the Community School sector, which was introduced into Irish post-primary education in the early 1970s. According to Clark *et al.* (2021, p. 60), a case might be chosen because it provides a suitable context in which certain research questions can be answered. In this study, the Community School sector offers a single context in which to explore the interplay between governance and patronage structures and leadership practices. Case study design can involve both qualitative and quantitative research approaches (Clark *et al.,* 2021, p. 59). In this study, however, the approach is purely qualitative and is aligned with the interpretive research paradigm.

The individual schools are situated across the Republic of Ireland, and each reflects its own community setting. Approximately one-third of the schools have disadvantaged status and are therefore designated DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools). A substantial number of Community Schools are in remote areas as stand-alone providers in a local community, while others are situated in densely populated urban areas. Some of the schools were established because of an amalgamation of two or three schools in an area, while others were established as greenfield sites.

The case study begins with an analysis of documents produced by the State, newspaper archives and a review of the existing literature on the topic of Community Schools in Ireland. The aim of this initial Phase One of the research was to establish a record of the evolution of

the Community School model introduced in 1970 and to set out the historical context of these schools up to the present time. Phase Two involved surveys with Community School principals. The sampling frame included practising school principals currently employed in the Community School sector excluding those on secondment, on other types of leave or working in the system with other support agencies. It also excluded principals working in Comprehensive Schools, Further Education Colleges, Youth Reach provision and primary schools. There are 83 school principals in the Community School sector in Ireland making this a small study. All serving principals in Community Schools were invited to complete the online survey and 40 completed responses were received.

In Phase Three, 10 principals who indicated willingness to be interviewed were selected using purposeful sampling to ensure diversity across characteristics such as career stage, school age, location, and DEIS status, while also seeking gender balance. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allowed predefined topics to be explored flexibly and in greater depth, generating richer data than the survey alone. A range of other stakeholders in Irish education were invited to participate in a single semi-structured interview, either in person or online. Initially, a maximum of eight stakeholders, including policy makers, DEY inspectors and others, were selected for interview in order to gain insights into the Community School model and its place in the Irish education system.

The stakeholders were invited to participate from the following areas:

Table 4.1 Stakeholders invited to participate in the study

No.	Stakeholder group
1	Former and current DEY personnel involved in policy making and the Inspectorate.
2	Former and current ACCS officers and Executive Committee members.
3	Former and current Community School patrons from the religious congregations.
4	Former and current Community School patrons from the Education and Training Boards.
5	Former and current Community School board of management members.
6	Former and current Community School chaplains.
7	Former and current trade union officials.
8	Former and current academics.

During the initial round of interviews, several of the stakeholders suggested others who might be also useful for the study. This snowballing technique sourced an additional seven stakeholders who were also invited to engage in interviews. Six of the seven agreed to be interviewed once they had read the Participant Information Sheet and the schedule of questions. The seventh stakeholder declined to participate due to a concern that they might not have sufficient knowledge of the Community School sector. In total, 14 stakeholders were interviewed for the study.

Following analysis of the interview and survey data, a new discrete data set was introduced, and a secondary round of documentary analysis was conducted. The aim here was to confirm or challenge the findings and patterns identified in the interview and survey participants' accounts. School Inspection reports from the DEY were analysed to triangulate the study's main findings with an additional data source to ensure accuracy of the research findings.

4.8 Data collection

Data collection in this study was designed as an iterative and interconnected process rather than as a sequence of isolated stages. Rossman and Rallis (2016, p. 3) describe data as the 'basic building blocks' of information from which qualitative researchers construct meaning, and in this study, this began during the collection process itself. Consistent with the interpretive orientation of the research, each phase of data collection informed the next, allowing the study to remain responsive to participants' perspectives and to emerging lines of inquiry.

Phase One involved documentary analysis of State documents, archival newspaper material and relevant literature in order to establish the historical and policy context of the Community School model. This phase provided the conceptual and contextual foundation for the fieldwork and informed the development of the survey questions. Phase Two comprised an online survey of serving Community School principals. While the survey generated a broad qualitative dataset across the sector, it also functioned as an exploratory stage, identifying issues, experiences and tensions that warranted further examination. Insights from the survey then informed the development of the semi-structured interview schedules used in Phase Three with principals and stakeholders. In this way, data collection was cumulative, with each phase deepening and extending understanding of the research problem. A later round of documentary analysis using DEY inspection reports added a further layer of analysis, enabling the emerging themes to be tested, refined and considered against an additional source of evidence. This iterative design strengthened the coherence of the study by ensuring that data collection remained closely aligned to the evolving analytical focus of the research.

4.9 Access to participants

Gaining access to participants required both formal institutional permission and careful ethical mediation. Bhattacharya (2017, p. 6) emphasises that access to research settings often depends on establishing rapport, understanding local protocols and securing the confidence of a gatekeeper. In March 2024, the boards of management of all 83 Community Schools were contacted by email to seek permission to conduct the study. The email outlined the purpose, scope and timeframe of the research and clarified that the survey phase would involve serving Community School principals. A total 76 boards responded positively and granted permission for the research to proceed. Access to individual participants was then supported by the Assistant General Secretary of ACCS, who acted as gatekeeper. The role of the gatekeeper

was not to recruit participants, but to ensure that prospective participants clearly understood the nature and boundaries of the study before deciding whether to participate. Using publicly available school email addresses, the gatekeeper circulated the Participant Information Sheet **(Appendix F)** and Informed Consent Form **(Appendix E)** once board approval had been secured. Participation was voluntary throughout, and principals were informed that they could withdraw at any stage. This staged approach was appropriate to the institutional context of the study and helped to ensure that recruitment was both ethically robust and procedurally transparent.

4.10 Research instruments

4.10.1 Research instruments - documentary analysis

Documentary analysis was used at two points in this study and served distinct but related purposes. In Phase One, it provided the historical and policy context necessary to understand the emergence and development of the Community School model since 1970. This phase drew on State documents and relevant literature to construct a contextual narrative for the study. It also used archival newspaper material from *The Irish Times* digital archive to trace contemporary reporting, commentary and key policy developments over time.

As Clark *et al.* (2021, p. 498) note, documentary sources are valuable because of their non-reactive nature. These documents were not created for research purposes, and so they remain unaffected by the research process itself. Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p. 182) also emphasise the 'stability of the data', seeing it as the greatest benefit of documentary evidence. They further note that documents can resemble interviews in that they preserve voices, perspectives and interpretations in textual form. In this study, such sources were not treated as neutral records. However, when read alongside official documents and other contemporary materials, they provided a sufficiently consistent basis from which to trace key developments in the model.

In a later phase of the study, documentary analysis was reintroduced through Department of Education and Youth inspection reports. Here, the purpose was not historical reconstruction but analytical triangulation. Natow (2020, p. 170) explains that relevant documentary analysis in research can support and validate findings, providing 'additional perspectives that cannot be obtained solely through interviews'.

> External inspections provide an external perspective on the work of the school… A quality continuum is designed to assist inspectors to arrive at evidence-based,

> evaluative judgements and describe the quality of a school's provision or aspects of that provision accurately. (A Guide to Inspection in Post-Primary Schools, DEY, 2025)

These reports offered an additional perspective on school life, incorporating the voices of other stakeholders and including evidence relating to leadership, inclusion, participation and school culture. The analysis of the reports therefore enabled the themes emerging from surveys and interviews to be refined, extended and, where necessary, challenged. In this way, documentary analysis contributed both contextual depth and analytical breadth to the study.

4.10.2 Research instruments - complementary fieldwork: surveys and interviews

In Phases Two and Three, the study used two complementary forms of fieldwork: an online survey and semi-structured interviews. These methods were selected because they generated different but related forms of qualitative data. As Atieno (2009) observes, different methods reflect different ways of thinking about data. In this study, the survey provided a broad overview of principals' perspectives across the sector, while the interviews created space for participants to elaborate on their experiences, clarify meanings and discuss issues in greater depth. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, p. 10) describe the qualitative interview as a key means of accessing how participants 'experience and understand their world', which is particularly relevant to a study concerned with leadership, governance and ethos. Used together, the two methods allowed the study to balance breadth with depth and to build a more nuanced account than either method could have produced alone.

4.10.3 Research instruments - the online survey

In Phase Two, an online survey was used to generate qualitative data on principals' understandings of the Community School governance structure and its perceived influence on their day-to-day leadership experience. The survey explored issues such as relationships with stakeholders, professional agency and leadership practice. The online format was well suited to a geographically dispersed national cohort and offered a practical means of reaching all Community School principals. As Queirós, Faria and Almeida (2017) note, online questionnaires can provide an efficient and cost-effective way of securing broad participation, while Clark *et al.* (2021, p. 222) highlight the advantage of direct download into a database for analysis. However, the value of the survey in this study lay not simply in convenience, but in its capacity to produce a broad qualitative dataset that could inform the next phase of the research.

The instrument combined closed questions, which captured contextual and profile information, with open-ended questions that allowed principals to respond in their own terms. No character limit was imposed on these responses, in order to encourage fuller reflection and reduce the risk of constraining participants' accounts. The survey was designed in Microsoft Forms and distributed by email using an anonymous link. Consent was integrated into the survey process and had to be completed before participation. At the end of the survey, respondents could separately indicate whether they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview. In total, 40 responses were received. The dataset was exported to Excel and then imported into NVivo for analysis. Importantly, the open-ended responses helped identify themes and issues that were subsequently explored in greater depth through the semi-structured interviews in Phase Three.

4.10.4 Research instruments - the qualitative interview

In Phase Three, semi-structured interviews were used to generate more detailed accounts from principals and other stakeholders. This method suited the interpretive design of the study because it enabled participants to describe their experiences in their own terms while also allowing the researcher to probe, clarify and pursue emerging lines of discussion.

A total of 10 principals were selected from those who indicated willingness to be contacted after the survey. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure diversity across relevant characteristics, including career stage, school age, location and DEIS status. In addition, 14 stakeholders from across Irish education were invited to participate in order to provide perspectives beyond school leadership alone. Separate interview schedules were developed for principals **(Appendix G)** and stakeholders **(Appendix H)** to reflect the different forms of insight sought from each group. The principal interviews were conducted first, and these initial conversations informed the subsequent stakeholder interviews.

Principals were contacted using the email addresses they had shared at the end of the survey, while prospective stakeholders were contacted through publicly available email addresses. Mikecz (2012) emphasises the importance of thorough preparation in advance of elite interviewing. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, p. 6) describe the interview as 'literally an *inter-view,* an exchange of ideas between two persons conversing about a theme of common interest'. Denscombe (2017) similarly notes that interviewees' perceptions of the researcher can shape their responses, as interviews are social encounters in which both parties remain conscious of identity and role. It was therefore important to recognise the pre-existing

professional relationship between the researcher and each interviewee and to establish a clear research relationship for the purposes of this study. This was made explicit in the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (Weiss, 1995, p. 75).

Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p. 130) note that the interviewer-interviewee relationship is inherently complex, as both parties bring assumptions, attitudes and potential biases to the interaction. Throughout the interview process, it was therefore important for the researcher to remain alert to personal assumptions and to minimise any influence on participants' responses. Interviewing principals and key stakeholders also involved the particular challenges associated with elite interviewing. Mikecz (2012) identifies these challenges as including negotiating access, managing limited time, and responding to the possibility that elite participants may dominate the conversation, mask their views or present a strategic account of events. In this study, the researcher's existing professional rapport with participants helped to reduce some of these difficulties and proved a useful resource throughout the interview process.

The Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form were shared with participants in advance of interview, together with the relevant schedule of questions. Once the Consent Form had been returned, an online interview was arranged on Microsoft Teams. The interview schedules differed for principals and stakeholders because the information sought from each group was different. Conducting the principal interviews first enabled insights from these early interviews to inform the subsequent stakeholder interviews. The stakeholder interview schedule was shorter, allowing more time for in-depth responses **(Appendices G and H).**

The principal interviews followed a broadly consistent structure and remained closely aligned to the schedule and order of questions. The stakeholder interviews, by contrast, required greater flexibility because participants occupied a wide range of roles and brought differing perspectives from across Irish education. The semi-structured format allowed the interviewer to adapt questions to each stakeholder while maintaining a clear focus on the research aims. Some stakeholders had prepared responses in advance, which supported a smooth interview process. In other cases, it was evident that the questions had not been reviewed beforehand. In these instances, the schedule helped the interviewer to maintain focus while allowing limited deviation where this was necessary to elicit fuller responses from the participant's own perspective.

While semi-structured interviews generate rich and detailed accounts, they are also time consuming to transcribe and analyse (Clark *et al.,* 2021, p. 425). Conducting the interviews on Microsoft Teams was helpful in this regard. With participants' consent, the online format allowed interviews to be recorded and transcribed. Weiss (1995, p. 53) argues that when researchers rely solely on notetaking, the 'vividness of speech disappears', speech patterns are 'flattened and simplified' and 'content is likely to be lost as well'. Recording therefore enabled the researcher to capture not only what was said, but also how experiences and events were described. Microsoft Teams produced a draft transcript with time stamps and speaker distinction. This provided a useful starting point for full transcription, although each transcript required careful checking and revision against the recording. The final typed transcript was member-checked by each interviewee and stored on an encrypted laptop. The transcripts were then imported into NVivo for analysis.

4.10.5 Piloting the research instruments

Clark *et al.* (2021, p. 250) state that piloting the research instruments should be carried out with respondents who are comparable to the members of the population being studied. For this reason, both the draft survey and the initial schedule of interview questions were piloted with recently retired principals who, after retirement, remain active in the educational system in different roles. The piloting of the survey was carried out in May 2025 with 10 people, and the piloting of the interview schedule was carried out in late June 2025 with three people. Piloting helped identify repetitive, ambiguous and potentially leading questions, and also confirmed that the interview duration was appropriate, while the survey required more time than initially estimated. Sample responses from the pilot survey are included in **(Appendix I)**.

4.11 Data analysis overview

Data analysis in this study was iterative and began during data collection rather than after it had concluded. Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p. 31) describe analysis as the process through which the researcher makes meaning from the data in order to address the research questions, while Clark *et al.* (2021, p. 524) emphasise that qualitative analysis often develops alongside data gathering. That was the approach adopted here. Survey responses informed the development of the interview schedule for principals, and the principal interviews in turn helped shape the focus of the stakeholder interviews. In this way, analysis and data collection were closely connected throughout the study. Survey responses gathered through Microsoft

Forms were exported to Excel and then imported into NVivo for analysis. Interviews conducted on Microsoft Teams were recorded, transcribed, checked for accuracy by the researcher and participants, and added to the same dataset. NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis package (CAQDAS), supported the organisation, coding and retrieval of data, but interpretation remained the responsibility of the researcher (Clark *et al.,* 2021, p. 548).

The analysis used Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 4) define thematic analysis as a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset through systematic coding. Their later development of reflexive thematic analysis places the researcher's role in knowledge production at the centre of the process (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p. 594). This made RTA well suited to the present study, where meanings were understood as co-constructed and where the researcher's interpretive role required ongoing reflexive awareness. Throughout this study, the researcher maintained this reflexive approach, continually reflecting on their role, assumptions, and potential influence on the process and outcomes of the research. This helped ensure that the researcher's own perspectives and professional context did not compromise the authenticity and integrity of the data collected and analysed.

The analysis was structured around Braun and Clarke's six phases:

Table 4.2 Braun and Clarke's six phases of analysis

Phase	**Description**
Phase One	Familiarising yourself with the dataset
Phase Two	Coding
Phase Three	Generating initial themes
Phase Four	Developing and reviewing themes
Phase Five	Refining, defining and naming themes
Phase Six	Writing up

In practice, the six phases did not operate as a simple sequence. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 9) emphasise that there are many ways to do RTA; rather, by situating the process in the strength of the researcher's subjectivity, it offers the researcher a wide spectrum of approaches and great flexibility. Consistent with RTA, the process in this study involved moving back and forth across the dataset as ideas developed. Initial familiarisation and first-round coding were undertaken inductively, an orientation where 'the data content' drives the analysis and coding (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 10). This approach allows both semantic (explicit) and latent (implicit) meanings to be explored without forcing the data into predetermined categories.

Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 70) recommend that the researcher work through the dataset more than once to ensure a rigorous and thorough process of coding has been carried out. Having completed the first round of coding, the entire dataset was coded for a second time. There were 64 data items in the dataset, and for the second round of coding, the researcher started at data item 50, in the middle of the dataset, working backwards through the principal interviews and survey responses towards data item one and then from data item 64 down towards data item 51 through the stakeholder interviews. This approach allowed the researcher to refine and reassess codes, resulting in a more evenly coded dataset, adding greater rigour and ensuring that no data segments were left uncoded (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 70).

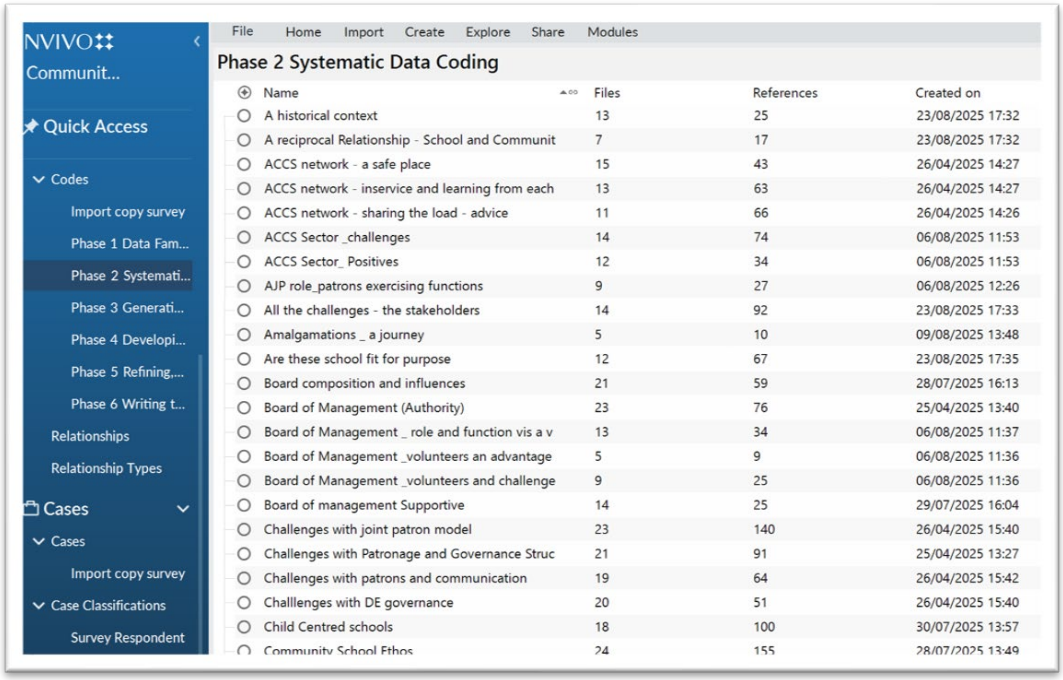


Figure 4.1 Phase Two: systematic data coding in NVivo

The coding phase produced 97 codes which were clustered in Phase Three of the analysis while generating the initial themes. This phase involved collating relevant coding extracts which brought the researcher back into the raw data. During this phase it was useful to set aside the software and take pen to paper to consider the initial themes, their sub-themes and how these related to the research question. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 97) emphasise the recursive nature of the RTA process that demands the researcher moves backwards and forwards between the data and the developing analysis. RTA allowed the researcher to move flexibly across the dataset and this revision of ideas and process of reflection assisted greatly in the identification of the themes.

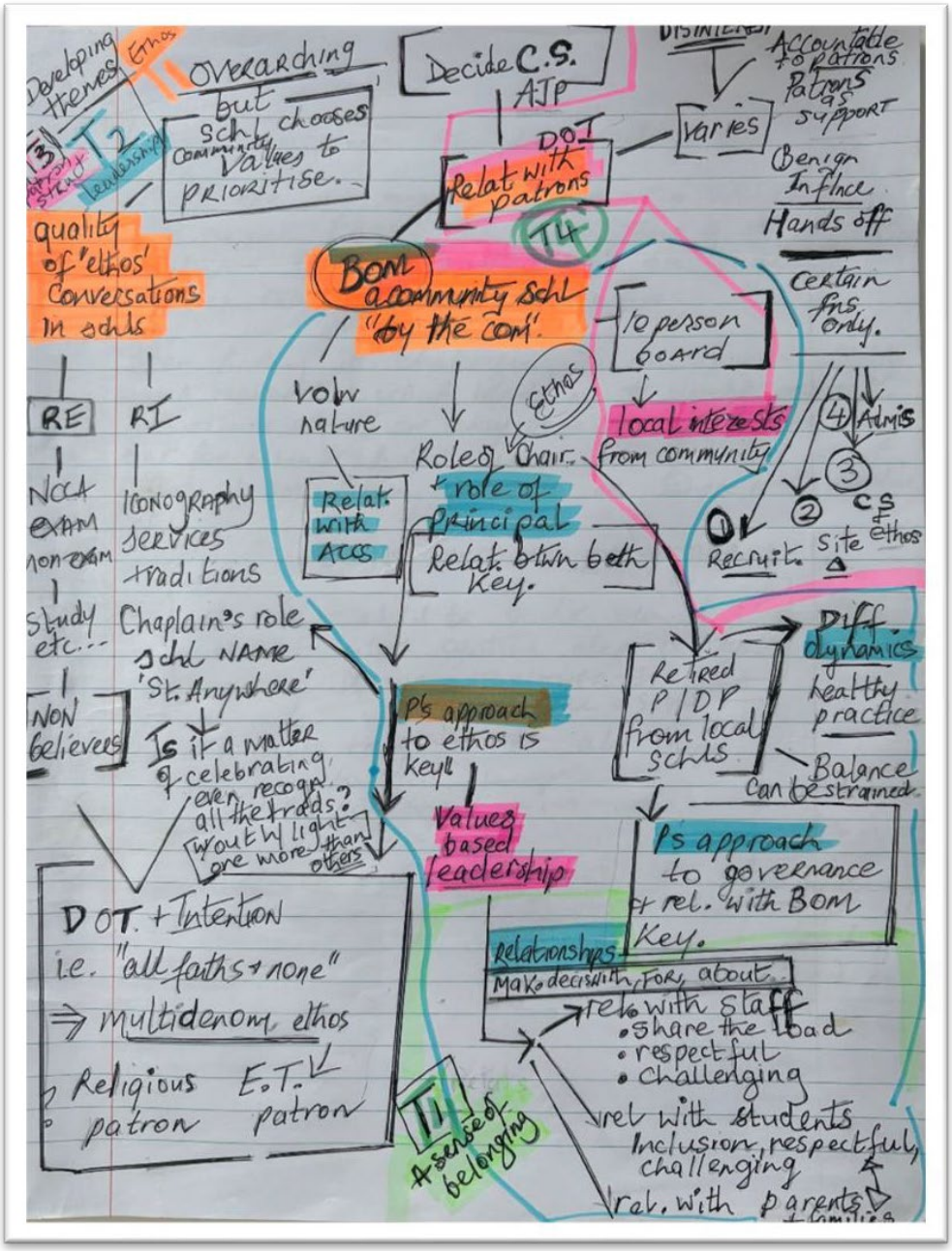


Figure 4.2 Developing themes and sub-themes: back to pen, highlighters and paper

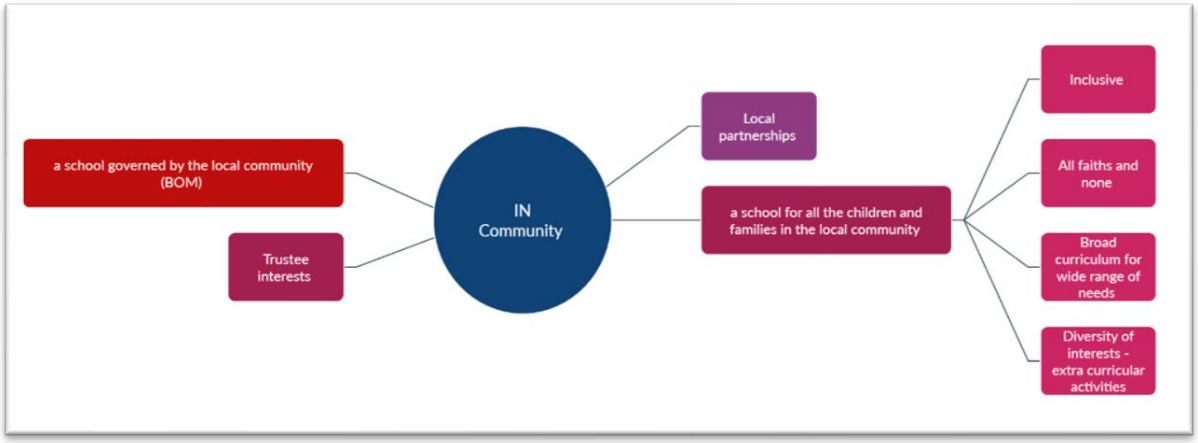


Figure 4.3 Developing themes using a mind map in NVivo

Phase Four involved refining the themes, adding sub-themes and reconsidering the data. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 89) caution against becoming attached to early themes and stress the need to be 'prepared to let things go' throughout the process of theme development.

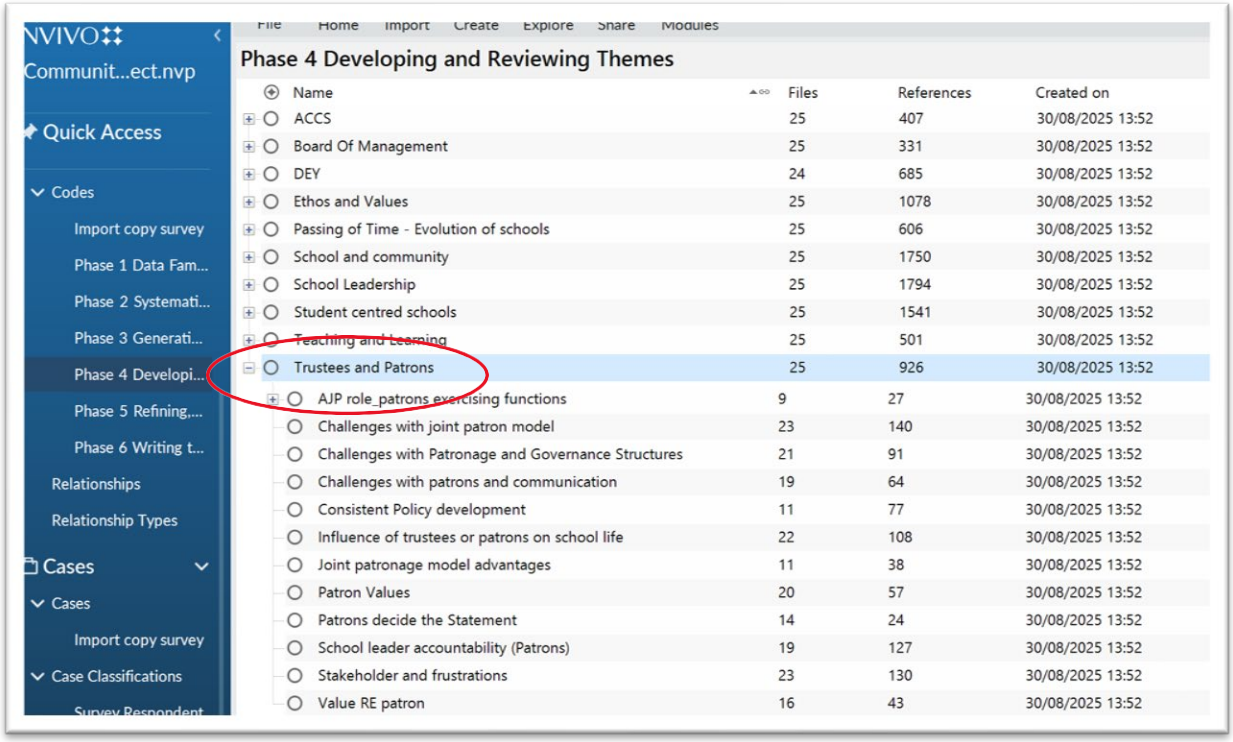


Figure 4.4 Phase Four: developing and reviewing themes in NVivo

The re-defining and refining of themes overlapped into Phase Five, allowing the researcher to engage deeply with the data and develop patterns of meaning in an active and deliberate approach encouraged by Braun and Clarke. The authors note that this type of change is positive, showing deep and reflective engagement with both the data and the process (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 97). Eventually six themes were identified by the researcher in Phase Five, each with three or four associated sub-themes.



