An exploration into how a selection of primary school principals understand the meaning and the role of ethos in the life of their school.

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Abstract

This research project explores the reflections of a small cohort of primary school principals in Ireland on their understanding of ethos and the role it plays in their school. The sample includes both current and ex-primary school principals who have experience of schools under a variety of patron bodies, and participants were purposefully targeted according to these criteria. Using a qualitative method of semi-structured interviews, data were gathered in the form of opinions and insights related to the meaning and role of school ethos.

The primary finding that emerged from this project was related to how participants understood the term ethos itself; a variety of different meanings were attributed to the term, with many participants drawing upon loose terminology to explain what they understood ethos to mean. Other key themes to emerge were informed by this. For some participants, the official ethos of their school informed much of their understanding of ethos and the active role it could play in the life of their school. For others, the personal vision of the principal was more central to the creation and maintenance of an ethos.

These findings highlight the need for further clarification on the topic of ethos. More specifically, there is a need to provide clarity on the meaning of the term ethos, the impact it can have on the school community and what role might be played by principals in this regard. An extensive, longitudinal research study on the attitudes of principals to ethos is required, with the aim of grounding any further research in attitudinal developments and changes which may occur among the target sample base over time.
Acronyms

An Foras Pátrúnachta (AFP)
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
Central Statistics Office (CSO)
Community National Schools (CNS)
Department of Education and Skills (DES)
Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
Educate Together (ET)
English as an Additional Language (EAL)
Goodness Me, Goodness You (GMGY)
Marino Ethics in Research Committee (MERC)
Marino Institute of Education (MIE)
National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA)
Physical Education (PE)
Professional Master of Education (PME)
Religious Education (RE)
Special Educational Needs (SEN)
Special Needs Assistant (SNA)
Teachta Dála (TD)
I would like to extend my gratitude to the participants of this research project who gave generously of their time and insights. Without their involvement, this project would not have been possible.

I am also very thankful to my supervisor Dr. Rory McDaid who offered unending guidance and encouragement throughout this project, and whose insight was invaluable.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This research project explores understandings of ethos from the perspective of a small variety of former and present primary school principals in Ireland. Specifically, the research investigates attitudes to ethos and the role of school principals, taking into account the official ethos which might be expected of schools with regards to their official denominational status. For this reason, I have interviewed principals from a mix of denominational, multi-denominational and inter-denominational school settings. This allowed me to engage with principals from Catholic, Church of Ireland, Community National School (CNS), Educate Together (ET) and a multi-denominational school which acts as its own unique patron body.

Research Design

The sample consisted of six participants in total. Of these, three were former principals, and three were current principals. Across the sample, five official school types were purposefully targeted for representation in this research project. These included two Catholic, one Church of Ireland, one CNS, one ET and one independent multi-denominational school. The aim of the study was to obtain thoughts and opinions on a subject area that is considered complex. As such, a qualitative method of research was pursued which involved the use of semi-structured interviews in order to obtain personal viewpoints and allow for unexpected topics to arise (Denscombe, 2011).

Literature

Ireland has experienced significant change over the last number of years, with calls being made for schools to reflect this change (Coolahan, Hussey & Kilfeather, 2012; Devine, 2013).
Much of the research in this field highlights that 91.1% of Irish primary schools remain under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Darmody, Smyth & McCoy, 2012) despite wide acknowledgement of the increasing secularisation, ethnic and religious diversity of Ireland (O’Toole, 2015; O’Flaherty, McCormack, Gleeson, O’Reilly, O’Grady & Kenny, 2018). Much research has been done on the important role of principals; as leaders within the school community, principals hold a position of power over the rules, regulations and ethos of their school; for example, McLaughlin (2005, p. 320) writes of the “inherent complexities involved in getting to grips with an ethos itself, in both its ‘intended and ‘experienced’ senses”. Writing on the topic of leadership and ethos, McLaughlin (2005) asserts that more critical attention is needed on the topic of ethos in order to combat the tendency among those in positions of leadership to treat ethos with a level of superficiality. The issues emerging from the literature on this topic remain focused on the important role played by principals in interpreting the ethos of their school, the ethos that is felt by those who are part of the school community and the need for further clarification on the topic itself.