Figure 4.5 Phase Five: refining, defining and naming themes in NVivo

One of the greatest challenges encountered during the analysis process in this research study was knowing when to move from one phase to the next. Each phase is ongoing and can easily take the researcher back into the previous one. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 118) provide little comfort in this regard, arguing that even in the final phase, while writing the findings, the qualitative researcher is still producing the analysis as they bring the whole story together.

The themes and sub-themes developed in Phase Five form the structure of the written report. By this point, the relevant data has been considered and organised. The researcher must then convince the reader of 'the credibility and significance' of the collected data and its interpretation (Clark *et al.,* 2021, p. 360). 'It is the quality and quantity of the evidence provided that persuades the reader that the findings are trustworthy' (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 285).

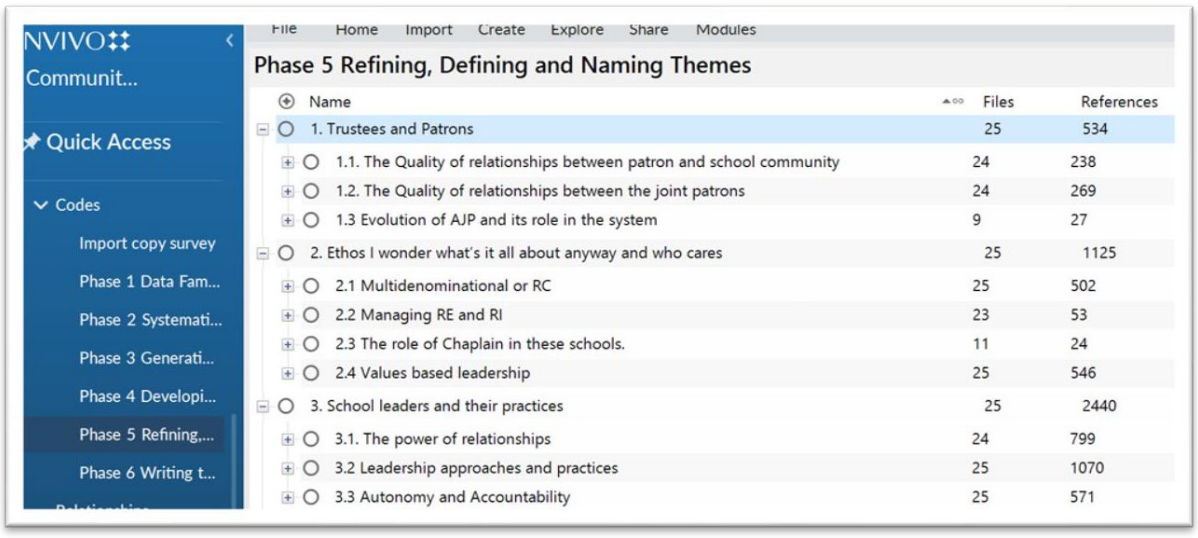


Figure 4.6 Phase Five: refining themes and sub-themes in NVivo

The analytic process did not end once coding and theme development within NVivo had been completed. A further documentary dataset was then introduced to deepen, refine and test the themes emerging from the surveys and interviews. This comprised published DEY inspection reports from Community Schools during the period of the study. The reports were selected because they provided an additional perspective on school life, drawing on evidence from the wider school community rather than from principals and external stakeholders alone.

Engagement with these documents at this stage is not conceptualised as a separate phase of analysis, but as being consistent with the RTA orientation of the study. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 36) emphasise that engagement with this approach involves going back and forth across phases as new insights emerge. Accordingly, introducing another data source at this point maintains alignment with RTA as an iterative, interpretive and flexible approach. A total of 12 reports were included in this final dataset. Subject reports were excluded because of their narrow curricular focus, and thematic reports were excluded because they did not allow Community School-specific data to be isolated.

Table 4.3 Inspection models included in the final dataset

No.	Inspection model
1	Whole School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE/MLL)
2	Transition Year Programme Evaluation (TY)
3	Leaving Certificate Applied Programme Evaluation (LCA)
4	Promoting Wellbeing in Schools Evaluation
5	Evaluation of inclusive practices and provision for children with special and additional educational needs in post-primary schools

Given the modest size of this documentary dataset, the reports were analysed manually in Microsoft Word rather than re-imported into NVivo. In keeping with the reflexive and iterative logic of RTA, the documents were read closely, coded against the six themes, and revisited several times as interpretation developed. Each document was read carefully and, using the highlighter and font-colour tools in Microsoft Word, each theme was assigned a distinct colour or highlight. This allowed for immediate visual comparison across themes and for identifying areas where themes intersected or needed further refinement. This final stage of analysis added breadth to the dataset and strengthened the overall interpretive account developed through the study.

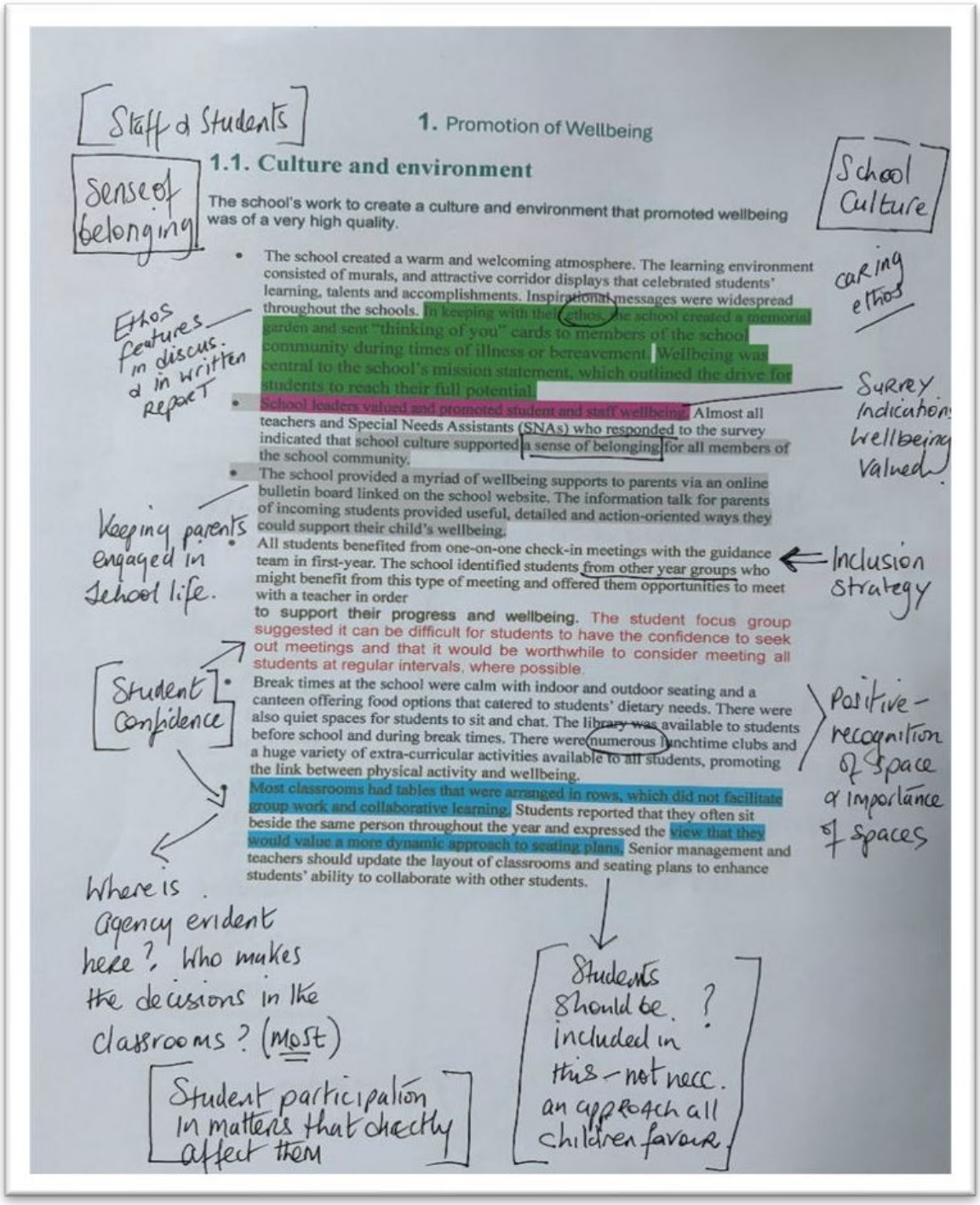


Figure 4.7 Highlighting themes in DEY published reports in Microsoft Word

4.12 Methods of verification and research integrity

Research integrity involves conducting research to the highest standards of professionalism and rigour throughout the entire research process from design to dissemination of findings. According to ALLEA (2023, p. 5), the fundamental principles of the *European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* include reliability, honesty, respect and accountability. Reliability or trustworthiness should be evident across design, methodology, analysis and the use of resources. Honesty is essential in undertaking and reporting research in a transparent and fair way. The researcher must also remain respectful of, and accountable to, all those involved in the process.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p. 237) describe reflexivity in qualitative research as a strategy to ensure reliability. Creswell and Báez (2020, p. 201) argue that reflexivity should inform all qualitative studies, as researchers' reflections on their experiences and influence can strengthen the accuracy of the account. The researcher remains 'thoroughly implicated' in the construction of knowledge, in the perspective adopted in data collection and analysis, and in decision making throughout the research process (Clark *et al.,* 2021, p. 368). In this study, the researcher clarified their assumptions and explicitly acknowledged potential biases, not to eliminate them, but to help the reader understand how they may have influenced the study's conclusions (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 249).

Triangulation is another common means of deepening qualitative insight and strengthening findings (Clark *et al.,* 2021, p. 364). In this study, triangulation was achieved through different data sources and methods, including document analysis, surveys and interviews. This enabled the researcher to examine the data through different lenses, strengthening the overall credibility of the study.

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the primary research instrument and is often more closely involved with participants than in quantitative studies (Bernauer and O'Dwyer, 2013, p. 10). This is evident in strategies such as member checking, which is often used to support the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. Newhart and Patten (2023, p. 381) describe member checking as a process in which participants review aspects of the researcher's results and analysis to determine whether they ring true. In this study, all interview participants were offered an opportunity to review their transcripts and were informed when the findings were completed. None of the participants sought any changes and each stated that the transcript accurately reflected the interview. This process helped verify the accuracy of the data and

mitigate against potential researcher bias. Reflexivity, triangulation and member checking were complemented by an audit trail maintained through NVivo, which supported transparent management of the data and showed how codes, themes and interpretations were developed. Including this account of methods, procedures and decision points adds to the rigour and trustworthiness of the study (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 260).

4.13 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Dublin City University (DCU) Institute of Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC). It was deemed to be a low-risk social research study as it did not involve vulnerable participants, and no adverse effects or risks were anticipated from participation. The research focused on distilling common themes and experiences of stakeholders engaged with the Community School sector. All participants were adults drawn from the Community School sector and wider education system. Although the research with school principals was conducted outside school time, formal permission from the 83 boards of management of the Community Schools was sought in March 2025, in advance of the research commencing.

The researcher, who acts in an advisory capacity to the Community Schools, has an established professional relationship with the principals and stakeholders involved in the study. It was therefore necessary to clearly establish a separate relationship with the school principals, and this was explicitly set out before the research commenced. Relevant safeguards and procedures were integrated into the Participant Information Sheets and Informed Consent Forms. A gatekeeper ensured that participants understood the scope of the study, had read the Participant Information Sheet, and could address any queries about the study.

Maintaining anonymity is key to protecting participants from harm (Clark *et al.,* 2021, p. 117). Participants' anonymity was protected in this study by deleting all identifying information and assigning identification codes. It is not possible to identify any contributions from individual school communities, school leaders or other stakeholders in the study. Participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw consent at any time. Anonymity and the option to withdraw were explained fully in advance.

Interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, with links forwarded to participants in advance. Participants were informed in the Participant Information Sheets and Informed Consent Forms that the interviews would be recorded using Microsoft

Dictate/Transcribe (available on the Microsoft Word and Teams applications). Permission was sought again before each interview. Audio files were sent to Microsoft solely for transcription purposes and were not stored by the service. To minimise misinterpretations and to ensure accurate representation, interview transcripts were shared with the interviewees shortly afterwards for member checking. Any references to specific personnel were replaced with pseudonyms before sharing the data.

All raw data including survey findings, interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely on an encrypted laptop and deleted on project completion in line with institutional data management policies. Data was removed from the mobile device as soon as was practicable and then stored securely on my DCU Google Drive for the duration of the study. The research did not involve collecting any special categories of protected data under Article 9.1 of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). It did not involve deception, investigation of participants involved in illegal activities, or performing any acts that might diminish the self-esteem of participants or cause them to experience embarrassment. There were no physical, social, legal or economic risks associated with participation in this research.

4.14 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the philosophical considerations underlying the study and has explained the research design and its rationale. It has described the methods of data collection and analysis, and the procedures used to support the reliability and credibility of the findings. Ethical considerations and research integrity have also been addressed. The chapter lays the foundation for Chapter five, which presents the research findings in relation to the original research question and the overall focus of the study.

Chapter 5: The research findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the findings of the study on how the combined patronage and governance structures of Community Schools shape school ethos, culture, leadership practice, and principal agency. The material is organised around six themes emerging from survey and interview data from principals and wider system stakeholders. A later section presents documentary analysis of Department of Education and Youth (DEY) inspection reports to support triangulation and to consider the extent to which inspection evidence affirms, complements, or extends the fieldwork evidence. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of the main findings before the discussion chapter.

5.2 Case study context: respondents

5.2.1 The principals and the schools

The fieldwork drew on survey responses from 40 principals in Community Schools, 10 of whom also participated in follow-up interviews. Interviews were also conducted with 14 additional stakeholders from across the education system to elicit broader perspectives on governance, ethos, and leadership in the sector.

Together, these participants provide the contextual basis for the findings presented in this chapter. The figures and tables that follow summarise the profile of principals, schools, and stakeholders, while respondent identifiers preserve anonymity in the quotations that follow.

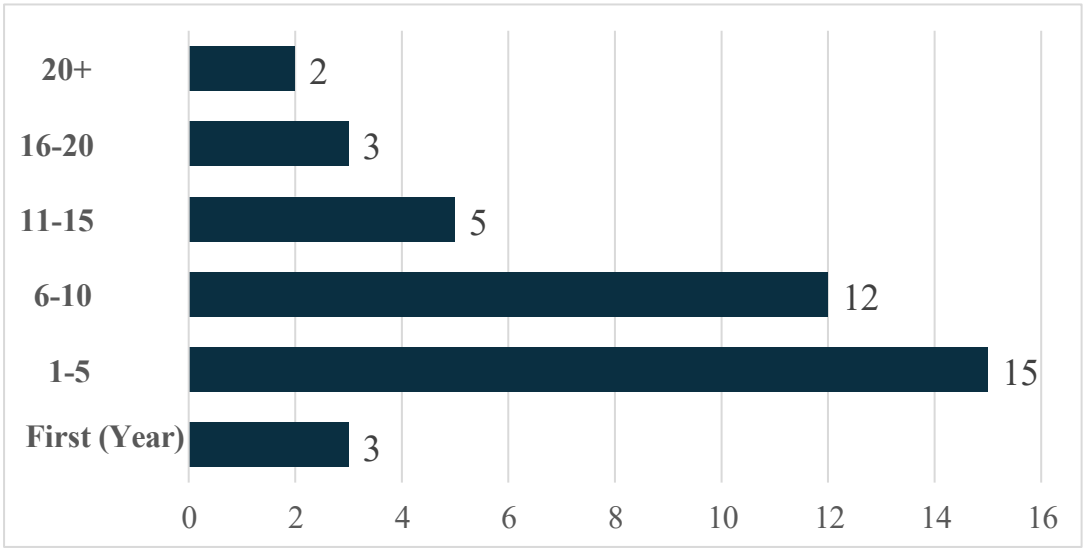


Figure 5.1 Principal tenure profile in Community Schools (n=40)

At the time the research was conducted, 75% of participating principals had served in the role for 10 years or less.

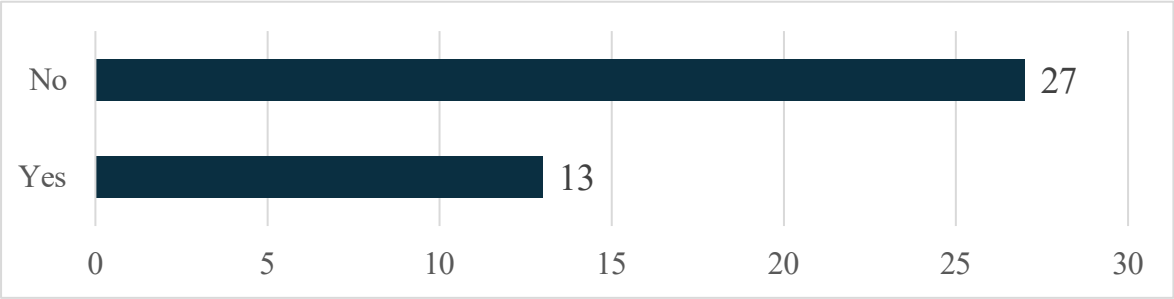


Figure 5.2 School inclusion in the DEIS programme (n=40)

A notable 32.5% of principals reported working in schools designated with a DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) profile. This proportion is representative of the wider Community School sector, where approximately one-third of schools hold DEIS status.

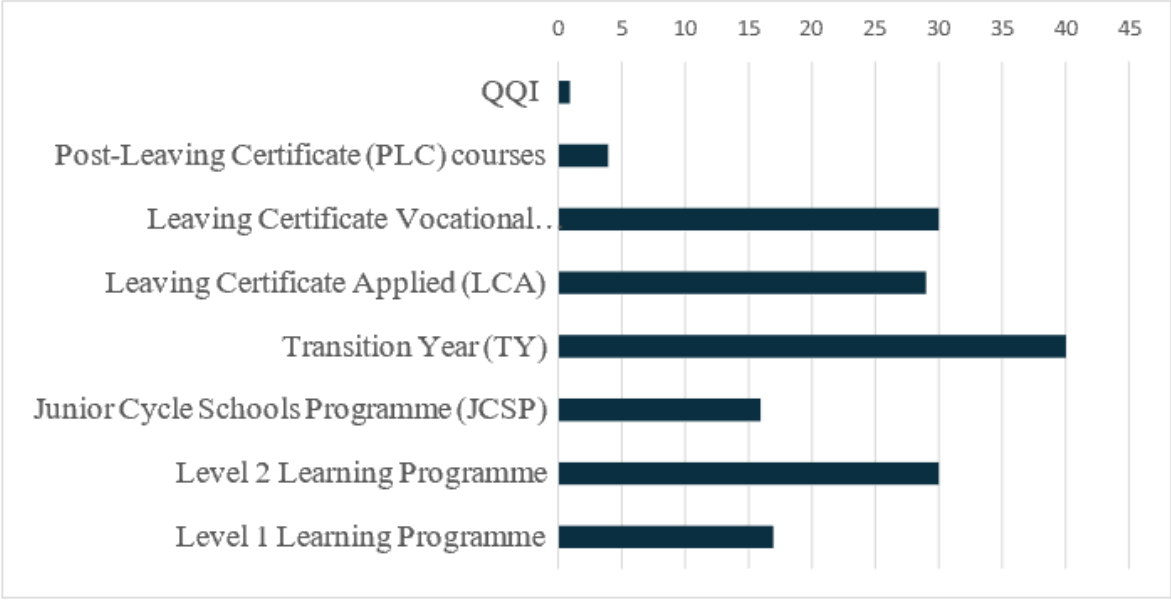


Figure 5.3 School programmes offered by responding schools (n=40; multiple responses permitted)

While all participating schools offer Transition Year, only around 75% offer senior cycle programmes such as the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), as well as junior cycle provision such as Level 2 Learning

Programmes (L2LP). This raises questions about inclusion and the availability of diverse educational pathways within these schools.

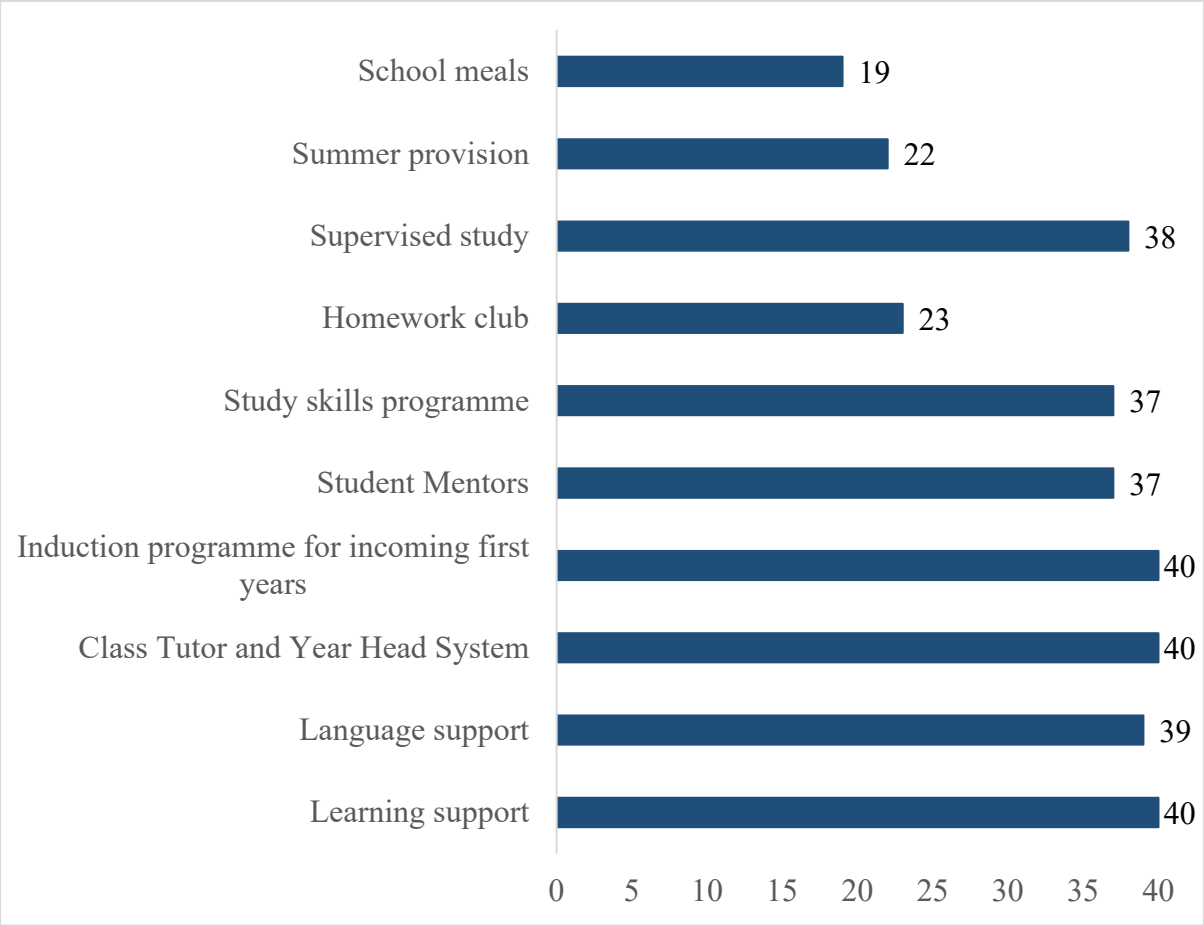


Figure 5.4 School provision offered by responding schools (n=40; multiple responses permitted)

Most schools deliver a wide range of student supports. These include a pastoral care system, typically structured around year heads and tutors, targeted learning support for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), induction programmes for first-year students, student mentoring initiatives, and study skills programmes. The availability of school meals and summer provision programmes is also consistent with the number of schools assigned DEIS status, reflecting the profile of the sector.

Where reference is made to respondents' direct quotations, a systematic approach to identification is used. This includes only information necessary for the research purpose, thereby maintaining anonymity. Quotations are referenced in brackets and include a respondent number, a role identifier and, in the case of principals, an additional reference to the source of data. Table 5.1 outlines the approach used in the study.

Table 5.1 Respondent role and identifier

Respondent role and data source	Identifier
Principal (survey)	PS, 1-40
Principal (interview)	PI, 1-10
Stakeholder	ST, 1-14

5.3 The central themes

The findings are presented under six central themes identified through the analysis. Within each theme, relevant sub-themes are discussed and supported by evidence drawn from interviews and survey responses. Direct quotations are used selectively to illustrate participants' perspectives and ground the analysis in the data.

5.3.1 Theme 1: trustees and patrons

This theme examines how trustees and patrons are understood and experienced within the joint patronage model of Community Schools. As outlined in earlier chapters, trustees and patrons are treated interchangeably in this study, and their role is framed by both the Deed of Trust (Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS), 2004) and the Education Act 1998. The focus here is less on formal definition than on how these relationships operate across schools. The effectiveness of joint patronage appears to depend largely on the quality of relationships between patrons, principals, boards of management, and the wider school community.

5.3.1.1 The quality of relationships between patron and school community

Relationships between patrons and the school community emerge as central to how the joint patronage model works in practice. Participants described the model as having potential to support partnership, board autonomy, and collaborative governance, but these benefits were not experienced consistently across the sector. Outcomes appeared to depend on communication, the willingness of patrons to engage, and the local history and context of the school. While some principals described strong and supportive relationships, others reported limited contact, slow responses, and an over-reliance on principals to sustain collaboration. The quotations below illustrate both the potential of the model and the tensions that arise in practice.

A more positive example is provided by one principal who stated, *'Having good relationships with our trustees is essential. We keep them abreast of everything we do. I am a leader for the past 24 years, and I have been hugely influenced by the Community School structure which is governed by the joint patronage model'* (PS, 18).

By contrast, another principal highlighted the weakness of patron engagement, observing, *'Sometimes there's a gap between the day-to-day running of the school and the connection between that and the patrons. I have had zero personal communications in 10 years with two of the patrons' (PS, 25),* while another principal noted that communication *'differs greatly. At times it can be very difficult to get responses on issues that need to be addressed'* (PS, 24).

These relationships cannot be understood apart from local context. One stakeholder contrasted schools where engagement was largely principal led with others where joint patron involvement was more structured and visible: *'Community School A were always very expansive with their invitations to visit... But it was very definitely principal led rather than anything to do with the role of the joint patron'...* whereas in Community School B, *'the principal there took it seriously. If this was the governance requirement, she did it and we would meet with the joint patrons annually. We'd have been invited to the school to meet the board'* (ST, 5). Another stakeholder similarly noted that *'the religious element of the patronage... were always more interested, more hands on than the VECs or the ETBs',* suggesting that ETBs could at times experience schools as local competitors (ST, 11).