**Motivation**

Despite the variety of research available on this topic, I found it pertinent to formulate a research question which took into account the basic issue of interpretations around the term ethos itself. At this particular time in Irish educational history, where there are calls for a more secular approach to education through alternative options to the traditional Catholic primary school (O’Toole, 2015; Coolahan et al., 2012), asking school principals for their interpretation of ethos could offer a new insight into the lived experience of ethos. In addition to this, the research is of personal interest to me. My own schooling background took place outside of the traditional
Catholic setting, although I did take part in many of the Catholic rituals including Communion and Confirmation, facilitated by my school for those whose families so wished. As such, I had a desire to better understand what it was that set certain schools apart, and to further understand the role played by ethos in doing so.

**Key Findings**

Key findings explored in this dissertation include the fundamental understanding of ethos; the participants who took part in the research displayed a variety of different understandings and interpretations. While some drew upon more general terminology to express their understanding of ethos, others were enabled to pull from official guidelines and principles which set their school apart in some way from the established norm. Despite this, some threads of similarity could be seen according to the denominational status of their schools. For instance, those from a Catholic school background seemed more inclined to draw on more generalised terminology and made less of a connection to their official Catholic status in comparison to those from a multi-denominational setting. As such, there is a need for further clarification on the meaning and role of ethos in Irish primary schools, which would be greatly informed by an in-depth, longitudinal research study into the attitudes of principals to ethos.

**Conclusion**

This chapter details my professional and personal engagement with the research project contained in this dissertation. I have outlined the position my research takes within the wider academic discourse available on the topic of ethos, the research design used to conduct the
research, my personal motivation for exploring this particular topic and some of the key findings which will be discussed in detail later in this dissertation.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

There has been much public debate in recent years around ideas of school ethos. In most cases, this discourse is linked to the role traditionally played by religion in our national education system, and is often considered in light of the growing diversity of our population (Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2019). Ireland’s changing demographics and increased secularisation (Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska, 2016) means there is now a higher demand for schools with a non-religious ethos (Hyland, 1989; Faas et al, 2016), such as ET or CNS. This chapter explores the literature on the subject of what is often – and sometimes interchangeably – referred to as characteristic spirit or school ethos within the Irish primary school system (O’Flaherty et al., 2018). Unsurprisingly, this topic is crucially interwoven with discussion on school patronage and trusteeship (Coolahan, Hussey & Kilfeather, 2012), the increasing secularisation, ethnic and religious diversity of Ireland (O’Toole, 2015; O’Flaherty et al., 2018; Breen & Reynolds, 2011), and the important role played by those in positions of leadership, such as school principals, in developing the characteristic spirit of a school (Faas, Smith & Darmody, 2018).

School Ethos

It is clear from the current academic discourse around the topic of school ethos that the language of this subject can be difficult to negotiate; it is noted in much of the research that there is an element of fluidity in the terminology used (Coolahan et al., 2012) and that words such as ideology, culture, spirit and values often appear to be used interchangeably (O’Flaherty et al., 2018). However the terms that seem most prevalent in the literature are ‘ethos’ and ‘characteristic spirit’ (Coolahan et al., 2012). Some authors have offered definitions on these terms writing on religious variation in Irish primary schools, with Darmody, Smyth & McCoy
(2012, p. 3) for example describing ethos as “a distinctive range of values and beliefs, which define the philosophy or atmosphere of an organisation”. Coolahan et al. (2012) note that ethos is often narrowly interpreted as simply meaning religious ethos, and O’Flaherty et al. (2018) suggest that the term ‘characteristic spirit’ is being used to avoid such connotations; they draw our attention to the most notable avoidance of the word ethos as being in the Education Act 1998 where the term characteristic spirit was first coined (Liddy, O’Flaherty & McCormack, 2019).

The Education Act 1998 states that a school’s Board of Management is “accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school”, which is determined by the “the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school” (Government of Ireland, 1998, p. 19). While this notable exclusion of ethos may be read as a reluctance to associate national schools with a religious ethos for fear of alienating non-Catholics (O’Flaherty et al, 2018), we must consider the high level of control afforded to the patron body of a school. This has significant implications for Ireland’s many state-run denominational schools, which are predominantly Roman Catholic in ownership and management and for the growing number of non-Catholics who now attend these schools (Darmody, Smyth and McCoy, 2012).

**School Patronage**

Coolahan et al. (2012) state in their advisory group report on the 2011 *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* that 96% of Irish primary schools in 2010 - 2011 were under denominational patronage. They define denominational patronage as “A school under the patronage of a single religious community” and outline the requirements of such a school as being one which “provides religious education according to the traditions, practices and beliefs
of the specified religious community” (Coolahan et al., 2012, p. v). Of this 96%, the amount of schools under a specifically Catholic Church patronage was reportedly at 91.1% (Darmody, Smyth & McCoy, 2012). In examining the development of a school’s characteristic spirit, these figures cannot be overlooked; following the Education Act 1998, the school patron has direct responsibility for the development and guardianship of school values and characteristic spirit (O’Flaherty, 2018). With such a large percentage of schools under denominational patronage – a fact unique to Ireland in the context of developed countries (Coolahan et al., 2012) – and the wide acknowledgement of an increasingly secular and multicultural Ireland (O’Toole, 2015; O’Flaherty et al., 2018; Breen & Reynolds, 2011), the link between patron body and the ‘lived experience’ of a school’s values or spirit needs to be examined.

O’Toole (2015) highlights how the 2011 Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector gave Ireland the chance to revisit the issue of patronage in primary schools; the author puts forward the possibility of a more radical restructuring which would see the state, as a secular, non-religious entity, fulfill the role of patron for all primary schools. The author argues that the effect of this would be a removal of religious education and practices from the school day, placing it firmly in the private realm of the home and family (O’Toole, 2015). This, in turn, would have an effect on the ethos of the school, which we are reminded is the responsibility of the patron according to the Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998).

It is important to note that the volume of schools which are currently under non-denominational patronage is on the rise. In 2019 the Minister for Education Joe McHugh TD announced the establishment of 12 new primary schools under non-denominational patronage; of these, three have been awarded the patronage of Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), two under the patronage of An Foras Pátrúnachta (AFP) and seven under the patronage of ET
This brings the total number of primary schools under the patronage of ET to 91 (DES, 2019). When examining the rise in the establishment of schools which do not fall under traditional Catholic patronage, it is crucial to consider what programmes are used that set these schools apart.

Schools under the patronage of ET follow the Learn Together (Educate Together, 2004) curriculum in place of a denominational religious education programme such as Grow in Love (Grow in Love, 2020) which is used in Catholic schools, or Follow Me (Board of Education, 2020) which is used in Church of Ireland schools. Additionally CNSs, which are under the patronage of the ETBI, use a programme called Goodness Me, Goodness You (GMGY) (National Council for Curriculum Assessment [NCCA], 2018). Each of these programmes are tailored to address the issue of teaching religion or religious studies in primary schools in Ireland and are designed around the specific ethos of each school type. For instance, the Learn Together curriculum is underpinned by key principles informing the ethos of all ET schools; these key principles are The Multi-Denominational Principle, The Co-Educational Principle, The Child-Centred Principle and The Democratic Principle (Educate Together, 2004). Similarly, the programme used by CNSs is also underpinned by four core values; Excellence in Education, Multi-Denominational, Equality-Based and Community-Focused (ETBI, n.d.). The multidenominational component of this set of values is supported by the GMGY curriculum which “employs a dialogical approach to teaching ‘about’ and ‘from’ beliefs and religions which aims to promote inter-belief harmony” (NCCA, 2018).