The data also indicates, however, that such variation should not be read in fixed terms. In some cases, Education and Training Board (ETB) involvement was described positively, producing *'a very good, a very open and a really supportive relationship. The link person who is from the ETB usually visits with the bishop and the representative of the Religious Order'* (PI, 6). Similarly, one stakeholder referred to a religious congregation that was *'100% committed to the schools... they sent their very best people. They were as committed to those schools as they were to their voluntary secondary schools, and they would have had fantastic people on the boards of management'* (ST, 3). These accounts reinforce the view that the quality of engagement is shaped less by patron type alone than by the commitment of those involved.

Several participants also linked strong patron-school relationships with a wider sense of partnership and board autonomy. As one stakeholder put it, *'The approach to partnership is far clearer in a Community School - there's a far clearer understanding of the devolution of*

responsibility to the board, by the patrons as opposed to, in a secondary voluntary school. In the Community School sector, the patrons afford the board that space' (ST, 9). A principal similarly observed that *'Ongoing partnership exists in a very lived way between all patron nominees and the school, including partnership between members of staff, students and the patron bodies more broadly'* (PS, 29). Yet this was not universal. Another principal explained, *'I don't overly seek the engagement of the patrons on should we've been in this or should we be doing that because at the end of the day, we're a Community School, not one of their direct schools'* (PI, 8), while a further participant described the relationship as *'light touch at best'* and suggested that patrons were kept *'at arm's length really'* (PI, 7).

Overall, these accounts suggest that the effectiveness of joint patronage depends less on formal structure alone than on active, consistent, and context-sensitive engagement between patrons and the school community. Where relationships are sustained and reciprocal, the model is experienced as supportive; where engagement is limited or uneven, its potential is weakened.

5.3.1.2 The quality of relationships between the joint patrons

The evidence on relationships between the joint patrons is more limited than that relating to patrons and the school community, but it still identifies an important issue. While only three principals who participated in the survey commented on the relationships among patrons, the interviews reveal a wider range of perspectives on how the joint patrons work together. These impressions are largely positive, as is evident in the following description of trustee relationships as informal, open, and sustained through regular contact: *'the three trustees would have arrived out here and it's a very unstructured environment where they would come in, put on the kettle, and over an hour, there's a totally open forum and basically a big discussion informally of every aspect of school life'* (PI, 3).

A contrasting account highlights tensions arising in the context of amalgamation. One principal described the early relationship between patrons as *'very intricate and complicated'* and recalled that, when the new school was established*, 'the patrons, because of their relationship, they all wanted to take us'* (PI, 8). Comparing the school to *'a shiny new toy' in a 'thriving town'*, the same participant suggested that *'they all wanted ownership of us'* (PI, 8). This points to the ways in which local history and competition can complicate the enactment of joint patronage.

Stakeholder accounts characterise the ideal relationship between joint patrons as equitable and collaborative. As one participant observed, *'should be the patron, the board and the principal. They should all be doing it, ideally'* (ST, 6). Participants also noted, however, how difficult this can be to sustain. There is always the risk of dominance by one or the other patron and the model depends on how patrons *'work and operate together, how they commit to being active patrons and supporting and guarding the commitment that they have made, rather than this being seen as the responsibility of one or other'* (ST, 8). Where this occurs, the shared presence of ETB and religious nominees is seen as *'really valuable'* because *'they're there together in their own school, all hearing the same thing'* (ST, 2).

Overall, these accounts suggest that relationships between the joint patrons are central to how the model operates in practice. Where collaboration is shared and balanced, joint patronage is experienced as constructive and as offering a broader and more balanced basis for school governance. Where relationships are marked by tension, competition, or uneven commitment, its effectiveness is diminished.

5.3.1.3 Evolution of the Association of Joint Patrons and Trustees (AJP)

The AJP appears to occupy an important, though still developing, place within the post-primary education system. Stakeholders viewed it as a potentially valuable forum for strengthening dialogue between patron bodies and articulating a clearer collective vision for joint patronage. At the same time, they raised questions about its current influence, visibility, and capacity to secure sustained commitment from its constituent organisations.

One stakeholder linked the future effectiveness of the model directly to the strength of AJP and to the commitment of the patrons themselves: *'I worry about the commitment of the joint patrons. When it's [the model] working well, it's a great mix of state and private. There needs to be a strong piece of work done by AJP to get commitment from both organisations. There needs to be that strength in the unity between the religious and the ETB, they're not talking to each other enough, and I think we need to strengthen that'* (ST, 2). This account positions AJP not simply as a representative body, but as a mechanism through which patron commitment and inter-organisational dialogue might be strengthened.

A related concern centred on recognition and system influence. One stakeholder argued that AJP should evolve further as a collaborative voice for the joint patrons and should be recognised more clearly within the Irish education system: *'The responsibility to ensure that this happens rests with AJP. The significance of AJP is really vital. My vision would be that*

they would develop into a body characterised by collaboration between the constituent joint patron representatives. There is a need also for the Department to recognise AJP' (ST, 10). This suggests that AJP's future role may depend not only on internal collaboration among patrons, but also on its external recognition as a legitimate system-level voice.

The findings suggest that AJP is viewed as a significant but still evolving part of the joint patronage framework. Its future effectiveness appears to depend on its ability to strengthen collaboration between patrons, secure clearer commitment to the model, and establish a more recognised voice within the wider education system.

5.3.2 Theme 2: ethos

5.3.2.1 Multi-denominational or Roman Catholic schools

The multi-denominational ethos of Community Schools is articulated in the Characteristic Spirit Statement agreed by the joint patrons. Participants, however, described ethos less as a fixed statement than as a lived reality shaping relationships, decision-making, and daily school life. As one principal put it, *'It underpins all that we do and is referenced frequently'* (PS, 8), while another explained, *'Decision-making by the senior management team would always go back to our values'* (PS, 30). This suggests that ethos is understood as an enacted rather than merely declared feature of school life.



Figure 5.5 School values identified by survey participants

Figure 5.5 shows the most common values listed by the survey participants. Figure 5.6 shows the frequency with which each of the top four values appears in the survey responses.

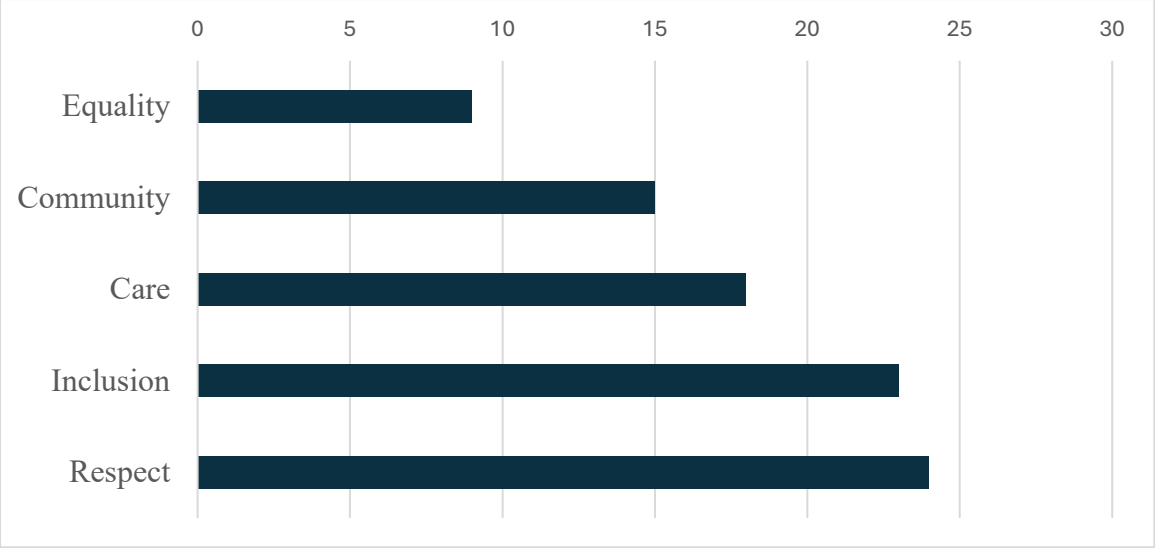


Figure 5.6 Most commonly prioritised school values (top five; n=40)

Principals were clear about the values prioritised within their school communities, particularly inclusion, equality, respect, care and community. For some, these values were consistent with the formal statement. One principal described it as *'spot on'* because it reflected *'who we are'* (PI, 4). Others questioned, however, whether a single statement could capture the ethos of very different schools. As one principal asked, *'Why does every Community School have the exact same Characteristic Spirit?'* (PI, 1), while another observed that ethos *'has evolved with the times'* (PI, 6). These accounts suggest that ethos is interpreted and reshaped within each school community.

Stakeholder accounts reinforce this view by presenting ethos as something actively negotiated rather than automatically inherited. One stakeholder suggested that a multi-denominational ethos requires schools to pause and reflect before holding religious services or whole-school events: *'what are we about here? What's guiding us? That is just so important for us'* (ST, 11). Another described the sector as having *'a very strong commitment to be multi-denominational'* and suggested that its ethos was built on *'that kind of sense of pluralism'* (ST, 3). One principal similarly noted that ethos *'serves as the foundation for all school policies... shaping teaching, learning, and relationships across the school'* (PS, 34).

At the same time, participants pointed to continuing ambiguity around what a multi-denominational ethos means in practice. One stakeholder observed that, in the absence of a clear legal definition, the term can become *'whatever you like it to be'* (ST, 12) and argued that schools may feel they *'need to be multi-denominational in a multi-denominational culture'* (ST, 12). This suggests that the term carries both ethical and strategic significance,

particularly in a context where inclusion is socially expected but not always clearly defined in policy or practice.

This complexity is further reflected in how participants spoke about faith and Catholic identity within Community Schools. For one principal, the school's values are most visible *'when your back is against the wall'*, and in such moments *'it's the faith, to know that God is part of this place'* (PI, 6). Others stressed the importance of honouring inherited traditions: *'we need to respect and reflect the Catholic ethos'* (PS, 29). At the same time, schools also described adapting religious practices in response to changing communities. As one principal put it, *'Our Christian ethos is a very important part of what we do... Our end of year services are not Masses anymore; they're services... It is always a balance that has to be looked at'* (PI, 9).

Participant accounts also reveal unease about how this balance may develop over time. Some stakeholders argued that *'where there's a dominant belief system in place, it's not multi-denominational'* (ST, 12), while others warned that the risk is that multi-denominational may become *'non-denominational'* and gradually support *'a secular set of values'* (ST, 2). Yet principals also described the model as adaptable, observing that Community Schools have *'never been afraid to take risks and to pivot and change direction according to need'* (PI, 6) and that, in increasingly diverse communities, *'We welcome everybody'* (PI, 4). Overall, ethos in Community Schools remains a negotiated and evolving construct, shaped by ongoing efforts to honour Catholic origins, sustain a genuinely multi-denominational identity, and respond to wider social change.

5.3.2.2 The role of chaplain in these schools

The findings suggest that the role of chaplain remains an important expression of the Catholic tradition within Community Schools, while also reflecting the schools' multi-denominational and inclusive ethos. Stakeholders described the chaplain as representing *a 'welcoming, hospitable, very pastoral dimension of a faith, multi-faith and non-faith community'* (ST, 3), while another argued that the role remains *'absolutely crucial'* because it acknowledges *'that there is a religious dimension to life'* and enables chaplains to support students in that context (ST, 2).

At the same time, participants indicated that the role has broadened beyond an explicitly religious function. While one stakeholder maintained that the faith formation aspect remains valid *'on the basis of the founding intention of the original schools'* (ST, 9), others

emphasised the chaplain's wider pastoral contribution. One principal described the role as '*as much around supporting relationships, friendships, pastoral care rather than just the spiritual guidance'* (PI, 7), while another explained that the chaplain works with students on social issues, drawing not simply on liturgical practice but on values such as *'respect'* and *'how you treat others'* (PI, 10).

This broader role is also evident in daily school practice. Survey respondents referred to the chaplain's involvement in *'weekly care team meetings'* (PS, 21) and in organising assemblies and services *'in partnership with the School Chaplain and RE team, in a way that respects religious traditions while ensuring that all students are invited to participate meaningfully'* (PS, 29). One stakeholder similarly described chaplains as '*powerful, key people'* who make visible the ethos and values of the school, particularly *'in moments of celebration or moments of sadness'* (ST, 3).

These findings show that chaplaincy in Community Schools has moved beyond a primarily religious role towards a broader pastoral and relational one, while still retaining an important faith dimension. The chaplain therefore emerges as a significant figure in negotiating the relationship between Catholic tradition, inclusive practice, and school ethos.

5.3.2.3 Managing religious education and religious instruction

Religious education in Community Schools is shaped by both legal obligation and curricular guidance. As one stakeholder noted, *'The Deed of Trust requires that our students all get two hours of religion'* (ST, 13). Department of Education and Skills (DES) guidance also makes clear that timetabled religious education should not include religious instruction or worship and should be accessible to students of all faith backgrounds and none (DES, 2018a, 2018b).

In this context, one stakeholder argued that the curriculum enables schools to meet the *'expectations and rights of the student in a multi-denominational setting'* to engage with religious education from their own perspective (ST, 10).

Participants differed, however, in how they viewed this obligation in practice. For some principals, religious education remains *'a non-negotiable'* because *'we owe it to the patrons'* and because there is *'a richness in being able to accompany students on that journey'* (PI, 6). Others highlighted the pressure of fitting religion into an already crowded curriculum, describing it as *'a real challenge'* in a timetable that leaves little room for flexibility (PI, 9). One principal argued more directly for reducing the two-hour requirement, suggesting that the influence of the patrons was not dependent solely on this clause but was *'evident in other*

aspects of school life', so its reduction would free time for other subjects without necessarily weakening the patrons' ethos (PS, 22). Even so, several participants emphasised the value of the subject as a space for reflection, personal development, and encounter with difference. As one principal put it, *'two hours a week out of 28 is not an excessive amount of time'* for exploring issues beyond academic achievement (PI, 3), while another highlighted the educational value of learning about religions alongside students of other faiths because it *'fosters understanding and tolerance... it fosters respect'* (PI, 6).

Participants also reflected on the practical management of student participation. Although the right to opt-out is recognised, principals noted that this rarely arises where parents understand that the curriculum is not designed as indoctrination and where alternatives are limited. One principal commented that *'Everybody would be encouraged to take part... there is an opt-out, which is really very few at the end of the day'* (PI, 6). In some schools, the subject is organised in ways intended to increase engagement and promote shared experience. One principal described how the school had *'blocked religion in senior cycle'* and adopted a more *'dynamic'* approach involving guest speakers, discussion of world issues, and charitable activity, explaining that *'We might be skirting around the curriculum a little bit, we're certainly not skirting around the learning outcomes'* (PI, 1).

Participants identified greater complexity around the separate faith formation element. As one stakeholder observed, *'The Faith Formation piece is probably the more difficult'* (ST, 10). While some schools continue to include traditional Masses, many have moved towards more inclusive and student-led forms of ritual. One principal described an end-of-year event in which *'There is a prayer at the start, and then, it's a series of poems and singing and a bit of music... very much led by the students... they set the theme'* (PI, 7). Others stressed the continuing value of ritual as a way of marking transition and belonging. One principal reflected *'without it, there's something missing'* (PI, 6), while another described a *'ceremony of light'* involving representatives from different parts of the school community (PI, 4). Overall, approaches to religious education and religious instruction vary across schools, reflecting differences in how ethos, tradition, inclusion, and student participation are interpreted in practice.

5.3.3 Theme 3: school leaders and their practices

This section examines how respondents understand leadership and the factors shaping leadership practice in the Community School sector.

5.3.3.1 Leadership approaches and practices

Principals most often characterised their leadership as distributed and transformational, while also emphasising the need to adapt style to context. Survey data reflects this pattern, with distributed leadership ranked most highly and transactional leadership least preferred.

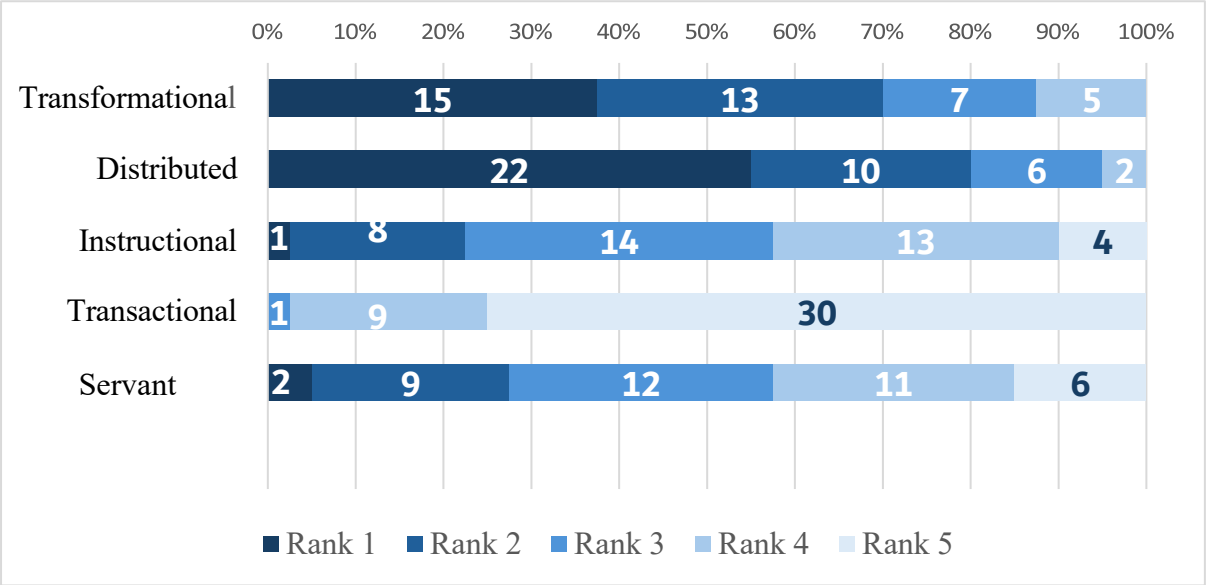


Figure 5.7 Ranked leadership styles of responding principals (n=40)

Participants were clear, moreover, that effective leadership cannot be reduced to a single model. As one principal explained, *'whatever is needed at the time, I try to be inclusive, and I try to bring people with me... Sometimes you got to walk out in front, sometimes you go behind them with a bit of a stick'* (PI, 2). Another similarly observed that leadership draws on different approaches *'depending on the situation... transformational and servant... [but] there's times when you need to be instructional, you need to be transactional. You need to be coaching'* (PI, 6).

Distributed leadership was strongly associated with trust, delegation, and the development of leadership capacity across the school. One principal described a structure in which '*two deputy principals and 19 Assistant Principals... have absolutely 100% delegated responsibility to look after their own areas', adding that people feel 'so trusted that they're empowered to go and do the work and come with suggestions'* (PI, 3). Another principal captured the same ethos more succinctly: *'It's not about me. It's about a team... people have a free space to challenge thinking but that's done in a collaborative, reflective and values-driven way'* (PI, 10). These accounts suggest that leadership is experienced less as individual authority than as a shared and values-based practice.

Stakeholder perspectives broadly support this view, suggesting that distributed leadership has historically been more embedded in Community Schools than in some other sectors. One stakeholder referred to middle leaders as having *'very good positive profiles, very recognised as leaders... they definitely had agency and authority'* (ST, 3), while another argued that the Community School model established early the idea that people *'had responsibilities with their posts'* and were more meaningfully engaged in leadership (ST, 13). A dissenting stakeholder noted, however, that leadership practices in some early amalgamated schools were shaped by very different assumptions inherited from vocational and secondary traditions, creating uncertainty about who held authority. In that account, expectations of leadership could vary sharply depending on institutional background, with implications for the principal's capacity to lead effectively. They recalled, *'When I came from a vocational school into what was essentially a secondary school, which was called a Community School, then it was very hard, because my understanding of who the boss was, in my head, was different from their understanding, which was you're not the boss, you're the management, but you don't have anything to do with my day job'* (ST, 5).

Table 5.2 Most popular strategies to support effective leadership

Strategy	**Type**	**/40 schools**
Regular structured meetings	Assistant Principal 1/Assistant Principal 2/Year Heads/Student Support Teams/Senior Leadership Teams	39
Professional development/learning and training	In-house professional learning programmes and external programmes	33

Participants also identified the practical conditions that support effective leadership. Structured meetings and professional learning were the strategies most frequently cited in the survey data, while informal consultation was also valued, particularly in smaller schools.

Stakeholders linked the early development of distributed leadership in Community Schools to the allocation of time and responsibility, arguing that *'the idea of distributed leadership and delegation came in much earlier to the Community Schools... if you get the time you have to*

do the work and if you don't do the work, you can be pulled up... there's also the perception of, like a status thing, that you have the time to do it and so you honour that, and you live up to the expectation' (ST, 2). Principals also stressed the relational work involved in building others' confidence. As one principal noted, *'the confidence piece is difficult... takes a lot of time but still I give autonomy and support'* (PI, 8). Another reflected that leadership works best when others feel 'empowered to step up' and are given the freedom to make mistakes, because *'We all help each other out in mistakes'* (PI, 7). Another agreed, *'If we make mistakes, we'll make them together'* (PI, 1). Taken together, these accounts point to leadership in Community Schools as adaptive, trust-based, and sustained through deliberate investment in collective capacity.

5.3.3.2 Autonomy and accountability

Autonomy emerged as a strongly valued feature of leadership in Community Schools. One stakeholder remarked that *'the key difference is autonomy'* and noted that principals were particularly alert to its importance *'not one of them argued for a loss of their autonomy and those, especially who had come from the ETB sector drew immediate attention to that difference'* (ST, 1). Participants associated this autonomy with the capacity to make decisions locally, respond more directly to school needs, and avoid some of the additional layers of approval required in other governance structures. As one principal put it, *'the autonomy is great... it's the best model for certain parts of the country and for Irish society because it represents your local community'* (PI, 1).

Stakeholders also linked autonomy with flexibility in practical decision-making. One argued that, where decisions are made locally, schools can respond more effectively to their own priorities, whether in programme participation or professional development, whereas in other sectors schools may need to seek approval before acting. *'If they decide locally, this is something that they want to do. They are the decision-maker. That's not the case in all sectors. In other sectors you have to seek approval, to engage in these programmes and that to me, limits the ability of people to reflect or to respond to their own needs. You have to give people autonomy to make decisions... a very simple decision about deciding what CPD people should be supported in, how that should be devolved locally, based on the needs of the school'* (ST, 9). In this reading, autonomy is not simply symbolic but enables leadership to remain responsive to local context and community need.

At the same time, participants did not present autonomy as unqualified freedom. Principals associated it with accountability and with checks and balances exercised through the board of

management and the patrons. One principal observed, *'they give me the autonomy to run the school on a day-to-day basis. But I am held to account if things aren't right, which is good and which is proper'* (PI, 10). More critical voices questioned, however, how far autonomy can be realised in practice. One stakeholder argued that '*Autonomy is a blinkered view of the world because autonomy means you have all the responsibility, and very little wherewithal to deal with that responsibility'* (ST, 5). A principal similarly noted that, *'it's a bit of a civil servant role, isn't it, I mean circulars come, you have to do what the man says, yes, you can operate the school in a certain way' a*nd, although there is room for creativity, school leaders remain *'governed by circulars'* and operate *'within parameters'* (PI, 7).

Overall, the findings suggest that autonomy in Community Schools is understood as meaningful but bounded. It is valued because it supports local responsiveness and independent decision-making, yet participants also recognise that it operates within wider frameworks of accountability, regulation, and resource constraint.

5.3.3.2 The power of relationships

Both principals and stakeholders emphasised the centrality of relationships to leadership practice in Community Schools. One principal described an Assistant Principal team as *'the backbone of the school'*, adding that leadership depends on *'bringing people with you' and 'keeping people on board'* (PI, 7). A stakeholder similarly stressed the importance of recognising that the principal does not possess all the capacities required by the school and must therefore appoint others *'who can address issues, that the principal may not be able to address, either in terms of skills or in terms of time management'* (ST, 3). These accounts position leadership as relational, collaborative, and dependent on building capacity in others.

Stakeholders also linked this leadership culture to the distinct governance arrangements of Community Schools. One suggested that principals may experience *'a little more independence perhaps' than in voluntary secondary schools and may in some respects get 'the best of both worlds'* by being *'mindful of patrons'* without being subject to the same degree of direct oversight (ST, 2). Another contrasted the Community School model with what they described as *'an increasingly managerial and corporatist ETB structure seeing themselves as providers of education or providing a service, and managing all of that carefully, in a growing hierarchy which is essentially disempowering local decision-making at the school level, and I suspect also, at the teacher level'*, arguing that Community Schools are more likely to operate through subsidiarity and to grant autonomy to principals, with this

in turn shaping teaching and learning in more collaborative ways. *'You would expect that to cascade into the classroom, and ultimately into the very notion of learning, as construction of co-learning, as opposed to learning as instruction, or as imparted from an authority figure'* (ST, 1). A principal who had previously worked in the voluntary secondary sector for 20 years similarly described the Community School model as combining a high degree of autonomy with roots in multiple trustee traditions and '*the guiding principles and philosophies of all of those people is meshing into where we are now as a school'*, which in turn supports '*high degrees of empowerment, motivation, freedom to make decisions which will best suit the kids in this area, not in three counties or not in an entire country'* (PI, 3).

Relationships with patrons were also seen as significant in key leadership decisions, particularly appointments. One stakeholder regarded patron involvement in selection processes as positive because it brought an external perspective and ensured that schools could not become overly insular, suggesting that *'you can't become too comfortable because you have this outside body that's going to send their selection committee, we've got the best of the best in there for those decisions'* (ST, 11). Principals similarly described consultation with joint patrons on selection panels and major governance decisions as part of a partnership that balances local needs with broader expectations set by patrons and the DEY (PS, 26; PS, 35). At the same time, principals noted practical frustrations where patron nominees for selection boards were not always available *'in a timely way',* which could *'delay decision-making'* (PS, 19; PS, 28).

The role of relationships becomes even more evident in the context of amalgamation. One stakeholder recalled that '*blending staff from well-established schools'* created additional challenges for principals, particularly where perceptions of favouritism, inherited loyalties, or different traditions shaped expectations of leadership (ST, 13). Another, however, suggested that some of the structural complexity of Community Schools could also be productive, noting that engagement with two unions may have *'encouraged teachers to be more open, balanced, and willing to take on responsibility'* (ST, 2). More recent accounts describe amalgamation as a process that begins at patron level and develops through *'building trust, building respect, building shared values',* with '*real partnership and open communication'* increasingly evident in how new Community Schools are formed (ST, 8). A further stakeholder observed that, particularly in some middle-sized towns, amalgamation has enabled Community Schools to become an inclusive common space for the whole community, creating *'one school in the town that everybody went to and that's really the*

ideal you should be trying to achieve' (ST, 7). Overall, these findings suggest that leadership in Community Schools is shaped not only by formal structures, but by the quality of relationships through which those structures are enacted.

5.3.4 Theme 4: the board of management, ACCS and the DEY

This section examines governance in Community Schools through three related dimensions: the work of the board of management, the collegial support of the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS) network, and the relationship between Community Schools and the DEY. The analysis shows that governance in this sector is understood not simply as formal oversight, but as a relational process characterised by shared responsibility, informed challenge, professional collaboration, and strong interdependence across organisational levels.

5.3.4.1 Community Schools and the board of management

The findings position the board of management as central to Community School governance, while also exposing tensions regarding the sustainability of its voluntary basis. Stakeholders valued the model for the community representation and external perspective it provides, with one noting, *'I like the voluntary nature of the board of management, it does bring in the community, because you have parents and trustee nominees and people that are external to the school and I think that's healthy'* (ST, 2). Concerns were also expressed, however, about the demands placed on unpaid members: *'What other sector relies on volunteers to manage, you know, to show such leadership. We ask too much. Board members, you know, asking volunteers to implement change or oversee the implementation of change'* (ST, 6).