When considering the value systems promoted by these programmes, it is crucial to consider how they might impact on the lived experience of pupils. Wren (1999) draws our attention to the hidden curriculum of a school, claiming that the ethos or spirit of a school is
impacted by the values that are shared and transmitted among the school community through mottos, school traditions, policies and general perceptions and attitudes held by those within the community. In this way, we can see the strong link between school ethos and the wider school community, a view which can be linked back to Faas et al.’s finding that “many teachers stated it was important to their ethos to reflect the local community they were in, as part of a wider commitment to reflecting a modern diverse Ireland” (Faas et al., 2019, p. 162).

**Increasing Secularisation, Ethnic and Religious Diversity**

The discussion around patronage and school ethos cannot be separated from Ireland’s current status as an increasingly secular and ethnically-diverse country. The period of massive economic change known as the Celtic Tiger can be examined in conjunction with the idea that Ireland experienced a rise in secularism, ethnic and religious diversity (Breen & Reynolds, 2011). Figures from the 2016 census can help us to more accurately understand Ireland’s changing profile. For instance, the 2016 census recorded the lowest ever percentage of Catholics in Ireland at 78.3% (CSO, 2019). It should be noted however that the figure recorded is still a very high percentage in general, which could be considered an example of Ireland’s long-standing status as a highly religious country (Breen & Reynolds, 2011). This change has had a profound effect on the Irish education system. Research in the area of education and demographic change indicates that traditional Irish classrooms may be finding it challenging to respond to and appropriately accommodate for “new expressions of race, culture and religion” (Jenkins & Masterson, 2013).

Much research has been done on Ireland’s educational policy approach to increased ethnic diversity; Ireland has adopted an intercultural approach which aims to offer an education
which is inclusive of diverse values, languages and practices (DES, 2010). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) offer a definition of intercultural education as “an education which respects, celebrates and recognises diversity in all areas of human life” and which “promotes equality and human rights [and] challenges unfair discrimination” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2005). With these policies in mind, it is crucial to consider how schools, in particular those in positions of leadership within a school, are bridging the gap between a denominational patron body responsible for the development of positive values and characteristic spirit, and the vastly multi-denominational students now in attendance.

Policies such as this which inform our educational decisions and responses to diversity must be considered. O’Toole (2015) points to these interculturalist policies as the social and political backdrop against which the 2011 *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* was established. Here, the author highlights Ireland’s problematic response to “inward migration and ethnic, cultural and religious diversity” in our society and in our classrooms (O’Toole, 2015, p. 96). Bryan (2010) makes reference to Ireland’s interculturalist response as weak, characterised by a self-perceived generosity which allows the nation to deem some immigrants more worthy than others. Bryan (2010) applies this thinking to the world of education, highlighting how this broader social thinking undoubtedly influences that on a school or community level.

**The Role of School Principals**

In their examination of the role played by school principals in creating a more inclusive school atmosphere in light of the above changes to Ireland’s social sphere, Faas et al. (2018)
identify school principals as one of the main agents of culturally responsive change in schools. Their study looks at the behaviours principals undertake in Ireland’s CNSs in an effort to change their school culture to make it more inclusive. Although the researchers are mainly speaking about positive change in terms of interethnic and multi-denominational issues, their research highlights the crucial role played by leadership when effecting any type of change (Faas et al., 2018).

To bolster their point, the authors point to research conducted by Devine (2013) in exploring the challenges that can arise between this increasing social change and the efforts of school leaders to preserve the ethos of their school. In her work, Devine explores concepts of leadership, school ethos and increasing social change, and what these factors mean “in practice for school principals on the ground” (Devine, 2013, p. 392). The author draws important attention to the “tension… between ethos as practice within a school… and ethos as part of a state-funded governance system that sorts and selects children into schools according to their faith background” (Devine, 2013, p. 393). The emphasis on ‘practice’ here is Devine’s own; her research draws on the work of Bourdieu in thinking of schools as structured social spaces and in thinking of the work of principals as practices (Devine, 2013); in essence, the author acknowledges the personal experience of the principal in shaping their in-school responses and the development of effective school leadership. It is worth noting, then, that there is a strong likelihood of primary school principals in Ireland to be from “the majority-ethnic white Catholic grouping” (Devine, 2013, p. 393), which the author claims would influence the type of ethos a principal may bring to bear on his or her own school.