There was no consensus on the best response to this challenge. Some participants argued that training and support matter more than payment, while others suggested *'professional recognition'* (ST, 2) or *'that concept of semi-professional chairperson or professional part-time chairpersons available to a cluster of schools'* (ST, 8). Principals, however, consistently described boards as supportive, questioning, and collaborative rather than symbolic. One principal explained, *'They're really supportive to me, but they ask questions and they keep me on my toes. They bring up things that they want to see happening in the school. We've a very productive collaborative relationship. They make valid suggestions, give time and adequate consideration to issues brought before them. There's huge expertise and I suppose they add a layer and a richness to the school that you wouldn't have otherwise. They are your sounding board, your support, and your refuge when things go pear shaped'* (PI, 6). Stakeholders

likewise positioned the principal as the key agent of change who works with voluntary management rather than expecting the board itself to drive reform.

Across the data, effective governance is linked to informed challenge, mutual trust, and a strong relationship between the principal and chairperson. Participants emphasised that governance is not passive oversight but informed scrutiny: '*a real understanding of governance is not about rubber stamping what the principal is doing on an operational basis. A real understanding of governance is asking the appropriate questions and to be able to ask the right question, you must be informed'* (ST, 8). Principals recognised both the time involved in preparing for board meetings and the importance of the board's independence in decision-making. As one principal put it, *'It's certainly not the case of, yes, sir no, sir, three bags full, sir!'* (PI, 3). Diversity of membership and the work of subcommittees were also seen as strengths, bringing wider expertise and practical support to areas such as finance and buildings. *'The building subcommittee is very active. When things are tough, you can rely on people to speak up and come up with solutions'* (PI, 7).

5.3.4.2 ACCS and the Community School network

The evidence indicates that collegiality is a defining feature of the Community School sector, sustained through informal exchange, mutual support, and strong professional relationships. This is captured in the phrase *'through the sharing of problems and the sharing of solutions'* (PS, 33). Principals described the sector as a *'huge support network' (*PI, 3), while others highlighted an openness to seek and provide support across schools. *'An acceptance is there, and an openness within the network to make and take a call from another C&C principal for a myriad of reasons'* (PS, 37). For some participants, this was most clearly expressed through the ACCS 'family' metaphor, and stakeholders likewise identified a highly connected and committed professional community. *'Having worked in all three sectors, I can honestly say the ACCS family* '*get' each other in a way that I don't think is replicated in the other sectors'* (PS, 40). As one stakeholder observes, *'You did have a sense, coming in cold to it, of a group that were very collegiate. The ACCS had quite a strong sense of a community of principals and chairs of boards who knew each other quite well. You did very much have a sense of a lot of strong, very committed players'* (ST, 7). Another stakeholder highlights, *'work that's been done by you as a management body is very significant. Your connectivity is really strong. It should never be taken for granted. The relationship building that you have done takes a lot of work, a lot of engagement, a lot of time because, like any network, it needs to be sustained'* (ST, 8). The relatively small scale of the sector was viewed as enabling, rather than limiting,

this connectivity by preserving the personal relationships that underpin its collaborative culture. *'So probably the size of the sector, while it can be seen as a challenge, it can also be seen as a huge strength because it's like a school, you know, a school can get too big as well, where you lose that personal impact. And I think a sector can be the same. You know, you could lose that very, very rich community that we have by making it too big'* (PI, 6). Together, these accounts suggest that the network operates not simply as a support structure, but as a source of shared identity and professional cohesion.

5.3.4.2 Community Schools and the DEY

The findings suggest that Community Schools have historically maintained a direct and generally constructive relationship with the DEY, rooted in the origins of the model itself. Stakeholders traced this to the origins of the model, noting that these schools were seen as a departmental project and were therefore supported through close lines of communication. *'I think historically the link with the Department as we experienced it, in our own principalship was always a very strong and direct linkage. Even more than that, from the Department's point of view in the earlier days, these were their schools. They really felt ownership of Community Schools. It was their model that they set up, they wanted it to work'* (ST, 11). That sense of direct contact remains important, with principals valuing named contacts and strong working relationships within different sections of the DEY. *'When you're dealing with the Department, you have a specific contact, you can develop a relationship with that person'* (PI, 6) and *'I find the Buildings Department absolutely brilliant. We also have a great person for payroll. I think if you do things timely... Don't leave allocation to the last minute, that's a credit to ACCS as well, because all this was new to me'* (PI, 1).

The model was also seen as offering transparency around funding and resource allocation. At the same time, both principals and stakeholders emphasised the growing administrative burden of the principalship, with *'finance, planning, and compliance work consuming significant time'* (PS, 40) and making it more difficult for principals to sustain a visible presence in the daily life of the school. *'In a principal's role, you must be visible. Every term, you should be changing your shoes because of the worn soles. You need to know the temperature of the climate out on the corridors meeting and greeting. It's difficult to do it in today's job with the extensive administrative side of things'* (PI, 10). Overall, the findings suggest that strong communication between Community Schools, the DEY, and ACCS supports governance, implementation, and the wider school community. These relationships

also provide an important backdrop to the next themes, which explore belonging and student-centred practice.

5.3.5 Theme 5: the school community and a sense of belonging

This section explores how Community Schools cultivate a sense of belonging through relationships with local communities, a commitment to inclusion and diversity, and the everyday practices through which belonging is enacted within school life. Across these dimensions, belonging emerges not as an abstract ideal, but as something actively built through openness, responsiveness, participation, and connection.

5.3.5.1 School and community relationships: a school for the community

The findings indicate that Community Schools understand themselves as schools rooted in, and responsive to, their local communities. Participants described the model as *'a school in the community for the community. That sounds a bit simplistic, but I think it's a very major part of the reality'* (ST, 10) and emphasised its founding commitment to partnership, inclusion, and service to all children in the locality. *'It's very clear, it is a model of school that, from its very inception, is designed to provide an opportunity for all the children in the community... it really is about partnership, not only between patrons, but also with community and it really has to be inclusive and it has to be flexible in its approach, in terms of meeting the needs of the children within the community'* (ST, 9).

This was reflected not only in how schools understood their purpose, but also in how they built relationships with local organisations, services, and businesses. Principals described deliberate efforts to bring the community into the school: *'We do a huge career fair every year... the colleges and some of the local businesses will come in. So, the mechanics next door will come in, the gym down the road, the hairdresser... there's that little piece of trying to bring the community in as well to us, because where we're located, we're right in the middle of a built-up urban area'* (PI, 7). Schools also reached outward into the community. *'Links to the local community, enshrined in the Characteristic Spirit Statement, are embedded and central to school life - adult education, community outreach projects such as paired reading and Seniors IT training, connections to the local Tidy Towns committee and involvement in community events such as parades and charity drives'* (PS, 37). Together, these findings suggest that Community Schools position themselves not simply within communities, but as active participants in community life.

5.3.5.2 A school for all: inclusion and diversity

Inclusion and diversity are presented as core to the Community School model, but also as requiring ongoing work in practice. Participants described schools adapting their enrolment, provision, and supports in response to changing community needs, with principals emphasising the importance of ensuring that all students can access and belong within their local school. *'In terms of enrolment we constantly adapt and expand to make sure everyone has a school place. This means that we then work hard to make everyone feel at home and included'* (PS, 28). One principal reflected that inclusion becomes meaningful when children with additional needs can attend their local Community School, *'I didn't feel when I started, our school was inclusive. So, I'm not going to put inclusive up on the wall, even though that's a key component of community education. Inclusiveness to me was getting a special class in the school so that kids that have autism could attend their local Community School. We have a little girl next year enrolling in first-year with Down Syndrome. First time in 15 years, somebody with Down Syndrome is going into this school. That to me is inclusive because people in the local community can come too'* (PI, 1), while another stressed that being *'multi-denominational, inclusive, adapting to change, allowing for all'* is embedded in the fabric of the school (PI, 5).

At the same time, one stakeholder offered a more qualified view, arguing that although the model promotes inclusion, practice can vary across schools depending on local context and levels of competition. *'I don't think any Community School would refuse a child. I think, I can say that upfront. I have, however, known a Community School that would have been fairly selective, fairly middle class, not necessarily a very ethnically mixed group, whereas I would have expected, based on the local population, that that might be the case'.* They contrasted this with schools '*that are single providers in local communities'*, noting that *'if you don't have a lot of competition around you, you will do what you are expected to do and what the model allows for you to do. So, if you were to say, does the model promote it, yes. Does the model always support it? Almost all cases, yes, I believe so'* (ST, 13). The findings therefore suggest that while inclusion is a defining aspiration of the model, its enactment is uneven, influenced by local context and competition, and depends on sustained leadership and vigilance.

5.3.5.2 The Community School: developing a sense of belonging

The findings show that Community Schools use a wide range of practices to foster belonging among students, parents, and the wider school community. Belonging was described as

visible in school spaces, in the celebration of diverse forms of achievement, and in the deliberate efforts made to ensure that parents feel welcomed and included. One principal pointed to the symbolic importance of visible messages about collective identity, *'A poster that says, 'In a Community School we work together', a round circle of hands together with our crest in the middle, about this idea that we're very much a community, we will fall or thrive together'* (PI, 9), while another explained that school events are designed to recognise contribution across academic, sporting, cultural, and extracurricular domains. *'Our prize giving is a very long affair, that looks at the academic, sport, music, debating, school musicals, green schools... we try and acknowledge anybody that has made a specific contribution to the school'* (PI, 6).

Principals also described practical strategies to strengthen parental engagement.

Table 5.3 Most popular strategies to engage parents/guardians

Top strategies used by Community Schools to engage parents	**Total (/40)**
Parents' Association meetings and involvement in policy development	22
Open nights, musicals, career fairs, fundraising activities	21
School app and digital communications, e.g. social media, newsletters	13
Surveys, consultations and focus groups	13
Coffee mornings, workshops	11

Principals described open-door communication and sustained efforts to make school-home relationships more accessible. *'We try hard to cultivate that sense of belonging... an open-door policy for parents... I keep parents abreast of what's going on in the school... reaching out to parents and trying to get parents to understand that this is us together'* (PI, 6). They also showed a clear understanding of the role that parents and the wider community play in enriching and supporting students' educational experiences. *'We go to great lengths to encourage parents to attend parent teacher meetings... increased numbers attending year on year... campaign to support parents to access and engage with reports... Career fair – next goal is to increase the number of parents attending this event'* (PI, 4). Overall, the findings

suggest that belonging in Community Schools is actively cultivated through recognition, visibility, relational openness, and ongoing partnership with families.

5.3.6 Theme 6: student-centred schools

This section examines student-centred practice in Community Schools across three interconnected dimensions: holistic development and relationships, curriculum breadth inside and outside the classroom, and student voice and representation. The analysis suggests that student-centredness is understood not simply as an educational approach, but as a defining feature of the Community School model, expressed through care, responsiveness, participation, and the everyday experiences described by participants.

5.3.6.1 Strong relationships and holistic development of the student

The findings indicate that Community Schools place the student at the centre of school life, with participants repeatedly linking this to holistic development, pastoral care, and strong relationships. As one principal asked, *'If the school isn't about children, what is it about?'* (PI, 6). This student-centred approach is described not as a narrow academic project, but as a commitment to enabling students to *'develop their full potential' within 'a friendly, safe and caring environment'* (PS, 27). Participants also connected this approach to school ethos, with one principal noting that an ethos centred on holistic development *is 'not just a statement on paper'* but shapes *'teaching, learning, and relationships across the school'* (PS, 34). Pastoral care emerged as a key expression of this orientation, particularly through daily contact with students and deep knowledge of their family circumstances. As one principal explained, *'Pastoral care was huge and came in through the Community Schools. The idea of a tutor and that every day you started your day with the students, you got to know your own class. You knew the families, you knew everything about that child. The holistic approach to the students was important'* (PI, 5). The ongoing relevance of this aspect of school life is highlighted each year especially when parents seek support, *'When the school comes to the end of a term, suddenly parents are knocking at your door. What will we do? The school is that much a part of the community and the parents are trying to keep them off the streets'* (PI, 5).

Participants also stressed that strong relationships and clearly lived values are central to this work. One stakeholder referred to *'the guardianship of those values'* and the need to ensure they are *'a lived experience'* influencing all school interactions. '*In my engagement with the Community Schools, you're constantly hearing about an expression of their values and their*

commitment to their community' (ST, 8), while principals acknowledged that this aspiration is not always fully realised, despite efforts to ensure students know *'they're accepted for who they are. We just say, the package of you, irrespective of what that is, is OK. Now, obviously, of course, that sometimes doesn't happen, unfortunately'* (PI, 6).

5.3.6.2 Curriculum choice inside and outside the classroom

Curriculum breadth emerges as central to how Community Schools understand student-centred education. Participants linked a broad curriculum to inclusion, engagement, retention, and responsiveness to diverse learner profiles. One stakeholder reflected that the model was intended to ensure that *'historically, it was about growing and developing Irish education in a way that every student in the country would actually be provided for, in accordance with their own gifts and talents'* (ST, 10), while a principal described it as *'this open, inclusive education that serves everybody and serves everybody equally'* (PI, 6). Principals also emphasised the practical significance of subject choice. One noted, '*We run 17 subjects in fifth year... because NEPS keep telling us our subject choice is keeping kids in school'* (PI, 1), while another linked a broad curriculum to school transfers because of 'the range of options' available to students with very different profiles: '*We have 11 transfers in from a school locally into our fifth year this year because of the range of options. I suppose we are more inclusive and the act of learning is more important because we have a very mixed academic profile. We have children doing Level One learning programmes and others who are aiming for 625 points'* (PI, 8). At the same time, participants recognised the challenge of sustaining this breadth and 'trying to fit everything in' (PI, 8). As Principal two put it, '*we are being stretched to get so many things into our curriculum... Any problem in society is thrown into the schools'* (PI, 2). This points to breadth as both a defining strength and a practical challenge within the model.

Participants also considered the diversity of learner profiles in Community Schools, connecting this to the original purpose of serving local communities. Principal 4 noted, *'What gives us the added element then is the whole community connection'* (PI, 4). While acknowledging that other types of schools also adapt to change, they saw the joint patronage structure as particularly supportive of flexibility at a local level. *'They were always adaptable; the change thing is huge. That's not to say the other schools weren't, but I think we had more opportunities to do that because of that governance structure'* (PI, 5). Stakeholder Two supported this view, noting the schools' response during the Ukrainian

crisis. *'The Community Schools came up trumps in the Ukrainian crisis. They did really well in coping with the Ukrainian students and with an open heart'* (ST, 2).

Participants also connected student-centredness to pedagogy. One principal stated that *'child-centred and active methodologies are key to absolutely everything we do here in the school. I think it's been long established, from our very foundation'* (PI, 9), while others argued that in Community Schools '*chalk and talk just doesn't work. They have to be active, creative, and to differentiate. Otherwise, it would become a very extremely challenging space to be'* (PI, 7). Another principal reflected on '*the rich diversity of student'* and the necessity for flexible teaching approaches, stating that this '*requires an education system which is underpinned by everything revolving around the student and an active learning environment where everybody's needs are met'* (PI, 3).

Innovation was likewise identified as a longstanding feature of the sector, with Community Schools described as *'more innovative'* and *'more forward-looking'* (ST, 2). Principal Five recalled, *'The Community Schools around this area were involved in a PhD study on active learning about 30 years ago. I was the coordinator of science. We worked in subject groups, coming up with active methods. That was a little bit scary because they were noisy classrooms. The kids weren't sitting in their seats. We had groups and activities. It was a case of what was to come'* (PI, 5). Stakeholder Six suggested that the schools *'do cater for all students, regardless of background, regardless of ability'* (ST, 6), while another had a more nuanced perspective, suggesting that while *'they're all equally interested in the advancement of the school and ensuring the best for the pupils, that's not unique to the Community School structure. In most cases, they're the single provider in the local area, so they do tend to reflect what the demands of the local area are. In my experience, in one particular school, there was a very academic focus for a school that was designed to capture the needs and interests of all the students that were there'* (ST, 13).

Participants pointed to convergence across sectors, raising questions about how Community Schools maintain a distinct identity. Stakeholder Nine, reflecting on their experience, commented, *'As a chair of a voluntary secondary school board, where a disconnect has come between the community and the school, a boys' school with no technical subjects is unbelievable. There is a greater realisation that there is no future here unless we can really begin to serve the community. In general, you're beginning to see schools move closer to what Community Schools do, and I think that poses a challenge for Community Schools.'*

(ST, 9). This observation is reinforced by others, as one participant noted, *'if you take all post- primary schools in Ireland, same curriculum, same teachers are trained in the same colleges, we all have the same legislation, regulatory responsibilities, they're all the same, all post-primary schools'* (ST, 12).

Extracurricular provision was also seen as part of this student-centred curriculum, offering opportunities where *'the local town isn't an affluent town. Erasmus Plus has helped us to give opportunities to kids that they wouldn't necessarily have. There's something for everybody'* (PI, 10). Often, activities emerge in response to students' own interests. *'The choice of activity is student driven; the chess just grew organically... you've a niche group. That's their thing. The same with public speaking'* (PI, 4).

5.3.6.3 Student voice and representation

Student voice emerges as a significant feature of student-centred practice in Community Schools, extending beyond formal representation to include everyday participation in school life, learning, and decision-making. Participants emphasised the importance of creating safe and welcoming spaces, with one principal observing that a school that is *'a bright, welcoming place is a good starting point'* (PI, 5), while others described careful planning of lunchtime spaces so that *'everybody has a little space'* and working with students to ensure that they can access *'places, spaces of comfort'* within the school (PI, 7; PI, 9). Formal structures such as student councils, focus groups, and surveys were also described as meaningful channels for student feedback. One principal explained, *'Students do focus groups with year heads, and our student council is very active... they definitely have evolved because of the feedback'* (PI, 1), while another described a council where *'stuff gets done'* and proposals are either implemented or openly discussed when constraints arise (PI, 4).

Participants also highlighted less formal and more continuous forms of engagement, including the use of student groups as a '*sounding board'* (PI, 8), and one principal's metaphor of '*the many student voice fires that are burning in our school'*, suggesting that empowerment often arises through ongoing conversations rather than isolated meetings (PS, 40). Student voice was also linked to classroom practice. Participants described initiatives such as *'Stop Everything and Ask'* (PI, 6), a *'listening culture in classes'* where voice is *'about being part of the teaching'* (PI, 9), and active consultation with students on how they learn best, *'We're constantly asking the kids how they learn'*, including through discussion and group work (PI, 7). This emphasis extended to subject choice and assessment, with one

principal stating that optional subject lines are *'driven by student choice'* (PI, 8), and to parent-teacher-student meetings, where another argued, *'how can you have a conversation about a learner without the learner present?'* (PI, 4).

Overall, the findings suggest that student voice in Community Schools is embedded in both structures and relationships, and is treated as integral to teaching, wellbeing, and school culture.

5.4 Documentary analysis: inspection reports

This section draws on published DEY inspection reports to support triangulation of the fieldwork findings. It examines the extent to which inspection evidence affirms, extends, or highlights gaps in the perspectives provided by principals and stakeholders. Overall, the inspection reports are broadly consistent with the fieldwork, while also identifying some issues less visible in participant accounts. Using the same six-theme framework, the analysis considers where inspection evidence supports, develops, or complicates the themes emerging from the fieldwork and situates those findings within a wider system context.

5.4.1 Theme 1: the joint patronage model

Inspection reporting gives limited attention to the joint patronage model, despite its importance in the fieldwork as a defining feature of Community School identity and governance. In the published reports, the terms '*patron'* and *'trustee'* are often used interchangeably, usually only in contextual description, and the theme itself is largely absent from inspection analysis. Across the reports reviewed, the relationship between schools and their joint patrons is not directly explored. In three cases, patrons or trustees are omitted entirely from the *'School Context'* section, while in three whole-school evaluations they are only briefly referenced in the main body of the report. Overall, the inspection evidence suggests that, although patronage is significant in participants' accounts, it is not a major focus within these inspections.

5.4.2 Theme 2: evolving school ethos and identity

Inspection evidence broadly supports the importance of ethos identified in the fieldwork, but its treatment in the reports is uneven. References to *'ethos', mission statement', 'vision', and 'values'* appear in nine of the 12 reports and are usually brief, suggesting that the prominence of the theme depends on how strongly it featured in inspection discussions. Consequently, it can be inferred that it was central to the discussions between the inspector and the school in only one of the inspections. In the relevant report, it is noted that while the board and senior

leaders demonstrated a strong awareness of their stated vision and ethos, this was not always effectively communicated to the wider school community. The need to develop practices across the school and with stakeholders beyond the board and the school leaders was noted numerous times by the Inspectorate, suggesting a lack of consistency between the stated vision and the actual practices found across all four domains of *Looking at our School: A Quality Framework for Post-primary Schools* (DE, 2022a). The Inspectorate notes that in *Managing the Organisation,* the board was *'guided in their work by the core values',* while across the other three domains '*the values, vision, stated ethos were less evident during the inspection visit'*. A similar gap appeared in inspection findings on inclusion, where an *'inclusive ethos'* and a *'comprehensive Special Educational Needs policy'* were noted alongside recommendations to update policy language and practice. The Inspectorate advises senior management to update the policy *'to reflect progress made in the elimination of reduced timetables'* and to remove *'unsuitable conditional clauses in relation to admissions to the autism class'*. In the remaining seven reports, inspection findings were positive, indicating broad consistency between stated ethos and school practice.

5.4.3 Theme 3: leadership practices and autonomy

Inspection reports present leadership practices as broadly positive and effective, while giving less attention to the relational and negotiated dimensions of leadership emphasised in the fieldwork. References to leadership appear across all reports, particularly in whole-school evaluations, and focus on board and senior leadership, distributed leadership, CPD, and meeting structures. Leadership and management are generally described as good, very good, or commendable, with stronger reports referring to '*strong vision', 'commitment to improvement',* and '*exceptional practices'*. The reports also highlight middle management structures, teacher leadership, and staff engagement in CPD as important supports for school improvement. Meeting time is similarly presented as contributing to communication, planning, collaboration, and oversight. Overall, the inspection evidence affirms the strength of leadership structures and practices in Community Schools but offers a more procedural account than the fieldwork data.

5.4.4 Theme 4: board of management and governance relationships

Inspection findings emphasise governance effectiveness, oversight, and procedural compliance, in contrast with the more relational account of governance provided in the fieldwork. References to boards of management appear mainly in the whole-school evaluation reports under *Managing the Organisation*, where boards are presented as central

to governance and resource oversight. Across these reports, boards are generally evaluated as effective, experienced, and committed, with evidence of training, support for school leadership, and engagement in facilities development and strategic planning. Inspectors also note board consultation with staff and, in some cases, with students, although regular communication with student councils was often absent. While most reports indicate that legislative and policy requirements were largely met, some identify weaknesses in policy review and updating. Overall, the inspection evidence presents governance in Community Schools as largely strong and well supported, while also noting areas where practice could be strengthened.

5.4.5 Theme 5: inclusion, diversity, and local context: building community engagement and sense of belonging

Inspection reports strongly corroborate the inclusive and community-oriented practices described by principals. Across all 12 reports, schools are presented as committed to diversity, inclusion, wellbeing, and positive relationships, with recurring references to *'sense of belonging', 'inclusivity', 'welcome', 'positive relationships',* and *'connections to the community*'. Inspectors identify broad curricular provision, varied pathways such as Level Two Learning Programmes (L2LP), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), and Transition Year (TY), extensive co-curricular and extracurricular opportunities, and strong links with community organisations. They also record positive parental experiences of communication and openness. At the same time, the reports identify areas for further development, including SEN resource allocation, differentiated practice, reduced withdrawal for L2LP students, broader curriculum options in some programmes, stronger parent and community structures, and more collaborative classroom environments. Overall, the inspection evidence affirms the inclusive ethos described in the fieldwork, while also identifying practical gaps in implementation.

5.4.6 Theme 6: student voice and participation: democratic schools

This inspection evidence broadly supports the fieldwork finding that Community Schools display democratic features, particularly through representative structures such as student councils. At the same time, the reports suggest that student agency is more unevenly embedded, especially in classroom practice. Inspectors commend schools for active student councils, leadership opportunities, respectful relationships, and consultative processes that support school improvement. The 12 reports also identify inconsistency, however, in the depth of democratic practice across schools. Across the reports, classroom voice is

significantly weaker than representative voice, and inspectors repeatedly point to the need for stronger student agency in learning, more consistent formative assessment, and clearer use of success criteria. While many schools consult students on policies and school decisions, some students remain unsure how their views influence outcomes, and others report not being consulted at all. Overall, the reports indicate progress towards democratic practice but also show that more inclusive and shared forms of participation remain to be developed.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings of the study through six themes relating to governance, ethos, leadership, belonging, student voice, and system relationships in Community Schools. Taken together, the fieldwork and documentary analysis indicate that the joint patronage model creates both opportunities and tensions, with outcomes shaped by local relationships, leadership practices, and stakeholder engagement. The chapter also shows that Community School ethos is interpreted in different ways across settings, while leadership is characterised by collaboration, distributed practice, and negotiation between autonomy and accountability. These issues are explored further in the discussion chapter.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter continues the exploration of whether school culture, ethos, and leadership practices in Community Schools are influenced by the patronage and governance structures that underpin the joint patronage model. As noted in the literature review, research on Community Schools in Ireland is limited, particularly on how patronage and governance structures shape school culture and leaders' agency. While Community and Comprehensive Schools are explicitly included as one of the three post-primary school types in wider Irish research on school self-evaluation, that work also underlines the importance of attending to sector and context rather than treating schools as homogeneous settings (Skerritt *et al.,* 2021; Skerritt, O'Hara and Brown, 2021). This chapter discusses the study's findings in the context of the broader literature and policy landscape. The following research sub-questions reflect the main themes identified in the analysis:

1. How do the joint patronage structures influence the ethos and cultural identity of Community Schools?
2. How do principals interpret and implement the characteristic spirit and ethos within their day-to-day leadership practices?
3. How do governance relationships, particularly between the principal, board of management, and Department of Education and Youth (DEY), affect leadership agency and collaboration?
4. How does the local context, including school origins and patron engagement, contribute to variations in school culture and potential tensions or cohesion?
5. How is a sense of belonging cultivated among students and staff in Community Schools?
6. How do students' voices and participation shape the decision-making processes and cultural dynamics within these schools?

The findings provide answers to the research questions and suggest a broadly positive view among participants of the Community School model. The data indicate that the model offers both opportunities and challenges, including areas of tension and complexity. In this chapter, the findings are discussed in relation to the broader literature and policy context to develop an overall interpretation of the research. The chapter is organised around the broad themes listed below.

1. The joint patronage model
2. Evolving school ethos and identity

3. Leadership practices and autonomy
4. Board of management and governance relationships
5. Inclusion, diversity, and local context - building community engagement and sense of belonging
6. Student-centred schools

6.2 Theme 1: the joint patronage model

The evidence from this study indicates that the joint patronage model holds considerable potential for fostering effective partnerships by balancing autonomy and accountability among stakeholders. The structure enables patrons, boards and school principals to work towards shared goals with mutual respect and collaboration. Participants suggested, however, that the success of this model depends heavily on the quality of relationships both among the joint patrons themselves and between patrons and schools. Where relationships are constructive and supportive, governance is strengthened. Some principals, however, reported insufficient patron support, slow decision-making, and poor communication. Participants also described variation in collaboration between patrons, depending on local context, individual engagement and school history, especially in cases of amalgamation. Patron engagement could differ considerably, with religious patrons sometimes more actively involved than Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and vice versa, creating perceived competition or conflict of interest. Participants also raised concerns that certain patrons may dominate the partnership, undermining its collaborative intent. Overall, the findings suggest that for joint patronage to succeed in practice, all patrons must commit to equitable collaboration and active engagement.

From a policy and governance perspective, the joint patronage model is described as a partnership between two or more patrons (state and denominational), governed by a Deed of Trust (Randles, 1975, p. 303). The Education Act 1998 provides limited statutory detail on how joint patronage should operate, resulting in much being determined by local negotiation. This lack of statutory clarity can lead to ambiguity and inconsistent practice, as joint patrons must negotiate the terms of their partnership themselves. Consistent with this, participants reported that some patrons are more involved than others, and this can cause frustration and delays in decision-making for school principals. The wider literature similarly cautions that challenges often arise when roles and frameworks are unclear. McCormack, O'Flaherty and Conboy (2024) note that without a shared understanding and clarity regarding roles and

relationships, school leaders are left to resolve school-based dilemmas based on their own personal values, leading to decision-making that is subjective and school-specific.

Boards of management have formal responsibility for governance and are required to consult and keep patrons informed, establishing a structure that aims to balance board autonomy with patron oversight. The responsibilities of the principal are set out in the Deed of Trust for Community Schools, which requires the principal to carry out duties delegated by the board of management (ACCS, 2004). The principal acts as adviser to the board of management, keeping its members informed and managing the school on the board's behalf (DES, 2016). In fulfilling these functions, principals remain accountable to the board of management and have autonomy to liaise directly with Department of Education and Youth (DEY) staff on school matters.

The relationship between principals or boards and patrons is not explicitly defined in either the Deed of Trust or the Department of Education and Skills' Governance Manual (DES, 2016). The findings indicate that, while multiple patrons can broaden perspectives and enhance board autonomy, the lack of clarity concerning the principal's relationship with patrons can be problematic. Some principals reported a preference for minimal patron engagement, keeping patrons at 'arm's length,' which may reflect a lack of meaningful partnership. In other instances, the responsibility for collaboration is delegated to the principal, leaving principals vulnerable if collaboration breaks down.

The literature review acknowledges significant gaps specifically on the Community School model and the operation of joint patronage in Ireland. There is no empirical research on the patrons' commitment to and sense of agency towards the Community School model or on the experience of principals and the practicalities of operating the partnership. This study's findings suggest that the Association of Joint Patrons (AJP), while recognised as a potentially valuable forum and voice for joint patronage schools, has not yet fully matured in its role.

Questions remain about the AJP's present effectiveness and the extent to which patrons are genuinely committed to its success. This finding resonates with Colton (2009) who explains,

> Partnership, therefore, ought to sculpt the praxis of patronage and the day-to-day workings of every school. Patrons have a specific duty to ensure that schools are managed in a spirit of partnership. The concept and praxis of partnership are slowly being cultivated, but it still sits uncomfortably with some… (Colton, 2009, p. 258).

Neglecting contentious issues and avoiding difficult conversations risks perpetuating the gaps and ambiguities that currently undermine the AJP's effectiveness. If patrons are to move

beyond superficial participation and contribute actively to the evolution of joint patronage, they must be willing to confront challenges and disagreements directly. This openness is essential not only for building trust among patrons but also for ensuring that the practical realities faced by principals and schools are reflected in the priorities and actions of the AJP.

The findings in this study suggest an increasing perception among interviewees that distinctions between educational sectors are diminishing. This prompts important reflection on the different patronage models. As schools across Ireland increasingly reflect the diversity and pluralism present in society, this thesis argues that Community Schools remain uniquely positioned to foster genuine integration and inclusivity. Their governance structure and multi-denominational ethos, binding together local community, state interests and private entities, whether religious or Educate Together, provide a balanced framework that mediates between different traditions, values, and beliefs. The fact that differences in student intake, outcomes, and performance have narrowed across all sectors suggests that the foundational goal of the Community School model - bridging divides and promoting equity - is now a broader expectation across the education system. Within this context, however, the joint patronage model continues to play an important role in keeping the principles of integration and inclusivity central to school governance.

Furthermore, this study suggests that, although schools across the sectors are becoming more similar, the joint patronage model is particularly well positioned to respond effectively to change. Its blend of community and state involvement continues to foster subsidiarity, enabling boards of management to make key decisions locally. Although issues remain, including the provision of appropriate supports, this localised decision-making is presented by participants as a defining feature of the model, enabling flexibility in responding to emerging challenges. This responsiveness supports the model's continued relevance as distinctions between schools and sectors diminish. The claim that the joint patronage structure supports flexibility at school and local level has not previously been explored in Irish patronage literature and warrants further discussion.

Interestingly, the inspection report analysis undertaken as part of this study finds that Inspectorate reports rarely reference patronage relationships with schools. The joint patronage dynamic is largely absent from the written reports and does not feature as a focus in Inspectorate reviews including Whole-School Evaluation - Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL) evaluations. The DEY states that the Inspectorate's remit is to

promote best practice and school improvement through advice to teachers, principals and boards of management, and to provide advice to policy makers in the DEY and to the wider education system (DEY, 2025). Against this stated system-level role, the absence of any explicit reference to school patrons or patronage is a matter for concern, particularly given the influence of patronage on governance and ethos formation. This absence suggests that the system may operate with a limited understanding of how ownership and ethos formation shape everyday practice and raises questions about the extent to which inspection discourse engages with the structural complexities of the Irish school system. Patronage arrangements, especially in a joint patronage context, are procedurally and historically complex, and do not fit readily within the standardised inspection templates focused on observable practice and measurable improvement. Consequently, patronage appears to remain peripheral in inspection discussion and is seldom explored even in structured engagement with boards of management. It is important to acknowledge that this study focuses only on the Community School sector and inspections in other sectors may attend more explicitly to patronage.

Within this sector, however, the relative silence on patronage points to a substantive knowledge gap that reinforces the importance of this study and the need for further research.

6.3 Theme 2: evolving school ethos and identity

For the purpose of this study, ethos is understood as the guiding set of beliefs and values shaping school character and atmosphere. Participants use the terms ‘characteristic spirit’, ‘ethos’ and ‘values’ interchangeably. In the literature, Barry (2022) discusses the concept of ethos, or ‘characteristic spirit,’ as both a formal and informal expression of a school’s culture, shaped by collective norms, beliefs, and interactions. The literature repeatedly stresses ethos as something manifested in daily relationships and school life rather than something imposed or articulated solely in written statements (Williams, 2000; McLaughlin, 2005; Moran, 2014; Barry, 2022; Meehan, 2022). Similarly, the findings indicate that the relevance of the Characteristic Spirit Statement varies and that ethos is understood as a dynamic concept, evolving with societal changes and local context rather than something imposed by patrons.

In both the survey and interviews conducted for this study, principals placed greater emphasis on articulating their own and their school’s core values, such as respect, inclusion, care, and community, rather than engaging in an explicit discussion of the ethos as viewed through the lens of the formal Characteristic Spirit Statement. This is understandable, as principals constantly draw upon their own guiding principles in daily decisions and interactions. Their

values shape school culture and help ensure that actions remain consistent with the inclusive and caring ethos they wish to foster. As such, ethos is not always consciously shaped in direct alignment with the Characteristic Spirit Statement formally agreed by the patrons. Coherence between everyday practice and the broader governance aspirations may therefore be serendipitous, rather than deliberate. This is reflected in the literature that describes each school community as 'tasked with realising the values enshrined in the Characteristic Spirit Statement,' while managing the challenge of translating these values into reality in increasingly diverse communities (Darmody, Smyth and McCoy, 2012; O'Flaherty, Liddy and McCormack, 2018). Donnelly (2000) refers explicitly to the tension between intended and experienced ethos while McCormack, O'Flaherty and Conboy (2024) point to the challenges of living out espoused values in diverse school communities. Barry (2022, p. 111) similarly describes ethos as a 'negotiated process'.

One stakeholder expressed considerable surprise at the historical lack of collaboration among joint patrons in Community Schools regarding the development of a Characteristic Spirit Statement. This stakeholder (ST, 10) described it as 'shocking' that, apart from certain individual patrons, there was no concerted effort to produce a joint statement capturing the Community School's ethos until quite recently. The current statement emerged only because of legislative change, specifically, the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018, which required schools to revise their admissions policies to articulate and define their ethos (DEY, 2025a). This statutory requirement led the joint patrons, assisted by AJP, to formalise a Characteristic Spirit Statement for the Community Schools.

In the context of the research question of whether the joint patronage structure influences ethos, this issue is especially important and may partly explain how current practices in these schools have evolved and why the Community Schools, for the most part, have developed their own distinct values or mission statements over the years. As schools and boards work more independently within the joint patronage framework, they naturally adapt to the needs of their specific communities, thus shaping their own ethos and values in practice. The inspection report analysis conducted as part of this study highlights that the question of school ethos is not routinely referenced in formal inspection reports unless there is a discrepancy observed between what is set out in school policies and what is evident in school procedures. This suggests that, within the prevailing inspection models, ethos is treated primarily as a matter of governance and compliance, that is, whether policies are lawful, consistent and enacted, rather than as a 'lived' and relational dimension of school life that is

experienced on entering a school but is not readily reducible to measurable indicators. Two of the reports analysed for this study reveal an inconsistency in relation to admissions policies. This focus on inclusivity and provision for students with special educational needs is the primary lens through which the Inspectorate assesses ethos in schools, reflecting the current climate where demand for school places has intensified. Other than this, the matter of school ethos is not addressed explicitly in the formal reports, with ethos therefore remaining largely implicit, glimpsed through related indicators such as admissions and inclusion rather than examined as a cultural reality shaped by changing cohorts of stakeholders and local community expectations. This is notable given that, in joint patronage settings, ethos is handed down through formally approved documents. Where discrepancies such as those identified continue to arise, this points to an accountability gap within the joint patronage model. It is possible that ethos may come under greater scrutiny in newer reporting inspection models, such as in the Promotion of Wellbeing in Schools Evaluation (DEY, 2025) where school climate and the quality of relationships are more directly described. This, however, falls outside the remit of this current study.

The role of patrons and the safeguarding of school ethos is not just an issue in Community Schools, as is evident in Duffy *et al*. (2024), GRACE Report 6, a report from the Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (GRACE) national research project which explores educational stakeholders' perspectives on Catholic education in the Republic of Ireland. The GRACE research finds that, while patrons and trustees are formally responsible for safeguarding and promoting ethos in Catholic schools, there is often a lack of proactive engagement, clear accountability mechanisms, and effective training for boards of management and school leaders. The report states:

> When one looks at how the patrons and trusts are exercising their responsibilities, it appears that they are not proactive in communicating the primary importance of their ethos to the school communities; nor do they appear to demand accountability from them regarding the implementation of ethos-related issues, as the data from the survey indicate (Duffy *et al*., 2024, p. 3).

This is further highlighted in the report, which reveals that only a small proportion of boards of management in Catholic schools' report to their patron or trust on the school's faith life, and that even fewer receive any feedback, pointing to a weak system of engagement and accountability. The findings of the GRACE report on Catholic school governance and ethos are pertinent to understanding the unique challenges posed by joint patronage in Community Schools. While the report focuses primarily on Catholic schools, its critique of the 'hands-off

approach' adopted by many patrons and boards of management, together with the lack of robust training and accountability structures, resonates strongly with the complexities inherent in the joint patronage model. In Community Schools, where governance is shared between religious and state patrons, the risk of ambiguity and diffusion of responsibility may be heightened. The report further highlights that:

> if proper education and training in matters of ethos are not provided for boards, it is very hard to expect that boards will be in any significant position to oversee the expression of ethos in the life of the school (Duffy *et al*., 2024, p. 3).

This observation is especially relevant in joint patronage settings, where the articulation and enactment of a shared ethos can be undermined by unclear lines of authority and insufficient communication between patrons. Moreover, the report points to a disconnect between policy and practice, noting that:

> a statement of what a Catholic school should be is poorly articulated by patrons and trusts for those in leadership and management roles below them (Duffy *et al.,* 2024, p. 23).

This mirrors the challenges faced by many Community Schools in translating Characteristic Spirit Statements into lived realities. Thus, the GRACE report underscores the urgent need for clearer benchmarks, more consistent training, and stronger systems of accountability across all patronage models. In the joint patronage context, issues of governance and ethos become even more complex given the involvement of multiple stakeholders in each school.

As Ireland becomes more religiously diverse and more secular, schools face challenges in upholding their founding values while accommodating multi-denominational enrolments (Colton, 2009; Faas, Foster and Smith, 2020; Connolly, James and Murtagh, 2023). The findings in this study also show ambiguity around the definition of 'multi-denominational ethos', leading to varied interpretations and practices. Community Schools are therefore tasked with balancing inherited religious traditions with inclusivity and pluralism. The literature acknowledges ambiguity and the potential tension between the Characteristic Spirit Statement, and the ethos actually experienced in practice (Donnelly, 2000). It also highlights interpretive differences, raising concerns that schools in the 'multi-denominational' space can resort to more familiar and traditional Catholic values without considering the implications for all students (McCormack *et al.,* 2019; McCormack, O'Flaherty and Conboy, 2024). This is particularly relevant here as stakeholders were divided in their perceptions of the actual ethos of Community Schools, with some describing it as Catholic rather than multi-denominational. Lumby and Mac Ruairc (2021, p. 130) similarly point to the complexity of

upholding ethos amid ‘many incompatible demands’ of the stakeholders. This recurring tension of preserving the founding intentions of a school while accommodating growing religious diversity is further explored by Colton (2009), Faas, Foster and Smith (2020) and Connolly, James and Murtagh (2023), who collectively highlight the challenges for schools in navigating these competing priorities.

The central role of the chaplain is identified in the findings of this study as a significant one that has evolved from being solely spiritual to a more pastoral and inclusive position, supporting all students. Recent literature in the Irish context is consistent with and develops this idea more fully. Barry (2022) directly addresses the evolving role of the chaplain, observing that practicalities of celebrating all religions, while remaining faithful to the denominational nominating body, that is, the Catholic Church, may have serious implications for the role of the chaplain in these schools. Barry also highlights the chaplain’s support for principals in navigating values and ethos in diverse communities. Both Barry (2022, p. 44) and Moran (2014, p. 251) identify the chaplain’s vital role as a ‘meaning-maker’ and facilitator of inclusion in Irish schools, helping students of all faiths and none to find meaning and belonging. Their research underscores the ongoing tension that chaplains may face in balancing their own faith identity, typically Catholic, with the pluralist and multi-denominational ethos required by modern educational settings. Chaplains are called upon to respect and support all backgrounds, often striving for impartiality and inclusivity, even as the challenge of remaining faithful to their nominating body persists. The Deed of Trust included an agreement that the competent religious authority would have the right to nominate a person to the position of school chaplaincy, and the salary would be paid by the State (Moran, 2014). This arrangement was superseded in 2014 when a standardised appointment procedure, contract of employment and defined duties for chaplains was developed (ACCS, 2017). Moran suggests that appointing chaplains without religious nomination may be a necessary step towards genuine inclusivity, while both studies emphasise the importance of the chaplain’s role in promoting respect and navigating diversity within the school community.

With regard to the teaching of Religious Education, the Community Schools are governed by statutory requirements, notably the Deed of Trust, mandating two hours of Religious Education per week for all students, and more recently, *Circular 0013/2018* and *0062/2018* which address the teaching of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Religious Education programme. Research by Mullally (2018), Stapleton (2018), García-

Segura, Martínez-Carmona and Gil-Pino (2022) and Regan (2024) underlines both the value of religious education in shaping collective identity and the importance of recognising pluralism. Colton (2009) and Faas, Smith and Darmody (2019) view schools as essential sites for intercultural dialogue and social cohesion, with the NCCA Religious Education programme (NCCA, 2019) designed to be non-denominational and to promote inclusivity by accommodating students of all faiths and none. This programme is aimed at supporting students' understanding and respect, and Meehan (2019) argues that, when taught well, the programme enhances students' wellbeing and supports engagement with ethical issues, regardless of faith background.

The Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2018a; DES, 2018b) circulars point to the approach being adopted by Irish policy makers in relation to religion while at the same time reflecting the ongoing debates about the place of religion in schools.

> Religious Education, where it is offered by a school, must be delivered in the timetabled class periods without any religious instruction or worship of any religion forming any part of class activity. This means that any practice or material that would introduce religious instruction or worship cannot be used in the future (DES, 2018b, p. 3).

Research shows that school leadership is crucial in navigating the tensions between tradition and contemporary realities. The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature, including that of O'Flaherty, Liddy and McCormack (2018), in showing that principals are divided on the value and relevance of Religious Education within an increasingly crowded curriculum. While some still stress that Religious Education is integral to student wellbeing and intercultural dialogue, others question its practicality and prioritisation amid competing curricular demands, especially in the context of evolving societal attitudes toward religion. Furthermore, there are questions raised by stakeholders interviewed in this study about the quality of offering in the Religious Education classroom, particularly at senior cycle. This concern is consistent with the broader literature, including Meehan (2019) who emphasises that for Religious Education to truly contribute to students' wellbeing and personal growth, it must be delivered with thoughtful content and effective teaching methods that engage students meaningfully, rather than as a tokenistic or marginal subject.

The literature highlights that this structural tension is not confined to Community Schools but is also evident in other schools across the system. For example, Duffy *et al.* (2024) highlight similar challenges in denominational schools, including diverging perceptions between boards of management and principals. Their findings point to a gap between policy and

practice. While over 75% of board members in Catholic schools reported that their school ensured two hours of Religious Education each week, just over 50% of principals confirmed that this was timetabled in senior cycle years. Similarly, Barry (2022) highlights that ETB Designated Community Colleges face significant challenges in teaching Religious Education due to the requirement to define and implement a multi-denominational ethos explicitly.

> This clear separation of religious instruction from the NCCA Religious Education syllabus has the effect of ensuring that withdrawal does not arise for students studying the NCCA Religious Education syllabus where the school provides the subject as part of its normal range of subjects (DES, 2018b, p. 3).

Meehan and Laffan (2021) note that this policy change means that the opt-out is no longer necessary in Community Schools, but the findings in this study indicate that it still arises. The lack of meaningful alternatives for students who choose to act on their Constitutional right to opt-out of Religious Education means that neither students nor parents see the opt-out as a real possibility. This creates a further tension and can lead to disengagement, which undermines the policy's intent of inclusion. The literature corroborates this finding, asserting that opt-out arrangements are often unsatisfactory and are not always managed in a way that respects minority beliefs or ensures meaningful inclusion for all students (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012; Niens *et al.,* 2013; Mullally, 2018; Meehan and Laffan, 2021).

Religious instruction in the Community Schools is described by many of the participants as 'invitational', where the chaplains facilitate interfaith practices, such as inclusive liturgical celebrations and interfaith prayer services, and are mindful to create events where students of all backgrounds feel welcome. The findings are consistent with practices described in the literature, which asserts that school principals are aware of the need to avoid proselytising and to ensure that religious events are accessible and meaningful for all (Barry, 2022). The findings of this study highlight that rituals and ceremonies remain important in Community Schools, but whether these are genuinely inclusive for all students is questioned by the participants. In her research, Moran (2014) asserts that while chaplains believe they are inclusive, parents and some stakeholders remain concerned about bias towards the majority faith, Catholicism, especially in liturgical celebrations. There is a call for more creativity in organising inclusive rituals and for chaplains to receive more training in interfaith and intercultural competence. Furthermore, and as referenced earlier, tensions can arise where

‘Catholic practices’ are normalised without due consideration of other faiths and religions in schools (McCormack *et al.,* 2019, p. 176; McCormack, O’Flaherty and Conboy, 2024).

6.4 Theme 3: leadership practices and autonomy

Leadership in the participating schools was frequently described in ways consistent with distributed and transformational approaches documented in the literature. The findings highlight the prevalence of these leadership styles among the participating principals, who also emphasise the need to adapt leadership style to context. This is supported by previous studies (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2004; Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008; Mac Ruairc, 2010; Bush and Glover, 2014; O’ Donovan, 2015). The conceptualisation of leadership as a practice shared among leaders, followers, and context, rather than based solely on individual attributes, is also well established (Gunter, 2004; Spillane *et al.,* 2004; Harris, 2005).

Another pattern in the data was the extent to which leadership was described as distributed across management teams, with a strong emphasis on trust and delegation. This is reinforced across the inspection report analysis, where distributed leadership structures, engagement in continuing professional development (CPD) and formal meeting routines are repeatedly cited as supporting planning, collaborative school improvement and overall oversight in these schools. In this way, the inspection reports concur with the findings of this study, indicating that the collaborative and distributed practices described by participants are also visible to external stakeholders who visit and evaluate these schools. This is reflected in the literature’s discussion of collaborative leadership and the movement towards distributed models (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008; Mac Ruairc, 2010). The importance of developing leadership capacity in others is acknowledged (Fullan, 2001; Bush and Glover, 2014), as is the need for clear roles and responsibilities within leadership teams (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008, p. 81; O’Donovan, 2015; Kavanagh, Sexton and Fitzsimons, 2021; Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara, 2023). Strategies such as structured meetings, regular consultative processes, annual review meetings, and support for professional development are in line with the focus of broader literature on effective management structures and ongoing professional learning (JMB/ACCS, 2014; O’Rourke, 2022). Positive relationships and a focus on building leadership capacity are linked to a positive school culture, staff morale, and school climate (Harris, 2005; Peterson and Deal, 2009; Hallinger and Huber, 2012; Bush and Glover, 2014; Gumus *et al.,* 2018; Fullan, 2019; Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020; O’Rourke, 2022).

The literature, however, also presents a critical view of distributed leadership. King and Stevenson (2017, p. 657) caution that in practice it often becomes 'licensed leadership', where teacher autonomy is heavily restricted by managerial frameworks. Drawing on case studies in urban disadvantaged schools in Ireland, they advocate for a more organic approach to leadership that genuinely empowers teachers and supports teacher-led change. Murphy *et al.* (2009) similarly argue that the strong norm of classroom autonomy in Irish schools can act as a barrier to distributed leadership and collaboration. While this critical perspective did not emerge strongly in the findings of this study, it warrants further exploration. Inspection report analysis is useful here. Even where inspectors judge leadership structures positively, they sometimes recommend stronger oversight of learning and teaching, suggesting that leadership capacity does not always translate into consistently strong classroom practice. Taken together, the participant accounts and the inspection findings present a nuanced picture: principals and stakeholders describe intentional structures for delegation, collaboration and shared responsibility, while inspectors at times identify a need to tighten the link between these structures and the core work of teaching and learning.

The findings also reference amalgamations and resulting staff diversity, which are regarded by stakeholders both as challenges and as sources of flexibility and innovation. The literature does not specifically address these challenges, but it does recognise the need for leadership practices to adapt to different contexts (Spillane *et al.,* 2004; Mac Ruairc, 2010). The findings do resonate with the *Report on the Amalgamation of Second Level Schools* (Commission on School Accommodation, 2001) conducted by the Commission on School Accommodation, particularly regarding the challenges of cultural integration, governance complexities, and the importance of inclusivity and shared values in amalgamated schools. The findings underline the need to balance different traditions, manage staff from varied backgrounds, and recognise the central role of clear leadership and stakeholder engagement in achieving positive outcomes. The shared need for deliberate strategies to build trust and a cohesive school identity further demonstrates the alignment between this study and the recommendations of the Commission (Commission on School Accommodation, 2001).

Principals in this study express a strong appreciation for the autonomy provided by the Community School model. This autonomy enables them to make decisions tailored to the needs of their local communities. It comes, however, with considerable accountability to boards of management and patrons. Principals acknowledge that being held accountable, particularly if things go wrong, adds to the pressure and complexity of their roles. The value

of autonomy for local decision-making, counterbalanced by accountability to boards, patrons, and the DEY, is mirrored in the literature. For example, Neeleman (2019) discusses school leaders in the Dutch system, who enjoy significant autonomy in curriculum, staffing, and resource management, but also face substantial responsibility and accountability. She stresses that, although autonomy is officially granted, its practical use depends on local conditions, with principals retaining considerable independence. Neeleman (2019) points out that policy-level autonomy does not always translate into practice, as actual decision-making is shaped by local realities and accountability mechanisms. This nuanced perspective is pertinent to understanding how autonomy and subsidiarity affect education quality and equity.

Skerritt (2019, 2020) argues that policy trends towards centralised frameworks, such as *Looking at Our School (LAOS): A Quality Framework for Post-primary Schools 2022* (DE, 2022a) represent a shift towards greater school autonomy. The findings of this study are consistent with Skerritt's view that this approach is accompanied by an increase in inspection models, which, in turn, heightens accountability and places greater demands on school leaders to provide evidence of improvement and compliance with legislation.

King and Stevenson (2017, p. 660) argue that 'leadership is distributed only as long as those lower in the hierarchy work within parameters that have been defined for them by those with superordinate power'. While their research specifically examines the relationships and dynamics between principals and teachers, depicting teachers as those 'lower in the hierarchy' and principals as the 'superordinate power', a parallel can be drawn in the context of this study, where principals themselves occupy a subordinate position relative to boards of management and patrons. This thesis contends that, just as teachers' autonomy is shaped and constrained by principals, so too is the autonomy of principals shaped by the parameters set by boards and patrons. In schools where principals actively trust teachers and grant meaningful autonomy, teachers are empowered to innovate and drive change, mirroring the potential for positive outcomes when boards and patrons extend genuine trust and autonomy to principals. This comparison highlights the importance of those in positions of authority 'letting go' and trusting the professional judgement of those further down the hierarchy, which is crucial for fostering collective responsibility and sustainable improvement. King and Stevenson (2017, p. 657) also caution that, despite the rhetoric, autonomy, whether for teachers or principals, is often limited by hierarchical and managerial structures. Agency is typically encouraged, but within boundaries determined by formal leaders, leading to what

they term ‘licensed leadership’ where autonomy is conditional and primarily serves managerial priorities rather than authentic, bottom-up initiatives.

This view is echoed by one principal in the study, who describes the role as: *a civil servant role, isn’t it? I mean circulars come, you have to do what the man says, yes, you can operate the school in a certain way, but it’s within parameters* (PI, 7). Similarly, Stakeholder five reflects: *‘Autonomy is a blinkered view of the world, because autonomy means you have all the responsibility, and very little wherewithal to deal with that responsibility’* (ST, 5).

The expanding administrative workload and the need to balance multiple responsibilities were identified by principals as significant sources of stress. This is consistent with the literature, highlighting the increasing complexity of the principal’s role, the growing administrative burden, and the implications for mental health and wellbeing (Skerritt, 2019, 2020; Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara, 2024). Principals note that these demands can detract from the more rewarding aspects of leadership, such as direct engagement with students and staff, and can make it difficult to keep core values and ethos at the forefront amidst the ‘nuts and bolts’ of running a school. Despite this, principals also described their roles as fulfilling, with the sense of making a difference and serving as a figurehead for local standards and values contributing positively to wellbeing. This is consistent with literature indicating that, despite the challenges, school leadership can be highly rewarding (West Burnham, 2009).

6.5 Theme 4: board of management and governance relationships

In relation to school-level governance, the findings represent boards of management in Community Schools as committed, voluntary bodies that provide governance and strategic oversight while delegating operations to principals and senior leaders. They highlight the significance of the chairperson-principal relationship, the value of diverse membership, and the importance of effective subcommittees. The DEY’s direct involvement and transparent resource allocation are perceived positively. Principals reported largely positive relationships, generally good communication and high levels of support from DEY contacts, contributing to effective school management. The findings also reflect a supportive wider network across the Community School sector. Overall, there is broad alignment between the findings and the literature.

The *Governance Manual for Community and Comprehensive Schools* (DE, 2016) positions the board as responsible for management of the school and the establishment of appropriate

systems of control, delegation, and accountability. Similarly, in the *Looking at Our School* (DE 2022a) framework, the board of management and the principal are linked in close partnership across the domains, standards and statements of practice. The standards:

> are written in a way that respects the professional agency and autonomy of the school leader in making judgments about the work of the school (p. 19).