Faas et al. also draw our attention to work conducted on a similar issue in an American context. In their synthesis of literature on the role of school leadership, Khalifa, Gooden and
Davis (2016) examine literature around behaviours of leadership, and identify four main behaviours of culturally responsive school leaders; critical self-awareness of principals’ own leadership, the development of culturally-responsive teaching staff and curricula, the promotion of an inclusive school atmosphere, and the engagement of students and parents on a community level (Khalifa et al., 2016). The authors explain their choice to focus their research on school-level administration, i.e. school principalship, due to the “profoundly deep impact” principals have on students and the school environment (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274).
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This research project explores the reflections of a small cohort of primary school principals in Ireland on their understanding of ethos and the role it plays in their school. My aim was to investigate what ethos meant to those in positions of leadership, if the official ethos of a school directly impacts on the ‘vision’ held by school principals, and if this is taken into consideration when making important decisions for the school and its community of learners and educators. This investigation takes into consideration the scope of interpretation around definitions of ethos, its interconnectedness to patronage, and its possible effect on school culture and atmosphere.

I will begin this chapter by discussing my choice of research design, which is qualitative in nature and employed a semi-structured interview style. I will then outline the ethical considerations surrounding this study and the data collection process I undertook, including the process by which I analysed the collected data. Following this, I will outline by own position as the researcher of this study. Finally, I will identify the limitations of the various elements of the methodology used.

Design of the Study

In considering which type of research design to utilise, I first considered what kind would best compliment my area of focus. As my topic is concerned with social inquiry, I decided a qualitative approach would be most appropriate. A qualitative style of research would be effective in exploring societal issues as it is commonly viewed as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Qualitative research usually involves the collection, analysis and
interpretation of data by the researcher, and can involve queries of both a specific and general nature (Creswell, 2009; Denscombe, 2011) which I felt would aid in drawing out crucial participatory opinion.

    It is noted in much of the literature around research methodologies that interviews are best utilised when the topic is complex and reliant on opinion rather than straightforward and fact-based (Denscombe, 2011). Making use of interviews allowed me to more easily access opinion and insights on a topic which, while not necessarily sensitive in nature, still needed to be treated with care and caution. Making use of the semi-structured style of interview was important also, as it allowed for a certain amount of flexibility within my list of questions to be covered; as outlined by Denscombe (2011), the open-ended nature of semi-structured interview questions allow for the interviewee to develop their own thoughts and opinions on the topic being discussed.

**Sample Selection**

    In order to include as broad a sample of school-types as possible, I aimed to engage with principals from a range of schools with varying patron bodies and ethos descriptions. This included principals from a variety of denominational, inter-denominational and multi-denominational schools. In total, I obtained a sample of six participants through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is used to identify and ‘hand-pick’ the participants, materials or sites that will allow for the best investigation of the problem or issue, and typically does not involve a large pool of participants but rather a smaller, more focused selection (Creswell, 2009; Denscombe, 2011). I first approached principals I knew personally through either substitute teaching or through family connections and managed to gain two participants in this way.
Following this, I reached out to friends and classmates who put me in touch with more potential participants with whom they were directly in contact. This resulted in four more participants, both current and ex-principals, from a very specific variety of school types.

Due to the ‘hard-to-reach’ and specific nature of my sample of participants, my assessment of their suitability was limited in some ways. I needed to ensure they followed the criteria of being principals or ex-principals working in an Irish primary school setting and further to this, I needed to ensure I included participants from a variety of patron-body schools, namely Catholic, Church of Ireland, ET, CNS and multi-denominational schools. In this sense, I felt limited in imposing any other criteria upon my sample and decided against attempting to obtain a wide range of age, gender or experience levels.

It should be noted that due to the unexpected Covid-19 pandemic which took place towards the end of my research timeframe, I was forced to conduct my sixth interview via telephone. Furthermore, I was unable to complete a seventh interview. This seventh interview was due to take place with a primary school principal who is currently working in a Gaelscoil which is under the patronage of An Foras Pátrúnachta (AFP). Obtaining this sample would have been of great benefit, as AFP are the largest patron of Irish-speaking schools and under this patron schools may choose to uphold a denominational, multi-denominational or inter-denominational ethos (An Foras Pátrúnachta [AFP], 2020). Below is a table detailing the participant sample;
Table 1. Participant profile according to gender, patron body and time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Patron Body</th>
<th>Time as Class</th>
<th>Time as Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>ET</td>
<td>33 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>29 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Church of Ireland</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>ETBI</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

As previously mentioned, I utilised a semi-structured interview style as my method of collecting data. It is widely accepted in the literature surrounding research methodologies that interviews – be they structured, semi-structured or unstructured – are the most effective method for gaining meaningful insight into the opinions and feelings of the interviewees (Denscombe, 2011). Within this category, I considered the semi-structured interview to best meet the needs of my research topic, as it allowed me to maintain “a clear list of issues to be addressed and questions to be answered” while also allowing for flexibility in the order of my questions and the space required for participants to “develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised” (Denscombe, 2011, p. 175).

One-to-one interviews also aided in this, as participants were enabled to take any length of time required to formulate or elaborate on a thought which was entirely their own
This was also an advantage when embarking on the task of transcribing the interviews, as it was clear who was speaking and there was minimal overlap of speakers. Where possible, the literature advises one-on-one interviews conducted in-person (Denscombe, 2011) however this is not always possible when taking into account the busy schedules of my participants. In most cases, interviews occurred in-person in a private room in the participant’s own school or former school, or at another appropriate site of mutual convenience. The final interview took place via telephone at a time that was convenient to the participant.

Through careful analysis of the literature surrounding the topic of school ethos in Irish primary schools and from informal discussion of the topic with friends, peers and mentors, I was able to identify key areas to explore. With this in mind, I created an initial interview schedule (see Appendix II) which consisted of ten specific questions, and which was designed to allow room for the flexibility required of a semi-structured interview. The ten questions which made up my interview schedule explored the participants’ thoughts and feelings on the role of school principal, their teaching history, their understanding of the term ‘school ethos’ and most crucially, their opinion on the impact an official school ethos may or may not have on their decision-making as leaders within the school community. This included considerations around school ethos and teacher buy-in, the hiring of new staff members and creating or making changes to official school policies. The semi-structured interview style allowed for participants to elaborate on issues such as these, and insightful opinions were gained on a wealth of topics such as the individual level of understanding brought to the topic of ethos by each participant.

Interviews ranged from thirty to forty minutes as anticipated, and were recorded on two separate Dictaphones in order to ensure the material. These recordings were later transcribed by the
researcher and saved onto a password-protected laptop, in line with the ethical guidelines of the Institute.

**Data Analysis**

The data obtained during this research project consisted of six transcribed one-on-one interviews, only one of which was conducted via telephone and not in-person, plus additional field notes taken during the interview process. The aim of analysing the data collected from semi-structured interviews would be to examine in great detail in order to interpret the meaning, rather than describe or explain how something works (Denscombe, 2011). With this in mind, my analysis was initially about finding patterns and regularities within my field of inquiry which I hoped would lead to a better understanding of how primary school principals view and handle the concept of ethos. Interviews and the transcription of these interviews, as well as field notes taken during these interviews, were my primary data sources. As such, I was tasked with organising my raw data (audio recordings of interviews and field notes) in a manner that would make analysis more practical. This involved backing up my original audio recordings onto a password-protected computer, transcribing the audio recordings, and deciding on a system for categorising the data during analysis (Denscombe, 2011).