Policy, as set out in the literature, therefore, mirrors the depiction of oversight and operational matters in the findings clearly. Principals in this study describe boards as supportive, yet challenging. Preparation for board meetings is extensive, and the board's independence in decision-making is valued, even where it diverges from principals' recommendations. The DES Governance Manual (DES, 2016) outlines the principal's role as a non-voting member, secretary, and advisor to the board, and this is consistent with the findings' narrative of boards sometimes overruling the principal's recommendations while relying on informed advice.

This governance picture is further illuminated in the WSE-MLL evidence discussed below. Overall, these reports broadly corroborate the role and functioning of boards, while also drawing attention to areas for improvement, particularly the regular updating and review of policies.

Coolahan *et al.* (2017) distinguish clearly between administration, management, leadership, and governance in education, highlighting that each serves a distinct function within schools. Good governance enables the other functions to happen:

> **Governance** - discharging responsibilities at a corporate level so as to ensure the best use of resources and to provide the best opportunities for leadership to be productive. (Coolahan *et al*., 2017, pp. 99-100)

Read alongside the principals' accounts, the WSE-MLL reports suggest a subtle difference of emphasis between external evaluation and participants' descriptions of governance practices. While the principals often frame governance as relational and negotiated work within boards, the inspection reports evidence effectiveness in terms of procedural compliance and documented systems. The reports note boards' engagement with strategic development and stakeholder consultation, but they also point to practical gaps such as limited routine communication with student councils and issues with the regular updating of policies.

Similarly, Gann (2015) defines governance as occurring at the interface of strategic (board) and operational (principal) spheres. The findings' emphasis in this study on board members asking 'appropriate questions', avoiding 'rubber-stamping' and relying on the principal for

accurate and up-to-date information to assist them in decision-making reflects Gann's description of a well-informed board supported by the principal's facilitation of learning and professionalism. Darmody and Smyth (2013) argue that successful schools feature clear role understanding and authentic partnership between board and principal, and this is echoed in principals' accounts of their relationships with their boards characterised by trust, autonomy and constructive challenge. The findings identify the suite of board of management training supports available from the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS) in different formats, both online and in person. The requirement for ongoing and relevant professional development for board members is reflected in literature (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008; Gann, 2015).

In this study, stakeholders were divided on the sustainability of the voluntary model of boards of management. Some praised the community ethos and diversity of membership, while others questioned whether it is viable to ask volunteers to lead significant change. Suggested responses included enhanced training, professional recognition, or semi-professional chairing models. Principals reported that where board members are engaged, informed and independent in decision-making, they are highly effective in supporting leadership. The broader literature reflects this tension. Although the Chief Inspector's Report (DE, 2022) finds governance 'good' or 'very good' in 80% of inspected post-primary schools, Hislop questions the sustainability of voluntary boards as governance responsibilities expand. By contrast, Harris and West-Burnham (2018) emphasise that volunteer oversight can be positive and beneficial, noting that volunteering at this level is not carried out by 'amateurs' and their strategic contributions and diverse expertise are not only professional but are vital, especially in school governance. The principals' appreciation of the expertise on the boards, including in such areas as finance and building, is consistent with MacKenzie (2012) who stresses the importance of diversity, maturity, discretion and collective responsibility. Coolahan *et al.* (2017), however, argue that the lack of a middle tier between schools and the DEY places heavy bureaucratic and operational burdens on school leaders, detracting from educational leadership. They suggest that reforms such as clustering schools or cooperative efforts among boards could help reduce this burden.

In this regard, the recent DEY initiative titled the '*Small Schools Project'* issued its final report in September 2024 (DEY, 2025b). The report notes a growing tension between statutory governance requirements and the capacity of small schools to meet them.

Governance emerges as heavily reliant on the principal, reflecting difficulties in recruiting and sustaining boards of management, limited governance expertise among volunteers, and the escalating demands of compliance and accountability. The study reveals stakeholder nervousness about proposed innovations such as shared governance between schools and compliance officers. To date these innovations have not been trialled at either primary or post-primary level. The report recommends proactive exploration of such models, deeper involvement of board members/parents, and learning from international practice. The findings of this study identify similar model proposals, as noted above, but acknowledge an absence of piloting or trialling of such proposals. One important initiative focused on additional administrative support for school leaders at post-primary and primary level across six schools has been introduced and is currently being piloted over the next three years.

Beyond this, the literature cited does not provide tested Irish exemplars for hybrid models, e.g., semi-professional chairs, shared governance, or compliance officers. This leaves a practical evidence gap on implementation, and evaluation criteria for redesigning governance in schools in Ireland.

This study finds that the principal holds primary responsibility for the school's educational vision, shared with the in-school management team. This is consistent with the ACCS Response to the Department of Education on the Green Paper (ACCS, 1993), which describes a collaborative leadership model in Community Schools. Stakeholders in this study view the principal as both an 'agent of change' and a 'thought leader', guiding board understanding of governance in educational areas like curriculum and assessment. This mirrors the DES (2016) Governance Manual's emphasis on the importance of leadership quality in setting direction and achieving outcomes. Boards are expected to support principal leadership through delegation and cooperation. Once again, this mirrors the findings' emphasis on empowered, accountable leaders working with boards of management. Similarly, Gann (2015) and Darmody and Smyth (2013) both emphasise the partnership model and the notion of a well-informed board supported by appropriate and mutually respectful collaboration with the school leader.

Community School principals report strong collegial support through the national and regional ACCS networks. The relatively small size of the sector is seen as advantageous, maintaining a close-knit community and informal relationships, which it is argued could be lost if the sector were to expand significantly. These informal collegial support networks are

characterised as a ‘family’ model of mutual practical help, open exchange, and collaborative problem-solving. In the literature, West-Burnham (2009) argues that leadership sustainability and resilience are enhanced through such quality relationships, mentoring, conferences, and opportunities for networking and collective learning.

In the findings, the DEY’s relationship with schools is described as direct, positive, and transparent, in the main, with principals describing helpful contacts and positive relationships with colleagues in different DEY sections including buildings, allocation and payroll. Timely responses and clear direct lines of communication are valued by the principals and viewed as important aspects when managing increasing workloads. This positive relationship is not only appreciated by school leaders but also underpins the well-developed autonomy in Irish schools noted by OECD (2020). The DEY’s supportive approach enables schools to exercise autonomy in a manner that is responsive to local needs, reinforcing the OECD’s view that such autonomy is a key strength of the Irish education system.

In summary, effective governance requires clear boundaries between strategic (board) and operational (principal) roles. Well-informed, diverse boards and strong principal-board partnerships enhance leadership, while professional networks support principals and reduce their sense of isolation. Although the findings of this study and the wider literature recognise the valuable role of volunteers, capacity strains and increasing administrative demands challenge sustainability. The broader literature lacks detail on board professionalisation, the principal’s influence on governance culture, the influence of informal networks, and the benefits of direct departmental and school relationships. Once again, these gaps suggest direction for further research on Community School governance.

6.6 Theme 5: inclusion, diversity, and local context: building community engagement and sense of belonging

Across the data, Community Schools are represented as striving to adapt to changing community demographics and to ensure inclusion and support for all students, including those with special needs. Some stakeholders, however, noted that in areas with multiple schools there can be a degree of selectiveness, with certain Community Schools reflecting a less diverse, more middle-class intake than the local population might suggest. This indicates that while the model promotes inclusivity, its realisation can vary in practice, shaped by competition and demographic context, and requiring ongoing vigilance to maintain equitable

access. This observation is reflected in the literature and policy documents reviewed for the study.

Against this backdrop, it is useful to restate the model's founding policy intent and the extent to which later statements of characteristic spirit formalise its inclusive remit. The original vision for the Community School model was articulated in a 1970 Department of Education policy document, reproduced as Appendix 5 in Randles (1975), and underlines the importance of serving all students regardless of ability or economic means, with a remit extending to adult education and fostering a sense of belonging within the local context. Osterman (2000), drawing on Dewey (1958), emphasises schools as social communities where inclusivity is central. The Characteristic Spirit Statement (ACCS, 2018) agreed by the joint patrons explicitly formalises inclusion and equal opportunities as protected characteristics within these schools. This formal commitment is reflected in the ethos as described by the participants in this study who characterise the Community School profile as 'open-door, welcoming to all and responsive to changing local community profile'.

Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) caution, however, that while these policies set normative expectations, their implementation is shaped by context, echoing the finding that practice can diverge depending on local competition and demographic factors. Therefore, while the broader literature supports the view that the Community School model is designed to be inclusive, it also highlights that vigilance is required to ensure these ideals are realised in everyday practice across all settings. Throughout the study, the principals report that their schools actively promote an inclusive ethos ensuring that all members of the school community feel valued and accepted. These efforts to nurture belonging are evident in several ways. Firstly, schools prioritise fostering a positive climate and building strong relationships among students, staff, and parents, which closely mirrors the OECD's framing of school climate and belonging (OECD, 2019; Byrne, Carthy and McGilloway, 2020; Rohatgi and Scherer, 2020). The importance of connectedness in educational settings, as highlighted by these sources, is cultivated through everyday interactions, inclusive policies, and targeted programmes designed to support wellbeing. Parent workshops, for example, aim to actively involve parents and families in the school community, provide guidance on supporting students' emotional and social needs and foster a collaborative environment where wellbeing is prioritised. Such initiatives not only strengthen the partnership between home and school but also contribute to a positive school climate and a greater sense of belonging for students (DE, 2019; Byrne, Carthy and McGilloway, 2020).

One concrete way this belonging work is operationalised is through parent engagement, with principals describing strategies such as parent associations, open nights, digital communication and workshops. These practices reflect the principles outlined in national policy and literature, particularly the whole-school focus on wellbeing, connectedness, and community partnership evident in the Department of Education and Skills' *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2019). This framework situates the sense of belonging and the need for connection to others in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development. In this model, human growth is linked to an individual's ability to interact and engage with others in their immediate and wider environments within a given ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The strategies identified in this study not only encourage active participation but also reinforce the sense that every stakeholder has a role in sustaining a culture of care, inclusion, and partnership (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; DES, 2019; NCCA, 2021).

Viewed ecologically, these relationships and partnership-based practices are central mechanisms through which schools build conditions for belonging. The findings suggest that the whole-school approach, advocated by recent Irish frameworks, is reflected in daily practice in the participating schools. Principals and staff appear attentive to the needs of all students, making deliberate efforts to create opportunities for connection and belonging, especially for those who may feel marginalised. This emphasis on connectedness is consistent with recent DE policy frameworks including the *Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-primary Schools* (DE, 2024a) and the principles underpinning *Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Post-primary Schools* (DE, 2022a). The Chief Inspector's Report (DE, 2022) also recognises that young people's wellbeing is enhanced when schools work positively within their communities and in effective partnership with families. Overall, nurturing belonging in Community Schools emerges as a multifaceted endeavour involving both formal structures and informal interactions.

Relationships between students and teachers emerge from this study as central to nurturing a sense of belonging within schools. Positive, authentic interactions marked by mutual respect allow students to feel valued and understood. Such relationships extend beyond the classroom, with teachers acting as mentors and role models, shaping the overall climate in which students flourish. The centrality of relationships is well supported in the broader

literature (Flutter, 2007; Benner, Brown and Jeffrey, 2019; Flynn, 2019; Flynn and Hayes, 2021; McCormack, O'Flaherty and Liddy, 2021).

Cultural celebrations, inclusive assemblies and a broad variety of extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, debating clubs, and leadership opportunities are described by principals in this study as central to school life. These ensure that students with varied interests and abilities find avenues to connect and thrive. It is noteworthy that these programmes are often designed in consultation with students, reflecting a commitment to genuine inclusion and the celebration of diversity. The educational literature also illustrates the importance of such initiatives and how these are effective in promoting belonging and reflecting the value that school communities place on diversity (Osterman, 2000; Allen *et al.,* 2018; Riley, 2019; Byrne, Carthy and McGilloway, 2020; Sime, Gilligan and Scholtz, 2021; Riley, 2022; Brown *et al.,* 2022).

Principals in this study identify that the physical environment of schools, including their spaces and layout, plays a vital role in supporting belonging. They are increasingly attentive to creating spaces that invite informal interaction for students who may not engage readily with peers, encouraging them to engage with others in ways that suit their social and learning preferences. Greenwood and Kelly (2019) suggest that this thoughtful use of space to signal that all students are welcome demonstrates that belonging is not only about relationships and programmes but is embedded in the fabric of school life.

These examples position inclusion as both cultural, i.e., relationships, and structural i.e., resourcing. The findings of this study report a strong ethos of inclusion and responsiveness to diversity, echoing the educational literature's recognition that diversity encompasses race, gender, language, culture, sexual orientation, and ability (OECD, 2023). The literature also frames inclusion as a dynamic process of ongoing school improvement, requiring structural changes to accommodate the diversity of learners (Winter and O'Raw, 2010; NCSE, 2024).

The findings highlight schools' willingness to adapt to changing community profiles and to create inclusive environments for all students and are thus firmly anchored in the general policy context. The study's examples, such as the establishment of special classes and flexible enrolment practices, reflect this dynamism, but the study does not explore the breadth and depth of these structural changes, particularly in areas such as curriculum adaptation, professional development, and resource allocation.

Inspection report analysis provides an additional lens on how inclusion and belonging are enacted in practice. Across the 12 reports reviewed, inspectors tend to affirm that Community Schools communicate a welcoming ethos and that relationships, including those between the school and the local community, are experienced positively by students and parents. The reports consistently describe a strong commitment to diversity, inclusion and student wellbeing. The same reports, however, also suggest that inclusion is most vulnerable at the level of routine implementation with recommendations repeatedly focussing on how special educational needs provision is organised, the consistency of differentiated practice in classrooms, and the tendency for students on Level Two Learning Programmes to experience withdrawal from mainstream settings. In this sense, while the inspection evidence broadly supports the findings' emphasis on belonging as a lived culture, it also offers a cautionary note that the real test of inclusion lies in the coherence of operational systems and pedagogical practice across programmes, classrooms and learner groups.

Drawing the findings, policy framing and Inspection evidence together, inclusion emerges as strongly espoused but not uniformly enacted, particularly in local contexts characterised by school choice and competition. This reinforces the well-documented tension between policy intent and local enactment, where schools interpret policy through local histories, capacities and interests (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992). More broadly, international research consistently links belonging to respectful, caring relationships and whole-community approaches while also noting that students' experiences can remain uneven where implementation is inconsistent (Osterman, 2000; Allen *et al.,* 2018; Riley, 2019; Byrne, Carthy and McGilloway, 2020; Sime, Gilligan and Scholtz, 2021; Riley, 2022; Brown *et al.,* 2022).

Overall, the study's emphasis on serving diverse local communities is consistent with literature that defines inclusion as a process of whole-school change rather than a narrow special educational needs agenda (Winter and O' Raw, 2010). This broader understanding is consistent with international research highlighting inclusion as encompassing diversity, equity, and relational school cultures (Cerna *et al.,* 2021; OECD, 2023). It also reinforces evidence that positive peer and teacher relationships are central to students' sense of belonging and wellbeing (Smith and Barr, 2008; Sime, Gilligan and Scholtz, 2021; OECD, 2023).

Within this broader picture, a related strand of the findings concerns the role of the Community Schools as places of re-engagement where these schools offer 'second chances'

to students. This suggestion is consistent with research on schools as sanctuaries, where cultures of care reduce early school leaving and foster belonging (Osterman, 2000; O'Gorman, Salmon and Murphy, 2016; Craggs and Kelly, 2018; Korpershoek *et al.,* 2020; Riley, 2022). Actual data on instances of transfer of students during mid-cycle into Community Schools from other sectors, along with retention rates and outcomes for these students, would strengthen the narrative of this study. Similarly, while the literature points to structural constraints such as uneven distribution of teacher quality and higher staff turnover in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) urban schools, which can impact the realisation of inclusive practice (Vekic, 2014; Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaite, 2017), this was not evident in the findings in this study. Again, the findings' claims of inclusion and greater staff stability in Community Schools would be bolstered significantly by data on staffing turnover and retention.

Beyond inclusion within the school, the findings also position Community Schools as 'schools in and for the community' with principals acting as community anchors and figureheads. This highlights the principal's role as more than a school administrator; principals are perceived, and perceive themselves, as central, visible leaders within the wider community. Their influence extends beyond the school gates, serving as a bridge between the school and the local community. In the context of the findings, principals who understand and engage with local social realities are better able to foster a sense of cohesion and belonging among students, staff, and families. They draw upon local partnerships, traditions, and networks to ensure the school remains responsive to community needs, creating an environment where all stakeholders feel included and invested in the school's success. This is consistent with research linking effective leadership to community cohesion and social capital (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008; Hampden-Thompson *et al.,* 2015; Riley, 2022).

The active engagement of parents and the repeated references to partnerships with local organisations mirrors the educational literature's emphasis on trust-building and barrier reduction (Engel, Kington and Mleczko, 2013; DE, 2022). Fargas-Malet and Bagley (2022) distinguish between community-ignorant, community-passive, and community-active schools. The responsiveness described in this study, including examples of support for newly arrived Ukrainian students, provides an illustrative example of their 'community-active' status. This example mirrors Tutunaru's (2015) emphasis on the importance of mutual benefit, as both school and community needs are addressed through such practical initiatives. The example also matches broader literature describing community-active schools as

institutions that are deeply embedded in, and shaped by, their local contexts, with principals functioning as key anchors of social capital and community cohesion (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008; Fargas-Malet and Bagley, 2022; Riley, 2022). In this sense, the examples discussed offer a practical illustration of how community-active values may be enacted in practice.

6.7 Theme 6: student-centred schools

The findings in this study highlight a strong commitment within the participating Community Schools to the holistic development of the young person, prioritising students' wellbeing, personal growth, and sense of belonging, while also recognising the importance of academic attainment. Participants present this dual focus as a defining feature of the sector's ethos, consistent with relevant literature and policy. The Characteristic Spirit Statement (ACCS, 2018) and international research (OECD, 2019; Byrne, Carthy and McGilloway, 2020; Rohatgi and Scherer, 2020) advocate for environments where students' holistic needs are met alongside academic goals. Policy frameworks such as the Department of Education and Skills' Wellbeing Policy Statement (DES, 2019), grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, reinforce the idea that wellbeing and academic success are interdependent rather than mutually exclusive.

Despite this strong holistic intent, both this study and the literature (Coolahan *et al.,* 2017; Högberg and Lindgren, 2023; Porter *et al.,* 2024) acknowledge a persistent tension between high-stakes exams and broad curricula that can undermine efforts to support the whole child. Participants described the challenge of 'fitting everything in', suggesting that while holistic development is valued, it can be squeezed by external demands for academic results. The literature warns that in examination focused cultures, belonging and wellbeing, especially for marginalised students, can be compromised, and students may be reduced to passive recipients rather than active participants in their learning (Squires, Kalambouka and Bragg, 2016; Coolahan *et al.,* 2017; Kleeberg-Niepage *et al.,* 2024). At the same time, it emphasises the centrality of teacher-student relationships. Overall, the evidence suggests that the most effective schools are those that integrate academic and holistic aims, rather than treat them as competing priorities.

Evidence of active student councils, focus groups and classroom 'listening cultures' in this study suggests that student voice is an established feature of practice in the participating Community Schools, but that its quality and influence remain uneven. This reflects a wider

rights and participation literature which argues that being heard is not, in itself, sufficient; rather, the significance of student voice lies in the extent to which it shapes decisions and experiences within the school (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; Lundy, 2007; Fleming, 2013, 2015; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2016; Flynn and Hayes, 2021). The Inspection reports support this interpretation by confirming the presence of representative structures such as student councils, while also exposing limits in their reach, particularly where engagement between boards of management and student councils is inconsistent. Read together, the findings and inspection evidence suggest that student participation is valued but not always embedded in ways that redistribute influence in a substantial sense. O'Brien *et al.* (2022), for example, provide an Irish illustration of participation extending beyond consultation, with students acting as co-researchers in school self-evaluation and contributing to evidence gathering, dialogue and school improvement planning. Their study points to a more democratic model of schooling, while also underlining the time, preparation and structural support needed if student voice is to move beyond an instrumental or compliance-based model. Irish policy developments from 2015 to 2024 have strengthened the formal expectation that children and young people should participate in decisions affecting them.

However, the findings here suggest that enactment remains mediated by local culture, leadership priorities and governance practices. The reported use of surveys, focus groups, progress reports and co-designed policies indicates that participatory structures are present, yet the variation evident in participant accounts and Inspection reports suggests that the move from voice as expression to voice as influence remains incomplete. This matters because classroom voice and co-construction are associated with greater self-efficacy, engagement and belonging (Levin, 2000; O'Brien, 2009; Allen *et al.,* 2022). The challenge, therefore, is not simply to create opportunities for students to speak, but to develop the conditions in which their perspectives can shape school life in sustained and visible ways.

A recurring theme in both the findings and the literature is the commitment to a broad, inclusive curriculum and to active, student-centred pedagogies. Evidence of broad subject choice to meet diverse needs aligns with the sector's history and intent to serve 'every student... in accordance with their own gifts and talents' (ST, 10). Participants' emphasis on active, child-centred pedagogies and inclusive classroom practices is reinforced by policy and research endorsing differentiated approaches (Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaite, 2017; DES, 2019; DE, 2022a). Stakeholder two suggests that innovation and pilot initiatives have been more common in Community Schools, while Stakeholder 13 later qualifies this by

arguing that context matters and that schools differ in their openness to innovation. This again reflects the literature's caution that policy enactment is mediated by local cultures and priorities (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992; Skerritt, O'Hara and Brown, 2021).

The findings demonstrate that schools offer a wide range of extracurricular activities to foster agency, personal and skill development in young people. This is well supported in the literature on belonging. Schools with caring cultures and inclusive activities provide 'second chances', offer stability, and promote student engagement (Osterman, 2000; O'Gorman, Salmon and Murphy, 2016; Craggs and Kelly, 2018; Korpershoek *et al.,* 2020; Riley, 2022). Transition Year (TY), as a uniquely Irish, student-centred, experiential programme fostering community connections, is linked to ownership of learning and holistic development (Bough, 2023). At the same time, inspection reports suggest that learner agency in day-to-day teaching is less consistently visible. In several cases, inspectors recommend a more systematic embedding of participatory classroom practices that enhance student agency. These include areas such as clearer use of success criteria and more active learner involvement in shaping learning and teaching. The NCCA *TY Programme Statement* (DE, 2024) endorses inclusivity and student agency, giving schools autonomy to design appropriately challenging experiences while the findings on students co-creating lunchtime maps and selecting subject lines scaffolds and strengthens student voice. It is noteworthy that while the findings in this study celebrate breadth and 'something for everybody', they do not evidence how cost barriers are mitigated, posing an implementation gap vis-a-vis inclusion commitments and rights-based participation. Resourcing and equity concerns that can be exclusionary are noted also in the literature (Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaite, 2017).

Overall, this study's findings align strongly with the existing literature on holistic development, student voice, active learning and inclusive, community-responsive practice in Community Schools. Stakeholders commended the sector for its dual commitment to academic achievement and student wellbeing, with policy frameworks and ethos providing a strong foundation for these aims. Inspection reports add useful triangulation by making variability in implementation more visible. The study would, however, have been strengthened by the inclusion of other stakeholder voices, particularly those of young people, parents and staff. Their omission limits insight into how holistic development and student voice are experienced and enacted in practice, and leaves gaps in understanding the broader impact and effectiveness of the Community School model.

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the study's findings in relation to the relevant literature and policy context. While previous research has addressed similar themes including leadership, values, inclusion, and stakeholder participation, this study explored them specifically within the Community School model. It examined the impact of patronage and governance structures on school culture across six themes. The chapter highlights the principal's pivotal community role, the importance of trust-based partnerships, the sector's commitment to holistic and inclusive education, and the centrality of student voice and participation in fostering belonging and agency.

In addressing the overarching research question, it is important to consider to what extent the patronage structure and the direct governance arrangements shape, or even contribute to the shaping of, the culture and practices evident in Community Schools. The findings suggest that, while the sector's history and aspirations have provided a robust foundation for these themes, the dynamics of patronage, where there are two or more patrons competing for influence, can and do impact school ethos and engagement. In such contexts, these findings show that schools often revert to the aspirational elements of the Community School model, using these ideals as a touchstone whilst simultaneously defining their own values and practices at school level. This tendency highlights how the current patronage and governance structures may both facilitate and constrain the reality of ethos and inclusion, depending on the level of engagement and clarity of vision among stakeholders.

The findings in this study are based largely on the perspectives of school principals and other stakeholders. To strengthen the evidence base, documentary analysis incorporated inspection report evidence from 12 Community Schools during the two-and-a-half-year period coinciding with this research. These inspector perspectives enrich the findings by offering an additional evidence-based lens on inclusion, belonging and community engagement.

Inspectors' observations broadly corroborate principals' accounts, while also introducing a more nuanced picture in which inclusive values are strongly articulated but unevenly enacted across contexts. These subtleties do not undermine principals' accounts; rather, they complement them and highlight areas where continued vigilance and further inquiry would enhance the realisation of the Community School mission.

The findings indicate that Community Schools are characterised by active, responsive leadership and a strong ethos of partnership and inclusion but also face ongoing challenges in

balancing academic demands with holistic aims and ensuring equity of access and participation. While the study is consistent with existing literature on leadership, partnership and inclusion, it also reveals gaps, particularly regarding the experiences of students, parents, and staff, underscoring the need for further research and deeper dialogue to fully understand the impact and effectiveness of the Community School model. In addition, Inspection report evidence adds an external perspective by incorporating student and parent perspectives and independent evaluative judgements, while also illustrating that some governance dynamics central to principals' accounts, particularly patronage relationships, remain comparatively under-articulated in formal evaluation reporting. The next and final chapter will draw together the implications and recommendations that emerge from this research, offering insights for policy, practice, and future research in the Community Schools sector.

Chapter 7: Recommendations

'I think historically the link with the Department as we experienced it, in our own principalship was always a very strong and direct linkage. Even more than that, from the Department's point of view in the earlier days, these were their schools. They really felt ownership of Community Schools. It was their model that they set up, they wanted it to work'. (ST, 11)

7.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together the main arguments and findings of the study and returns to the research questions that shaped the thesis. It does so with particular attention to the policy significance of the findings for the future of the Community School model within Irish education. The study examined how the patronage and governance structures of Community Schools influence school culture, ethos, climate and leadership practice, and how these dynamics are understood and experienced within the sector.

The thesis drew on interviews with principals, documentary analysis and system-level stakeholder perspectives to examine the relationship between governance arrangements and lived school experience. This chapter serves as both a conclusion to the argument and a summary of the research. It answers the research question, synthesises the key findings, considers their implications for policy, practice and the wider Irish education landscape, and presents recommendations on how the model might be more clearly recognised and developed.

7.2 Addressing the research question

This study set out to explore whether, and in what ways, the distinctive patronage and governance arrangements of Community Schools shape school culture, ethos, climate and leadership practice. It also examined how these arrangements are understood by those working within the model, how they influence everyday decision-making and relationships, and how far the founding vision of Community Schools is reflected in contemporary practice. The findings show clearly that patronage and governance do matter. They are not peripheral features of school organisation, but important influences on how school identity is understood, how authority is exercised, how partnership is enacted and how values are expressed in practice.

The research found that the joint patronage model remains one of the defining strengths of Community Schools, particularly in its potential to support shared ownership, community

responsiveness and a broad understanding of inclusion. However, that potential is not realised evenly across the sector. The evidence points to significant variation in how key issues are understood and enacted, including the role of patrons, the practical authority of boards of management, the meaning of partnership, and the interpretation of ethos and the Characteristic Spirit Statement. Community Schools are therefore neither defined solely by formal governance structures nor separate from them. Rather, governance and patronage shape the conditions within which ethos, leadership and participation are lived out, often in ways that depend heavily on local histories, relationships and custom.