I then began the process of analysis by first transcribing the recordings and also using annotations to informally denote moments or comments of interest. Interviews were transcribed by me verbatim and I ensured participant anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. I took a ‘grounded theory’ approach to the analysis of the transcribed interviews and field notes, making continual notes and memos which brought me closer to the data through in-depth re-readings (Denscombe, 2011; Creswell, 2009; Bryman, 2001). I should note that while gathering the data I
had also begun to notice emerging patterns of opinion and was able to analyse some of the interactions in an informal way. As noted by Bryman (2001), the collection of data and the analysis of data often occur in tandem, particularly if taking a grounded theory approach. Continual analysis and reflection of open-ended data in this manner ultimately aided in the identification of key themes and interpretations of these themes. As recommended by Creswell (2009) a detailed coding process will happen more easily following explicit organisation and re-reading of the raw data.

With this in mind, I then began to formally code the data using descriptive words and numbers. Following the advice of Denscombe (2011), Creswell (2009) and other experts in the field of research methodologies, I eventually collapsed these codes into themes which began to emerge in the following categories:

- Description of ethos
- Change over time in Ireland
- Comparison of school types
- Relationships between school and community
- Role played by principals
- Spiritual life of the children
- Workplace satisfaction

Following this, I implemented a system of hierarchy for these categories which aided in the re-evaluation of emerging patterns of opinion and topics. I began to compare themes and forming theories on the data. This led to the decision to disregard some theories and focus on others which were showing up more frequently.
Ethical Considerations

This study was granted full approval from the Marino Ethics and Research Committee (MERC). The participants in this study were provided with a full and clear overview of the nature of the study (Cohen et al., 2007) and the methods by which the researcher would be keeping their identities anonymous. All participants signed a letter of consent (see Appendix I). The participants in this study would be considered difficult to reach due to the busy nature of a principal’s schedule as well as the specific variety of school patron types I felt it necessary to include in my participant base.

While the subject of the interviews was not considered to be highly sensitive in nature, I was aware of the possibility of personal religious or spiritual beliefs arising from the topic. As such, I was aware of the need to ensure confidentiality for participants by highlighting both verbally and in my written letter of consent that the information they shared would be kept anonymous, and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. Pseudonyms are used in place of real names and the interviews were conducted in a setting chosen by the interviewee which would ensure their comfort and level of control. Recordings, transcriptions and field notes are kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home and all will be destroyed following the finalisation of this dissertation in line with the requirements of the Marino Institute of Education.

Researcher Positionality

In line with the ethical questions around interview-based research is the acknowledgement that the researcher may have their own views and agendas around their area of study (Cohen et al., 2007). Throughout this process, I was careful to reflect on my own
positionality; I am the sole researcher and interviewer in this study and all data was gathered and interpreted by me. I am a final year student of the Professional Master of Education (PME) studying at the Marino Institute of Education (MIE) in Dublin. Prior to this programme, I obtained a degree in English, Media and Cultural Studies and subsequently worked in the field of media and marketing. As such, my experience as a primary school teacher is limited to the four School Placement teaching blocks necessary to complete the PME.

It should be noted however that my interest in the field of ethos comes from my own schooling experience which took place in a multi-denominational school. My own school operated under a unique school ethos which was based on the practices of Eastern philosophy. As such, it was an adjustment for me to work within the more traditional Catholic school while on School Placement. My interest in ethos and its possible influence the daily activities of a school have become more pronounced because of these factors. This is something I acknowledged to those who participated in my study, and I feel this open acknowledgment shed some light on the reason for pursuing this topic and generated interesting and honest opinions during the interviews.

Limitations

Considering the specificity of the research topic and the need to include a representatives of as wide a variety of school types as possible, there were some limitations when it came to accessing participants. With this in mind, I ensured preliminary contact was made with potential participants months in advance with as much information as possible. I assured participants that interviews would take place at a location and time convenient to them within my abilities, and provided an overview of the subject area. All participants that I made this initial contact with
subsequently took part in the study, bar one who withdrew due to the sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 virus. All participants were happy with the stated methods for ensuring anonymity and were ultimately happy to take part in the study.