The study therefore shows that the Community School model remains valuable and distinctive within Irish education, but that its founding vision has been only partially realised. Governance, patronage, ethos and community relationship continue to matter because they shape how school life is interpreted, organised and experienced. The thesis contributes an evidence-based account of these dynamics from within an underexplored sector and shows that structural ambiguity, uneven policy recognition and limited visibility of patrons and trustees within official frameworks have left too much to local negotiation.

7.3 Synthesis of key findings

Taken together, the findings show that Community Schools are marked by both distinctive strengths and persistent ambiguities. Their distinctiveness lies in the interaction of patronage, governance, ethos, leadership and community relationship, and these shape how school life is organised and experienced. These dimensions are not always clearly articulated, consistently enacted or adequately recognised in policy and inspection frameworks. The key findings are synthesised below under three themes: governance and patronage; ethos and identity; and leadership, inclusion and participation.

7.3.1 Governance and patronage: strength, ambiguity and uneven enactment

The findings indicate that governance and patronage are central to the distinctiveness of Community Schools, but also to many of their most significant unresolved tensions. Joint patronage emerged as both a defining strength and a continuing source of complexity. In principle, it offers a model of shared ownership, partnership across traditions and responsiveness to local communities. In practice, participants described differing understandings of what joint patronage means, how it should operate and where authority lies. In some cases, relationships appeared constructive and collaborative; in others, decision-making depended more on personality, local history and tacit understandings than on explicit

structures. A model that depends too heavily on informal accommodation remains vulnerable to inconsistency and uncertainty.

A related finding is that the formal governance architecture of Community Schools has not kept pace with the demands placed upon it. The Deed of Trust remains symbolically and structurally important, yet the study found shortcomings in how it is understood, interpreted and enacted. Rather than serving as a consistently clear and authoritative framework, it often appeared as a partial or unevenly used instrument whose practical force varies across schools. This contributes to uncertainty around patron roles, board functioning and the practical meaning of partnership. The findings also show that governance in Community Schools extends beyond formal structures alone. The board of management, the relationship between principal and chairperson, and the quality of patron-school engagement all matter, but so too do wider mediating structures such as the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS) network, the role of the Association of Joint Patrons (AJP) and the relationship with the Department of Education and Youth (DEY).

The study further suggests that these governance realities are not adequately visible in inspection and policy frameworks. If joint patronage, trustee roles, sectoral supports and governance ambiguity barely register in official accounts of school quality, leadership and school life, then a central dimension of what makes Community Schools distinctive is left under-examined. Governance in Community Schools therefore cannot be understood simply as a legal or administrative arrangement. It is a lived and negotiated process, shaped by both formal structures and the quality of the relationships through which those structures are enacted.

Other inspection types, including thematic studies, may address some of these issues, but they were outside the scope of this study.

7.3.2 Ethos and identity: lived values, but limited conceptual clarity

The study also shows that ethos remains central to the identity of Community Schools but is more often described in lived and relational terms than in formally articulated ones. Participants consistently associated ethos with inclusion, care, respect, belonging and responsiveness to community need. Ethos was therefore presented not as an abstract principle, but as something enacted through daily relationships, pastoral practice and the general character of the school. This confirms its continuing importance within Community Schools, but also shows that it is dynamic, negotiated and sometimes contested rather than

fixed. The findings suggest that schools may share broad values language while differing considerably in how those values are interpreted in practice.

At the same time, the study found that understandings of ethos were not always clearly articulated. The Characteristic Spirit Statement was not always strongly visible in participants' accounts, and there was ambiguity around the relationship between multi-denominational identity, religious heritage and inclusive practice. Tensions were also evident in relation to ritual, chaplaincy and the place of religion in school life. These issues were not uniformly understood across participants, and the study points to differing views on what should be retained, adapted or reinterpreted. This suggests that apparent consensus may mask unresolved differences on key matters of identity and practice. The challenge is not that ethos is absent, but that the language and frameworks available to describe it do not always capture the complexity, internal variation and practical tensions of what schools are trying to enact.

The findings also suggest that ethos is closely bound up with community relationship and belonging. Community Schools were repeatedly described as schools rooted in, and responsive to, their local communities, and this community orientation appears integral to how ethos is lived rather than simply declared. Ethos therefore cannot be reduced to statements of values or questions of denominational identity alone. It is also expressed in how schools position themselves as places of welcome, service, partnership and local responsiveness. Documentary analysis, however, suggests that the complexity of this lived ethos is only partially visible in inspection frameworks, which tend to capture ethos in more procedural terms than in the negotiated and relational ways described by participants.

7.3.3 Leadership, inclusion and participation: strong local practice under systemic pressure

A third key finding is that leadership, inclusion and participation in Community Schools are marked by strong local commitment, but also by significant systemic pressure. Principals described leadership as relational, adaptive and often distributed, with a strong emphasis on supporting staff, students and community relationships. This reflects the community-based orientation of the model and its concern with responsiveness and care. At the same time, leadership is exercised within increasingly complex administrative and compliance contexts that can constrain time for educational and values-led leadership.

The findings further suggest that inclusion and participation are important to how Community Schools understand themselves, but that their enactment is uneven. Schools often present

themselves as welcoming and inclusive, and many participants described strong student support, curriculum breadth and positive student voice structures. Belonging, holistic development and student-centred practice emerged as especially important to how inclusion is enacted in everyday school life. Yet the evidence also points to variation in how inclusion is realised in practice and in how far student participation extends beyond formal representative mechanisms.

The documentary analysis reinforces this conclusion. Inspection evidence broadly affirms strengths in leadership, inclusion and student participation, but it often presents these in more procedural terms than the fieldwork data. As a result, some of the more relational and negotiated aspects of Community School distinctiveness are only partially in official accounts. Overall, the study shows that Community Schools have considerable capacity for inclusive, relational and student-centred practice, but that this capacity is too often sustained by local effort rather than coherent system support.

7.4 Implications of the study

The findings show that the central issues facing Community Schools are not simply local or interpersonal. They arise from structural ambiguity, uneven policy recognition and inconsistent enactment across the sector. The implications are considered here in relation to policy, practice and the wider Irish education landscape.

7.4.1 Implications for policy

The policy implications are substantial. Community Schools continue to function within a system that has never fully clarified or consolidated the model it created. As a result, issues such as joint patronage, the status of the Deed of Trust and the visibility of patrons and trustees in governance and inspection frameworks have too often been left to local negotiation. This has produced unevenness across the sector and placed a heavy burden on school leaders and boards.

A clear implication is that the Community School model requires stronger formal recognition within Irish education policy. Its current position in policy thinking on governance, patronage and school establishment no longer reflects the lived reality of these schools. Greater policy clarity is needed to support consistency across the sector and to ensure that the distinctive contribution of Community Schools is recognised in national planning, review and reform.

A further implication concerns the future use of the model. Community Schools remain highly valuable for amalgamations and may be especially important again as demographics change in some areas. The limitation was not the use of the model for amalgamation, but the fact that it came to be viewed too narrowly in that role and was no longer available as a model for new school provision. In current conditions, the model offers a strong framework for cohesive local provision and more streamlined use of resources in certain areas.

7.4.2 Implications for practice

The study also has clear implications for practice. Community Schools work best where governance relationships are explicit, communication is regular and ethos is enacted deliberately rather than assumed. In practice, however, much still depends on local histories, personal relationships and inherited ways of working. This creates vulnerability and can lead to inconsistency and uncertainty.

The practical implication is that stronger routine structures are needed across the sector. This applies to communication between patrons, boards and principals, to more consistent approaches to ethos, and to leadership support, inclusion and student participation. Goodwill and local commitment remain important, but they are no longer sufficient on their own.

These practice implications extend beyond individual schools. Principals, boards and patrons often rely on wider mediating supports, including collegial networks and sectoral bodies, to manage ambiguity that should be resolved more clearly within the system itself. Stronger school-level routines therefore need to be matched by stronger sectoral support.

7.4.3 Implications for the wider Irish education landscape

At a wider system level, this study points to the uneven development of Irish post-primary education and to the continuing effects of a tripartite structure in which school types are not equally recognised in policy discourse. Community Schools were established as a distinctive model intended to combine community responsiveness, shared governance and broad accessibility. Yet this vision was never fully realised in policy terms.

The model has endured, but without the structural attention, conceptual clarity or official recognition that its complexity requires. A significant part of the system is therefore operating with unresolved questions around authority, identity and governance that remain insufficiently acknowledged.

Community Schools demonstrate that partnership models can be durable, adaptive and locally responsive. They also show that the system needs greater structural clarity if it is serious about equity, coherence and the future development of plural models of school provision.

7.5 Recommendations

The findings suggest that the model has benefited greatly from local commitment, but that this now needs to be complemented by stronger structural support. The recommendations below are organised in three areas: policy change, practice change and further academic research.

7.5.1 Policy changes required

The first set of recommendations concerns policy, because issues that have often been managed locally now require clearer policy direction. This study shows that several of the most significant challenges facing Community Schools arise not from any lack of commitment at school level, but from unresolved structural questions and inconsistent policy recognition. It also suggests that the policy limitation was not the use of the model for amalgamation, which remains one of its strengths, but the fact that the model came to be viewed too narrowly in that role and was no longer developed as an option for new school provision. If the model is to realise its full potential, policy must now support work that schools, principals, boards and patrons have too often been left to do for themselves.

First, the respective roles, responsibilities and decision-making routes within the joint patronage model should be formally clarified. It is no longer acceptable that key questions of authority should depend on local custom, inherited assumptions or the strength of individual relationships. The DEY, working with AJP and patrons, should establish clearer lines of responsibility between joint patrons themselves and between patrons, boards of management and principals. An important and achievable step would be to update the Governance Manual for Community & Comprehensive Schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). Developed in collaboration with ACCS, the governance manual is now substantially out of date. This work should be carried out with ACCS, which has the practical knowledge of the model, its history and its negotiated character that is now too often missing at policy level. An updated version, brought into line with a revised Deed of Trust and current legislation, would provide a more coherent framework for practice across the sector. Without this, uncertainty about authority in practice will continue to weaken accountability and produce uneven governance across schools operating under the same nominal model.

Second, the Deed of Trust should be comprehensively revised. The study shows that it can no longer be relied upon as a sufficiently clear or consistently enacted governance instrument in its current form. Its interpretation and practical force vary too widely across the sector, and this leaves unresolved questions about partnership, patron authority, succession and decision-making. A revised Deed should be aligned with current legislation, reflect contemporary patterns of patron representation and provide an authoritative basis for governance in practice. Until the foundational instrument of the model is revised and clarified, the wider governance architecture will remain unstable.

Third, patrons and trustees must be given stronger formal recognition within national governance and inspection frameworks. The current under-representation of these roles in policy discourse and inspection processes is no longer sustainable. If the governance realities of Community Schools are largely absent from official accounts of school quality and leadership, then a central dimension of school life is being overlooked. Policy makers should ensure that inspection frameworks, governance guidance and relevant policy documents explicitly reflect the operation of joint patronage, the role of trustees and the implications of governance ambiguity. Greater visibility is necessary not only for accuracy, but for accountability.

Fourth, the State should provide stronger structural support for sectoral coordination and formally recognise the Community School model as a current and viable form of school provision. The work of the AJP is especially important here and requires sustained support if unevenness across the sector is to be reduced. At a wider level, the DEY should ensure that the Community School model is more fully reflected in policy thinking on governance, school establishment and system planning. If parental choice, inclusion and responsiveness to local context are to be taken seriously, Community Schools must be recognised not as a legacy arrangement, but as a contemporary model worthy of policy attention and development.

Fifth, policy makers should explicitly recognise the Community School model as a strong framework for future amalgamations and for broad local provision. As demographic pressures re-emerge, the model should not be viewed merely as an administrative device for consolidation, but as a valuable means of supporting inclusive, locally accountable and cohesive provision. This matters particularly in smaller towns, where future restructuring should promote a broader local approach to provision rather than a narrower one. The

findings suggest that one of the strengths of the model lies precisely in the fact that its structures have required school communities to negotiate identity, partnership and practice rather than inherit them unexamined. That negotiated character has often been demanding, but it has also been productive and formative. In current conditions, where schools across sectors are increasingly similar in the provision they offer, the Community School model may be especially well suited to future restructuring. Under the current Online Patronage Process System (DE, 2020a) for new school provision, the joint patronage model is not available as a patronage option; as a result, there is currently no mechanism through which a new Community School can be established, and this should now change. It should therefore be available both as a model for new local configurations and as a framework for more streamlined use of resources in areas where enrolment numbers are falling.

These policy actions move from clarification to system recognition, but all are now necessary. Without them, Community Schools will continue to depend on local effort to manage problems that are structural in origin, and policy will continue to underuse one of its strongest frameworks for inclusive and non-segregated local provision.

7.5.2 Practice changes required

The second set of recommendations concerns practice. Some issues require policy reform, but others can be addressed through stronger routine practices at school and sectoral level. Community Schools work best where governance relationships are explicit, communication is regular, wider support structures are available and ethos is enacted deliberately. Practice change is therefore needed both within schools and across the relationships that connect schools, patrons, boards and sectoral bodies.

The most immediate practical priority is the consistent use of guidance that has already been developed and recently updated. The ACCS Guidelines for Patrons/Trustees (ACCS, 2018) set out clear communication lines for important governance issues, and together with an updated Governance Manual for Community & Comprehensive Schools they can provide a stronger basis for decision-making and accountability. These resources have the potential to strengthen trust across the sector and support more equitable practice between schools operating under different patron combinations. The challenge is to maintain these materials, ensure that they are understood and used across the sector, and move beyond documentation into practice. The larger task is to facilitate structured conversations between patrons so that they move towards more robust partnerships. Building trust, strengthening collegiality and

improving communication between patrons and schools is one of AJP's most important functions.

A second priority is the articulation of a clearer ethos-in-practice framework for Community Schools. AJP has already made an important start by developing the Characteristic Spirit Statement for these schools. This now needs to be carried further. This study shows that ethos is understood by many participants in dynamic, lived and relational terms, but that this understanding is often only loosely connected to the agreed statement. AJP therefore needs to lead the next stage of work by developing a clearer framework for how ethos is to be understood and enacted in practice. Such a framework should address values, inclusion, ritual, chaplaincy, religious education, religious instruction, pastoral care, relationships and student and parent participation. If ethos is central to the identity of Community Schools, it requires not only an agreed statement, but clearer guidance for enactment.

A third priority concerns leadership support. Principals in this study described strong commitment, high levels of responsibility and considerable adaptability, but also significant pressure arising from administrative and compliance demands. ACCS and other relevant bodies should continue to strengthen leadership development, but this should be accompanied by practical measures that protect time for educational and relational leadership. The sustainability of leadership in Community Schools will depend not only on training, but on reducing avoidable administrative burden.

A fourth priority is the strengthening of inclusion in practice. The findings suggest that Community Schools often present themselves as inclusive and community-oriented, yet enactment can vary and access is not always equitable across local contexts. Schools and patrons, with the support of AJP, should therefore review how inclusion is understood, monitored and enacted, particularly through admissions, student support structures and school participation practices. Inclusion should not remain a claimed value alone; it should be routinely examined as a lived reality.

A fifth priority is the further embedding of meaningful student participation. While many schools described strong listening cultures and representative structures, the evidence also suggests unevenness between formal student voice mechanisms and everyday participatory practice. Schools should continue to strengthen student participation not only in representative forums, but in teaching, learning and decision-making processes that affect students directly.

A sixth priority is more systematic support for boards of management if voluntary governance is to remain sustainable. Board members need ongoing induction, continuing training, access to up-to-date governance guidance and opportunities for networked learning. Given the increasing complexity of school governance, further consideration should also be given to how the role of the chairperson is supported. The continued sustainability of voluntary governance cannot be assumed.

A seventh practice priority is the strengthening of mediating and sectoral supports that help schools interpret and enact the model in practice. The findings suggest that organisations such as ACCS and AJP, along with collegial principal networks and structured patron-school engagement, play an important part in sustaining Community School distinctiveness and in reducing isolation where governance complexity is high. These supports should be strengthened and made more consistent, so that schools are not left to manage recurring ambiguities in isolation.

A final practice priority is to ensure that governance and ethos are made more visible in school review and development processes. These dimensions are central to the lived reality of Community Schools and should therefore be more clearly articulated in routine planning, reflection and evaluative conversations. Schools, patrons and sectoral bodies should develop clearer ways of documenting and reviewing how partnership, Characteristic Spirit Statement, ritual, inclusion and community responsiveness are being enacted in practice.

7.5.3 Further academic and research priorities

The final set of recommendations concerns further research. This study provides new insight into the relationship between patronage, governance, ethos and leadership in Community Schools, but it also highlights areas that require fuller investigation.

A first priority is to broaden the range of voices included in future research. This study focused primarily on principals, with some additional system-level stakeholder perspectives and documentary analysis. Further research should now include teachers, students, parents and guardians, board members and patrons. This would provide a more complete account of how Community School governance and ethos are experienced across the school community.

A second priority is research that examines joint patronage in practice from the perspective of patrons themselves. The operation of joint patronage remains underexplored, despite its centrality to the Community School model. Further work is needed on how patrons

understand their role, how they work with one another, and how they perceive their relationship with schools and boards.

A third priority is the study of student participation and democratic experience in everyday school life. This study points to positive developments in student voice but also suggests that participation may not be experienced evenly across all areas of school life. Future research should therefore examine how students themselves understand agency, belonging and participation within Community Schools.

A fourth priority is research on distributed leadership from the perspective of teachers and middle leaders. Principals in this study described leadership as collaborative and distributed, but further work is needed to examine how such practices are experienced by staff and how they shape school culture, decision-making and classroom practice.

Finally, comparative and policy-focused research is needed. Future studies should examine how Community Schools compare with other school types in relation to governance, inclusion, ethos and participation, and should explore how policy and inspection frameworks represent, or fail to represent, the realities of the model. Such work would help to move the debate beyond description and towards a fuller understanding of the place of Community Schools within the wider Irish education system.

7.6 Strengths and limitations of the study

This study has positive features, but its limitations should also be acknowledged.

A positive feature of the research lies in its focus on an underexplored aspect of Irish post-primary education. Community Schools have received limited sustained academic attention in comparison with other school types, particularly in relation to the interaction of patronage, governance, ethos and leadership. This thesis addresses that gap by providing a detailed, evidence-based account of how these dynamics are understood and experienced by principals. The qualitative aspect of its design allowed for nuanced engagement with issues that are complex, relational and context-dependent, and made it possible to capture dimensions of school life that would be difficult to access through more standardised methods alone.

A further positive feature is the use of multiple sources of data, including principal interviews, documentary analysis and system-level stakeholder perspectives. This enabled a more robust interpretation of the findings than would have been possible through a single data source and supported a more developed understanding of the relationship between

formal structures and lived practice. The study is also strengthened by its attention to context. Rather than treating Community Schools as a uniform category, it recognises variation across the sector and shows how governance and ethos are mediated by local histories, relationships and institutional arrangements.

The study also has limitations. Its primary empirical focus was on principals, and while this was appropriate to the research questions, it means that other perspectives were not explored to the same depth. The voices of teachers, students, parents and guardians, board members and patrons would have added further insight into how governance, ethos and participation are experienced across the wider school community. In addition, the number of cases examined was necessarily limited, and the findings should not be read as statistically generalisable across all Community Schools.

The aim of the study was not statistical generalisation, but analytic depth and interpretive understanding. Its best value lies in how the analysis undertaken and the findings presented resonate with educational practitioners and those in positions of educational leadership and governance rather than in any claim to represent every Community School in the country. The limitations of scope therefore do not diminish the significance of the findings, but they do indicate the need for caution in making universal claims and point to the importance of further research that includes a broader range of participants and settings.

7.7 Concluding comments

This study has shown that Community Schools occupy a distinctive and important place within Irish education. Their joint patronage model, strong community orientation and broad commitment to inclusion continue to mark them out as a significant form of school provision. At the same time, the findings show that the strengths of the model have too often been sustained through local commitment rather than coherent system support. Patronage, governance, ethos and leadership are closely connected in the lived reality of these schools, but the structures through which they are enacted remain uneven and insufficiently recognised in national policy.

The central contribution of this thesis is to show that the Community School model remains relevant and valuable, but that its founding vision has been only partially realised. If the model is to thrive in contemporary Ireland, it requires clearer governance structures, stronger policy recognition and more consistent articulation of its ethos and purpose. The task now is

not simply to preserve the model, but to recognise and develop it as a model well suited to the future of local school provision.

Appendices

Appendix A: Table of Community Schools

(Schools in green italics text are greenfield/new schools. The remainder are amalgamations or mergers between a voluntary secondary school and the local VEC.)

DATE	NAME	PATRONS/TRUSTEES
1970	*Rosmini Community School, Dublin*	City of Dublin VEC Rosminian Congregation
1972	Scoil Phobal Mhic Dara, Carna, Galway	Co. Galway VEC Sisters of Mercy WP
1972	*Coolmine Community School, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Vincentian Fathers La Sante Union
1972	*Tallaght Community School, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Marist Brothers Dominican Order
1973	Carndonagh Community School, Donegal	Co. Donegal VEC Bishop of Derry
1973	Clifden Community School, Galway	Co. Galway VEC Sisters of Mercy WP Br. Dr. James Mungovan
1973	Pobalscoil Chloich Cheannfhaola, Falcarragh, Donegal.	Co. Donegal VEC Bishop of Raphoe
1973	Pobalscoil Ghaoth Dobhair, Donegal	Co. Donegal VEC Bishop of Raphoe An t-Athair Micheal Mac Suibhne
1973	*Mayfield Community School, Cork*	City of Cork VEC Bishop of Cork & Ross
1973	Millstreet Community School, Cork	Co. Cork VEC Bishop of Kerry Presentation Sisters SP
1973	Moyne Community School, Westmeath	Co. Longford VEC Bishop of Ardagh & Clonmacnoise
1974	Ardee Community School, Louth	Co. Louth VEC Sisters of Mercy NP Archbishop of Armagh, Primate of

		All-Ireland
1974	*Ballinteer Community School, Dublin*	Brigidine Sisters Carmelite Fathers Co. Dublin VEC
1974	Douglas Community School, Cork	City of Cork VEC Bishop of Cork & Ross
1974	Rosses Community School, Dungloe, Donegal	Co. Donegal VEC Bishop of Raphoe
1975	Cabinteely Community School, Dublin	Co. Dublin VEC Ursulines Archbishop of Dublin
1975	*Holy Child Community School, Sallynoggin, Dublin*	Society of the Holy Child Jesus Le Cheile Schools Trust
1976	*Ballincollig Community School, Cork*	Co. Cork VEC Bishop of Cork & Ross
1977	Ballyhaunis Community School, Mayo	Co. Mayo VEC Sisters of Mercy WP Archbishop of Tuam
1977	*Pobalscoil Íosa, Malahide, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Archbishop of Dublin
1977	Ramsgrange Community School, Wexford	Co. Wexford VEC Sisters of St. Louis
1977	*St. Mark's Community School, Tallaght, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Sisters of Mercy SCP Archbishop of Dublin
1978	*Donahies Community School, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Sisters of St. Clare Archbishop of Dublin
1978	Tullow Community School, Carlow	Co. Carlow VEC Brigidine Sisters Patrician Brothers
1979	*Old Bawn Community School, Tallaght, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Domincan Sisters Dominican Fathers
1979	*Bishopstown Community School, Cork*	City of Cork VEC Bishop of Cork & Ross

1980	Beara Community School, Castletownbere, Cork	Co. Cork VEC Sisters of Mercy SP
1980	St. Brendan's Community School, Birr, Offaly	Co. Offaly VEC Sisters of Mercy SCP Presentation Sisters
1980	*Blakestown Community School, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Sisters of St. Louis Servite Order
1980	*Coláiste Chiaráin, Leixlip, Kildare*	Co. Kildare VEC, Presentation Communications Archbishop of Dublin
1980	*Pobalscoil Neasáin, Baldoyle, Dublin*	City of Dublin VEC Sisters of Charity Christian Brothers
1980	*Portmarnock Community School, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Archbishop of Dublin Loreto Sisters
1980	*St. Tiernan's Community School, Balally, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Carmelite Fathers Faithful Companions of Jesus
1981	Bailieborough Community School, Cavan	Auxiliary Bishop of Armagh Bishop of Kilmore Co. Cavan VEC
1981	*Carrigaline Community School, Cork*	Co. Cork VEC Bishop of Cork & Ross
1981	*Holy Family Community School, Rathcoole, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Presentation Sisters SE DES Place Educational Association
1982	*Killinarden Community School, Tallaght, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Daughters of Charity Archbishop of Dublin
1982	*Pobalscoil Iosolde, Palmerstown, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Archbishop of Dublin
1982	*St. Kilian's Community School, Ballywaltrim, Wicklow*	Co. Wicklow VEC Franciscan Brothers Marist Sisters
1983	Scoil Mhuire Community School, Kildare	Co. Kildare VEC Presentation Sisters Cork

1984	*St. Aidan's Community School, Tallaght, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Loreto Sisters
1985	*St. Caimin's Community School, Shannon, Clare*	Co. Clare VEC Sisters of Mercy SCP Bishop of Killaloe
1987	Castlecomer Community School, Kilkenny	Co. Kilkenny VEC Presentation Sisters SE
1988	St. Ciaran's Community School, Kells, Meath	Co. Meath VEC Bishop of Meath Christian Brothers
1988	St. Peter's Community School, Passage West, Cork	Co. Cork VEC Sisters of Mercy SP
1990	Ballinrobe Community School, Mayo	Co. Mayo VEC Sisters of Mercy WP Archbishop of Tuam
1990	Dunmore Community School, Galway	Co. Galway VEC Bishop of Clonfert
1990	Heywood Community School, Laois	Co. Laois VEC Brigidine Sisters Salesian Fathers
1990	Mountmellick Community School, Laois	Co. Laois VEC Presentation Communications
1990	Portumna Community School, Galway	Co. Galway VEC Bishop of Clonfert
1992	Hartstown Community School, Dublin	Co. Dublin VEC Archbishop of Dublin
1992	Kilrush Community School, Clare	Co. Clare VEC Sisters of Mercy SCP Christian Brothers DL
1993	Castlerea Community School, Roscommon	Co. Roscommon VEC Sisters of Mercy WP
1993	Gorey Community School, Wexford	Co. Wexford VEC Loreto Sisters
1993	St. Louis Community School, Kiltimagh, Mayo	Co. Mayo VEC Le Chéile Schools Trust
1994	*Ashbourne Community School, Meath*	Co. Meath VEC Bishop of Meath

1994	Carrick-on-Shannon Community School, Leitrim	Co. Leitrim VEC Marist Sisters
1994	Cashel Community School, Tipperary	Co. Tipperary VEC Presentation Sisters SE Christian Brothers
1995	Gort Community School, Galway	Co. Galway VEC Sisters of Mercy WP Bishop of Galway
1996	Kinsale Community School, Cork	Co. Cork VEC Sisters of Mercy SP
1996	Loreto, Milford Community School, Donegal	Co. Donegal VEC Bishop of Raphoe Loreto Sisters
1996	Moate Community School, Westmeath	Co. Westmeath VEC Carmelite Fathers Sisters of Mercy WP
1997	St. John the Baptist Community School, Hospital, Limerick	Co. Limerick VEC Archbishop of Cashel & Emly Presentation Sisters SE
1998	Scoil Phobail Sliabh Luachra, Rathmore, Kerry	Kerry Education Service Presentation Sisters SP
1999	St. Wolstan's Community School, Kildare	Co. Kildare VEC Holy Faith Sisters
2000	Coláiste Cholmcille, Ballyshannon, Donegal	Co. Donegal VEC Sisters of Mercy NP Bishop of Raphoe
2000	*St. Colmcille's Community School, Knocklyon, Dublin*	Co. Dublin VEC Carmelite Fathers, Knocklyon
2001	Boyne Community School, Meath	Co. Meath VEC Bishop of Meath
2001	Pobalscoil Inbhear Scéine, Kerry	Co. Kerry VEC Sisters of St. Clare Edmund Rice Schools Trust
2002	Blackwater Community School, Lismore, Waterford	Co. Waterford VEC Christian Brothers Presentation Sisters Mercy Order
2002	Glenamaddy Community School, Galway	Co. Galway VEC Sisters of Mercy WP

2002	St. Attracta's Community School, Sligo	Co. Sligo VEC Bishop of Achonry Marist Sisters
2004	Athboy Community School, Athboy, Meath	Co. Meath VEC Bishop of Meath Sisters of Mercy Tullamore
2004	Gallen Community School, Ferbane, Offaly	Co. Offaly VEC Bishop of Ardagh & Clonmacnoise Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny
2006	Pobalscoil na Tríonóide Youghal, Cork	Co. Cork VEC Loreto Sisters Edmund Rice Schools Trust
2007	Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne, Kerry	Kerry VEC Christian Brothers Presentation Sisters SP
2008	Ballinamore Community School, Leitrim	Sisters of Mercy The Bishop of Kilmore Co. Letrim VEC
2009	Mountrath Community School, Laois	Brigidine Secondary School (Mountrath), Patrician College (Ballyfin), Co. Laois VEC
2011	Kildare Town Community School, Kildare	Co. Kildare VEC Diocese of Kildare & Leighlin
2014	*Ballymakenny College, Louth*	Louth Meath ETB Educate Together
2014	*Celbridge Community School, Kildare*	Educate Together Kildare & Wicklow ETB
2018	Skibbereen Community School, Cork	Cork ETB Bishop of Cork & Ross, The Mercy Sisters, De la Salle Brothers
2023	Ennistymon Community School, Clare	CEIST Edmund Rice Schools Trust Limerick & Clare ETB

Appendix B: Newspaper Themes and Headlines

The account of foundational public disclosure	
Nov 12, 1970	Unified system for post-primary education planned - Department's working document under study by hierarchy
Accounts of delay and local resistance to implementation	
May 22, 1971	Schools plan 'set-back'
Oct 12, 1971	Blanchardstown Community Schools - disillusionment and frustration
Feb 18, 1972	Faulkner may have anticipated the Ard Fheis on schools' dispute
Feb 06, 1980	School deeds not yet signed
Accounts of contestation over authority and representation	
May 19, 1971	School heads appalled at proposals - community plan found totally unacceptable
May 25, 1971	Community Schools - the engine in reverse
Jun 22, 1971	'An Open Letter' to Mr Faulkner, regarding last week's five Community School meetings
Nov 05, 1971	Strong opposition attack on proposals for community schools
May 10, 1979	Why the Vocational Schools lose out
Jun 20, 1984	VECs seen as 'under siege'
Jan 17, 1985	Community Schools face VEC boycott
May 27, 1986	Primary responsibility for education rests with parents
Accounts of board of management concerns	
May 24, 1971	More parental say in Community Schools - Lynch - calm discussion urged
Oct 28, 1974	A plea for realism on management
Accounts of minority denominational concerns	
Oct 23, 1971	Catholic control of school feared - Dublin rector's warning
Sep 16, 1974	Community or Comprehensive - the dilemma for protestants
Accounts of the role of finance and external influence	
May 26, 1971	$14m. for schools sought - World Bank loan
Aug 10, 1971	Explanation - 'World Bank plot'

Jan 18, 1974	$25m. World Bank loan for education
Accounts of implementation and legal formalisation	
Jan 19, 1971	Fitzgerald takes up schools theme - praise for community plan
May 14, 1971	Community School plan enlarged - Minister brings forward his proposals
Sep 14, 1971	Tallaght and its new Community School
Oct 14, 1972	Minister says school plan 'fair balance'
Mar 25, 1981	Deed of Trust signed
Mar 27, 1981	Deeds of Trust to be signed

Appendix C: Literature Review Search

This literature review involved an initial search to identify books, policy and other reports, journal articles, and newspaper articles on school culture, inclusion, ethos, and leadership practices of school principals. Policy reports considered include those published by the Department of Education (DE), National Council for Special Education (NCSE), National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) BelonG To Youth Services, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the European Commission. Other reports include Irish university research reports. A total of 19 reports were included after reading the full text of the relevant available reports.

At the initial stage, the databases searched included EBSCO Host, Google Scholar, and JSTOR with a focus on articles written in English within the date range 2000-2024.

Key words searched included 'post-primary' 'secondary' 'schools' AND 'Ireland OR England OR UK' NOT 'College' NOT 'primary'. The search was later expanded to include 'European' and the 'EU'.

Separate searches were conducted using the key words above and:

1	'community' AND 'belonging'
2	'child centred' AND 'holistic'
3	'school governance' OR 'school patronage' OR 'joint patronage' OR 'board of management' OR 'BOM' OR 'patrons' NOT 'special needs' OR 'SEN'
4	'inclusion'
5	'distributed leadership' OR 'school leadership' OR 'principal' OR 'school leader'
6	'autonomy' AND 'accountability' AND 'teachers' NOT 'students'

The research involved a preliminary reading of each abstract and excluded articles based on those not relevant to the general themes or any outside of Ireland or UK regions including the ones below:

1	Specific case studies carried out in American High Schools/Australian Schools/South African Schools
2	Not peer reviewed -TES magazine
3	Third level and Primary specific Teacher Education
4	Items not available through DCU library and duplicate articles sourced across the three databases.

The final literature search across the three databases, EBSCO Host (192), Google Scholar (151), and JSTOR (211) resulted in 554 unique articles. The abstracts of these articles were screened for the inclusion/exclusion criteria, and only 99 articles and content from nine books were sufficiently relevant for a full-text reading.

'Snowballing' refers to finding citations in a paper (backward) and to a paper (forward) and it is important to make this explicit when it is used in a literature review (Van Wee and Banister, 2016). In this review, backward snowballing was used to locate other relevant studies referenced in the initial articles selected and this is noted in the review where it occurs.

Given the dearth of research material available on Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland, a search of ProQuest and a separate search of DORAS, the DCU Research Repository were conducted to establish if there were any theses, scholarly articles, or books available on either the chosen themes or indeed, on other themes as they applied to the context of Community and Comprehensive Schools. The DORAS search conducted using the search terms, 'Community and Comprehensive Schools' yielded a total of 232 articles and 849 theses submitted between 2000–2024. Following a preliminary reading of titles and abstracts, only 14 journal articles, 33 doctoral theses, and two research reports were deemed relevant for a full text reading.

The ProQuest search yielded fewer results. The search term 'post-primary education in Ireland AND ethos', set within a publication date timeframe of the years 2000–2024, yielded 526 results. Applying the following filters, 'Religion' 'Religious Education' 'Culture', and 'Families' and excluding early years and primary education, readings outside of Ireland and UK, and history articles, resulted in the inclusion of a total of only five theses, seven journal articles, content from five books, and four newspaper articles.

As in previous searches, while the literature included in these two searches explores the themes in different contexts, including the ETB model, the Voluntary Secondary model, and the primary school model, it did not yield many studies specific to the Community School model in the Republic of Ireland.

Appendix D: Template Characteristic Spirit of a Community School

Template Characteristic Spirit of a Community School under the joint patronage of Catholic and ETB patrons:

XX School Community school is a co-educational/all girls/all boys multi-denominational post-primary school under the joint patronage of XX Bishop and/or Religious Congregation and XX ETB.

Community Schools provide a comprehensive system of post-primary education open to all the children of the local community. An innovative approach to delivery of a wide-ranging curriculum contributes to the spiritual, moral, mental, physical and social well-being of students within their community. Community Schools may also provide for life-long learning within their local community through the provision of adult education programmes.

Our school was established under the Deed of Trust and opened on XX date. (*Schools should customise to make reference to how the school was established e.g. amalgamation, greenfield site*). The values of XX ETB as a multi-denominational State Body and the inherited traditions, Christian values and founding intentions of XX Bishop and/or Religious Congregation are enshrined in the characteristic spirit and in the life of our school and are respected and cherished.

The core values of XX Community School are care, respect, community, inclusion, equality, justice and fairness. These values combine to provide and support an atmosphere which is conducive to excellence in teaching and learning. We endeavour to assist each student to reach his/her full potential in a calm, caring and creative environment.

Our values are reflected in how we live as a school community. The unique and intrinsic value of each member of the school community is recognised and respected. All are treated equally, regardless of race, gender, religion/belief, age, family status, marital status, civil status, membership of the Traveller community, sexual orientation, ability, disability or socio-economic status. All students are given equal opportunity for enrolment, in line with the Education (Admissions to School) Act (2018) construed in accordance with section 3 of the Equal Status Act 2000. Once enrolled, our school (school XX) provides all our students with equal opportunities to engage with the curriculum, school life and the local community.

Our school (school XX) provides a safe physical and social environment that reinforces a sense of belonging to the school community and wider society. We strive to enable every student to realise their full potential regardless of any aspect of their identity, culture or background. Our school promotes a fully inclusive education which recognises the plurality of identities, beliefs and values held by students, parents and staff. It seeks to prepare open-

minded and responsible citizens with a strong sense of shared values with a view to contributing to a just and fairer society.

Our school is multi-denominational where we welcome, respect and support students of all religions and beliefs. The provision of religious education, religious worship and the work of the Chaplain all combine to reflect the founding intention of the school, the school's mission statement and the needs of the students within the school. The characteristic spirit of the school finds practical expression through the provision of pastoral, liturgical and social outreach activities, as appropriate, for each student.

In (School XX), we celebrate the partnership, collaboration and empathy which nurtures and develops our young people in a community where the essence of our ethos is care and respect for self, others, and our environment.

Ethos Statement for Inclusion in Admissions Policy of a Community School under the joint patronage of Educate Together and ETB patrons.

Celbridge Community School: This statement has been agreed between Educate Together and Kildare Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB). Celbridge Community School is a community school recognised by the Department of Education (DE). It is multi-denominational and co-educational and Educate Together and Kildare Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB) are its joint patrons. As such, it operates within the regulations laid down by the Department of Education and Skills and follows the curricular programmes prescribed.

We are committed to the inclusive and equality-based values laid down in the Educate Together Charter and Mission Statement, and the KWETB core values of excellence in education, care, equality, community and respect.

Celbridge Community School is learner-centred, equality-based and democratically run. This means that all members of the school community, whatever their social, cultural or belief background, work together in an atmosphere of dignity and respect.

Our vision is for an equality-based model of second-level school; one that places the student at its centre and is run as a participatory democracy, with respectful partnership between parents, students, staff and school management. We aim to create a vibrant, welcoming school community with positive teacher-student relationships, in which every student feels a real sense of belonging. Each student is encouraged to explore their full range of abilities and supported to reach their full academic and social potential, whatever their background and identity.

Our multi-denominational and equality-based ethos provides a strong moral, ethical and spiritual framework for the whole school community that informs teaching and learning and all policies and practices in the daily life of the school.

Students follow an Ethical Education Curriculum, which includes learning about different religions and belief systems, equality and justice issues and an ethical approach to the environment. In line with our ethical and democratic

ethos, our school is committed to embedding and modeling sustainable and eco-friendly practices.

Celbridge Community School aims to provide an education that will enable all students to contribute meaningfully to their communities, embrace the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society and develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to live, learn and work in the 21st century.

This statement was agreed between Educate Together and Louth Meath Education and Training Board (LMETB)

Ballymakenny College is a community school recognised by the Department of Education (DE). It is multi-denominational and co-educational and Educate Together and Louth Meath Education and Training Board are its joint patrons. As such, it operates within the regulations laid down by the Department of Education and Skills and follows the curricular programmes prescribed.

We are committed to the inclusive and equality-based values laid down in the Educate Together Charter and Mission Statement, and the Louth Meath ETB core values of excellence in education, care, equality, community and respect.

Ballymakenny College is learner-centred, equality-based and democratically run. This means that all members of the school community, whatever their social, cultural or belief background, work together in an atmosphere of dignity and respect. Our vision is for an equality-based model of second-level school; one that places the student at its centre and is run as a participatory democracy, with respectful partnership between parents, students, staff and school management.

We aim to create a vibrant, welcoming school community with positive teacher-student relationships, in which every student feels a real sense of belonging. Each student is encouraged to explore their full range of abilities and supported to reach their full academic and social potential, whatever their background and identity.

Our equality-based and multi-denominational ethos provides a strong moral, ethical and spiritual framework for the whole school community that informs teaching and learning and all policies and practices in the daily life of the school.

Students follow an ethical education curriculum, which includes learning about different religions and belief systems, equality and justice issues and an ethical approach to the environment. In line with our equality-based, ethical and democratic ethos, our school is committed to embedding and modeling sustainable and eco-friendly practices.

Ballymakenny College aims to provide an education that will enable all students to contribute meaningfully to their communities, embrace the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society and develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to live, learn and work in the 21st century.

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form - Interview

Research Study Title: Do the patronage and governance structures of the community school impact the culture, the ethos and the climate of the school community?

Principal Investigator: Áine O'Sullivan, Doctoral Student, Dublin City University

Supervisors: Professor Gerard McNamara, Dublin City University

Dr Kevin Williams, Dublin City University

Dr Brendan Walsh, Dublin City University

Purpose of the Research:

This research aims to capture the distinctive niche of the Community School sector in the wider context of second level education in Ireland. The broad aim of this research is to investigate how school culture, ethos, climate and leadership practices in the schools are shaped by the model of model's patronage and governance structures in Community Schools.

Please tick/write Y in all the boxes with which you agree.

Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Participant Information Sheet:

☐ I have read the Participant Information Sheet (or had it read to me).

☐ I understand the information provided.

☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study.

☐ I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions.

☐ I am aware that my survey responses (including verbatim quotes) will be anonymised.

Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary:

☐ I am aware that I may withdraw from the Research Study at any point.

☐ I am aware that my data can be removed at any time up to the point of anonymisation.

Confirmation of arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations:

☐ I am aware that confidentiality of my data is assured, subject to legal limitations.

☐ I am aware that the DCU Data Protection Officer is Mr. Martin Ward and that he can be contacted at data.protection@dcu.ie Ph: 7005118 / 7008257.

Confirmation of arrangements regarding archiving/destruction of data:

☐ I am aware of the arrangements regarding archiving/destruction of my data.

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.

Participant's Signature:

Name in Block Capitals:

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F: Participant Information Sheet - Community School Principals - Interview

Research Study Title:

Do the patronage and governance structures of the community school impact the culture, the ethos and the climate of the school community?

Introductory Statement

This research study sets out to ascertain if the combined patronage and governance structures imbue the Community School sector with a unique structure which shapes in particular, the culture, the ethos and the climate of the school community and to assess the impact of these structures on the day-to-day leadership practices and sense of agency of the school leaders in these schools.

Áine O'Sullivan (Ed.D Student Researcher)	Ed.D Student DCU, Institute of Education aine.osullivan93@dcu.ie
Professor Gerard McNamara (Supervisor)	DCU Institute of Education School of Policy & Practice gerry.mcnamara@dcu.ie
Dr Kevin Williams (Supervisor)	DCU Senior Research Fellow doctorkevinwilliams@gmail.com
Dr Brendan Walsh (Supervisor)	DCU Institute of Education School of Policy & Practice brendan.walsh@dcu.ie

What is this research about?

The broad aim of this research is to investigate how school culture, ethos, climate and leadership practices in the schools are shaped by the Community School model's patronage and governance structures. The research will focus on the contemporary relevance of the Community School/joint patronage model in an increasingly pluralist society.

Why is this research being conducted?

This research aims to capture the distinctive niche of the Community School sector in the wider context of second level education in Ireland. A review of literature identified very few studies on Community Schools in the Republic of Ireland. Where Community Schools form part of studies, the data often refers to a single Community School only. In this sense, the available literature on

Community Schools is limited and the researchers have identified a need for further research on these school types. The research contributes to the continued development of the sector and ensure that the model remains as one which is fit for purpose which continues to be relevant nationally. Funding for this research is being provided by ACCS in full.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You are being invited to participate in this research study as you have expressed an interest in opting in to phase II of this research study.

What will happen if you decide to take part in this research study?

If you decide to participate in this phase of the study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview which will take approximately 1 hour to complete.

How will your data be used?

The researchers will follow the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). They will retain your data for the duration of the research study (ending in December 2026) and for an additional period of two years to allow for further analysis and verification. After this period, your data will be securely deleted.

- The researcher, Áine O'Sullivan, is the Data Controller responsible for the data collected in this study.
- Individuals have the right to access their personal data. Participants can request access to their data by contacting the researcher, Áine O'Sullivan, directly or by reaching out to the Data Protection Officer, Mr. Martin Ward, (data.protection@dcu.ie , Ph.: 7005118 / 7008257)
- Categories of personal data concerned: Normal Personal Data, de-identified transcripts, audio recordings, contact list of participants and online consent forms with signature.
- Categories of recipients with whom data is shared: Áine O'Sullivan (Ed.D Student) and her Supervisors, Professor Gerard McNamara, Dr Kevin Williams and Dr Brendan Walsh.
- Personal data will be processed and stored through the DCU Microsoft 365 environment. The Microsoft Data Processing agreement can be accessed here: *https://www.microsoft.com/licensing/docs/documents/download/MicrosoftProductandServicesDPA(WW)(English)(Feb2025)(CR).docx*
- Any data collected on mobile devices will be protected with a strong password at a minimum, and/or encrypted if the device supports it. Data will be removed from mobile devices as soon as is practicable and stored in a secured location in DCU (on server or institutional Google Drive).
- Paper based data will be held securely in locked cabinets in DCU, with access restricted to the named researchers The reason(s) for which the data will be processed or held.
- Retention period: The requirements of the General Data Protection

Regulation (GDPR) will be followed. The data will be retained for the duration of the research study (ending in December 2026) and for an additional period of two years to allow for further analysis and verification. After this period, your data will be securely deleted. Electronic data will be overwritten/securely deleted and paper-based data will be confidentially shredded.

- See Data Subject Rights Procedure Dublin City University at this link: https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/info/3aids_rgts_proc-public-final.pdf.
- Information on rights to withdraw consent: You are free to withdraw your consent for the processing of your personal data up to the point of anonymization of data. To withdraw your consent please email aine.osullivan93@mail.dcu.ie.
- You have the right to lodge a complaint with the Irish Data Protection Commission concerning the use of your personal data: https://www.dataprotection.ie/.

How will your privacy be protected (including any legal limits to confidentiality)?

To protect privacy, all information that is collected from you will remain confidential to the research team and will be treated with utmost confidentiality. Data relating to this study will be encrypted and stored for a maximum of two years post-completion of the study, after which point it will be destroyed. Audio recordings, through which your voice might be able to be identified, will be destroyed as soon as the transcriptions are completed. It will not be possible for anyone from outside the research team to identify you from your transcribed responses from the interview. Only the researchers will have access to your contact information. Your name or other personally identifiable information will not be included in the project data file or any reports or publications related to this project. All audio recordings will be password protected and permanently deleted when they have been transcribed to a text file. Any references to specific personnel, will be replaced with pseudonyms in the transcription or survey responses prior to sharing of the data.

Please note that confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

What are the benefits of taking part in this research study?

- It is envisaged that participants who engage in this study will get an opportunity to reflect on key areas of their professional lives and on their relationships with key stakeholders in their school communities.
- The research will integrate the life experiences of the principal with an examination of the claims made in a range of literature on the topic. This will be significant in clarifying the school leaders' understanding of their role in what can be an extraordinarily

complex lived reality.

- The participants will be contributing broadly to research that aims to establish patterns and norms in culture, climate and leadership practices across the schools operating within the Community School model. It is hoped that this understanding will contribute to their own knowledge of the contemporary relevance of the model in an increasingly pluralist society.

What are the risks of taking part in this study?

- There are no adverse effects or risks envisaged from engagement in this study. This research is focused on distilling common themes and experiences of the stakeholders engaged with the community school sector. Consequently, this research is considered low risk as it explores the everyday practices of school principals who are not considered vulnerable participants, and the research does not involve the collection of any special categories of protected data under GDPR (Art. 9.1). However where vulnerabilities, might surface during the study, please note supports are available through the Occupational Health Provider, Spectrum. Life, a free and confidential service funded by the Department of Education and available to all school personnel. The details are as follows: Freephone: 1800 411057, Email: eap@spectrum.life, WhatsApp & SMS: Text 'Hi' to: 087 369 0010.

Can you change your mind at any stage and withdraw from this study?

Your participation in the project is voluntary and will end if you choose to withdraw your consent to participate. Your data can be removed at any time up to the point of anonymization. To withdraw please contact Áine O'Sullivan at aine.osullivan93@mail.dcu.ie.

How will you find out what happens with this project?

A copy of the research findings will be made available on request.

Contact details for further information:

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me or my supervisors. See details above.

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, email: rec@dcu.ie.

Appendix G: Schedule of Questions for School Principals

Schedule of questions for a semi-structured interview with Community School principals (approx. 60 min)

Welcome – *introductions for the record, ref. to survey and ref. to area of study and research question themes. (**5 minutes)***

Sense of Belonging and Community (10 minutes)

1. **Community School Concept:** When you hear the phrase 'Community School,' what comes to mind?
2. **Community Engagement:** Is a sense of community/belonging cultivated among staff, students, and parents? If so, how?

Child-Centred and Active Learning (10 minutes)

3. Do phrases like 'child-centred' or 'active learning' have relevance in this school? Can you think of activities or strategies that have been successful in integrating these concepts into the school's teaching practices?
4. Do you face any challenges in promoting active learning? How do you address these challenges?
5. Do you see a value in student voice in shaping school policies and practices? What do you see as important in student voice and how can it be integrated into school decision making processes?
6. Are there different spheres where a student can succeed in this school such as academic, extracurricular, and social areas? Please provide examples.

Ethos, Faith, and Spirituality (10 minutes)

7. With regard to ethos, do you have a view of what multi-denominational education is in Ireland today? How do you think it impacts the school's culture and inclusivity?
8. What does the agreed Characteristic Spirit Statement mean to you as a leader of this school? How do you implement this statement in your daily leadership practices?
9. How do you balance/accommodate the diverse religious and non-religious beliefs of your students? Can you provide examples of specific policies or practices that support this balance?
10. What role does Religious Education play in your school? How do you ensure that it respects and includes the diverse beliefs of your student body? Are there challenges with the Deed of Trust requirement in this regard?

Inclusion (5 minutes)

11. Can you share any specific examples of inclusive practices that have

been successful in your school? Do you measure the impact of these practices? If so, how?

Leadership and Management Practices (5 minutes)

12. Tell me about your own leadership style? Do you face many challenges as a leader? Do you face challenges as a leader, particularly in relation to the patronage and governance structures of the Community School model? How do you address these challenges?

Governance and Patronage Structures (10 minutes)

13. Can you describe the relationship between you as school principal and the Board of Management? How does this relationship influence decision-making and school policies?
14. How does the governance structure (*direct relationship with the Department of Education)* impact your ability to manage the day-to-day tasks as school leader? If so, how?
15. Do you consider that there is effective communication/collaboration with the patrons? Can you provide examples of successful collaboration? What changes, if any, would you like to see happen in this regard?

The Community School Model and Sector (5 minutes)

16. If you were to do a S (strengths) C (challenges) O (opportunities) T (threats) analysis of the Community School Model today, what would you highlight?

See notes in italics below:

Strengths*: What do you consider to be the key strengths of the Community School model? How do these strengths benefit the school community?*

Challenges*: What are the main challenges faced by the Community School model? How do these challenges impact the school's operations and objectives?*

Opportunities*: What opportunities do you see for the Community School model to grow and improve? How can these opportunities be leveraged to enhance the school's effectiveness?*

Threats*: What threats or risks do you perceive to the Community School model? How can these threats be mitigated to ensure the model's sustainability?*

Appendix H: Schedule of Questions for System Stakeholders

1. What does the term 'Community School model' mean to you?

2. Do the patronage and governance structures of Community Schools:
    a. influence the climate and culture of the school community? If so, in what ways?
    b. shape the day-to-day leadership practices and sense of agency of school leaders in Community Schools? If so, can you identify any examples?

3. How can members of the board of management be better supported to enhance their ability to shape, adapt, and enhance school culture?

4. How does the multi-denominational ethos manifest in Community Schools today? Can you identify any particular respects?
    a. What challenges arise in balancing inclusivity with religious and cultural diversity? (e.g., the Deed of Trust requirement for 2 hours of Religious Education)
    b. In what ways do the presence of chaplains and religious celebrations contribute to or challenge the multi-denominational ethos of Community Schools?
    c. What is your view on the difference between the ethos in a Catholic or an ETB school and the ethos in a Community School of which e.g. Loreto/ETB is a joint patron?

5. Does the Community School model offer sufficient flexibility and governance adaptations to address future societal and educational changes while preserving its local identity and community spirit?

6. Can you identify any respects in which the governance structure of Community Schools compares to that of other educational models, such as Voluntary Secondary Schools or ETB schools, in fostering effective leadership practices, inclusivity and local engagement?

7. How does the long-term viability of the Community School model compare to other educational models, such as Voluntary Secondary Schools or ETB schools, in terms of addressing current challenges, leveraging its strengths, and capitalising on future opportunities?

Appendix I: Sample Responses to Pilot Survey

Pilot Response: Example 1: *Sorry if some seem very pedantic, but I think the edits might be useful after the fact rather than just for principals. All the 'If YES' suggestions in particular, I have suggested separating out answers also, again perhaps more useful for you afterwards.*

Q7: 'Can you name any specific ways' might be ambiguous. I could answer Yes, I can. Suggest 'If YES, can you describe the way(s).....

Q9: Long question/statement. Would put statement on one line and then begin Q on new line.

Q11: Would it be better to say 'DESCRIBE' instead of name?

Q15: If YES, please describe how it has supported you

Q18: Would it be useful to ask 'What 3 key lessons (as in give them a number) and then include 3 text boxes OR just ask what key lessons and include three text boxes. Again, it will help with analysis.

Pilot Response: Example 2: *The closed questions will give a lot of valuable information. The open ones will be testing for Principals but I'm not sure you could or would make them any easier. The richness will come from here. One would hope that they will put in a bit of thinking time on them, it will certainly bring them back to basics which is a good thing.*

There's nothing in it that I would leave out, everything is very clear - I presume they will all understand Level 1 and Level 2? It may force them to look up a thing or two and that mightn't be a bad thing in itself. It may take more than 20 minutes unless they don't spend time on the open ones, but I think they will - especially when it's coming from you!

Pilot Response: Example 3: *The Participant Information survey sheet and the Informed Consent Form are clear, and I do not see any issue with them. The Ms Forms survey document is working on a laptop and on a mobile device. There is an issue with Q5. It is only accepting one option to be*

submitted, and the question requires a multiple number of answers. Also, in the same question the instructions say to tick if you wish to select all options, but I cannot see where you tick. Also, in Q6 I was confused by the wording 'evident' in the question as I am not sure that a principal would be able to provide 'evidence' unless it is self-evident which may not meet the standard of the research.

Otherwise, the survey is very clear and can be completed in about 15 – 20 mins.

Pilot Response: Example 4: I have reviewed your documentation and note the process:

Q1-5. Informative questions - Q6-14 Really good, interesting informative questions

Q15. Could this question be reviewed/restructured in light of the focus of the study? - Q16-19. Reflective questions

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