Despite my fortunate experience in gaining access to principals from a variety of school backgrounds, there are still many school types absent from the study, including principals from Muslim and Jewish schools, as well as the variety of schools which are under the patronage of AFP. As noted in the literature above, AFP is now the largest patron of Irish-medium schools, and was originally established in order to provide future Gaelscoileanna with the option of adopting a denominational, multi-denomination or inter-denominational ethos (AFP, 2020). Their absence from this dissertation is due in part to access and the time constraints placed upon the researcher, but it should be noted that due to the unexpected outbreak of Covid-19, a pandemic-level virus which forced the sudden closure of all primary schools in Ireland, I was unable to carry out a seventh interview which was scheduled to take place with a principal who is working in a Gaelscoil which operates under the patronage of AFP.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Discussion

This chapter concerns the analysis and discussion of findings coming from research carried out with both former and current primary school principals from a variety of school types and backgrounds. Throughout this chapter, reflections from semi-structured interviews will be used to highlight key findings from my own research, which in turn can be traced back to the current academic discourse surrounding the question of school principals’ understanding of ethos. Participants’ interpretation of ethos varied significantly; while many participants drew on general words and anecdotes to express their interpretation of ethos, others made direct reference to their official guiding principles and ways in which their school was different to the majority of primary schools in Ireland. Despite these variants in interpretation, some comparisons could be made according to the denominational status of the schools. Many of the schools which were not under Catholic patronage, the most dominant school type in Ireland, expressed a clearer understanding of their school’s ethos. Other key findings that emerged from the research included the importance of change over time; as many of the participants had been working in the Irish education system for a number of years, some over a 30-year period, an undeniable link between ethos and key events in recent Irish history were also established. Interestingly, another theme which is explored in this chapter, and which emerged as a unifying theme, was the assertion that a large part of the role of a principal included influencing their school’s ethos, to varying degrees.

Understanding of the term ethos

In exploring how a selection of principals understand the meaning and the role of ethos in the life of their school, I found there to be a variety of understandings of the term ethos itself.
When conducting interviews I found that each principal offered their own interpretation of the term and the role it played in their school. I found when directly asked about their understanding, some of the participants made reference to their school’s mission statement, some made direct associations with the role of religion in their school and others spoke more generally of the atmosphere and the values they hoped to instil in the children attending their school.

When asked about the meaning of school ethos participant 3 acknowledged that it was difficult to define, before suggesting the following:

I think probably just the kind of the character or the atmosphere of a school…

Um, the kind of… the kind of identity of the school.

Participant 2 offered a similar interpretation based on providing children with “a bag of values” which would enable them to make the world a better place. Participant 2 also noted that many people associate ethos with religion;

You see people associate ethos a lot with just religion, and really to me is not… that sort of colours it start it gives you your basis but after that it’s about values and it’s about how you want kids to thrive and get on academically as well as socially or emotionally.

Participant 1 offered a more definitive interpretation based on the important relationships between their school and the surrounding community;
It's reflected in the relationships I suppose within the school and outside the school. In my school I think children of other faiths and other races and other cultures, there was more of an effort being made to include them.

Participant 5 made a strong connection between ethos and religion:

I suppose I would tie it strongly to the Church of Ireland. Church of Ireland has been a big part of my life so when I say I’m working in a Church of Ireland school that’s why I associate the ethos with Church of Ireland beliefs and Church of Ireland teachings of inclusion and acceptance, you know? I feel like this school very closely represents what ethos should be.

It is clear that among my interview base, there was no one accepted definition of the term ethos. This is a finding that can be traced back to the literature. O’Flaherty et al. (2018) note that the term is often seen used interchangeably with words such as spirit, atmosphere and character. I found this to be true of my interview participants; these words were drawn on repeatedly when interviewees were asked to explain their understanding of the term. This can also be read as reflective of the definition offered by Darmody, Smyth & McCoy (2012, p. 3) who describe ethos as “a distinctive range of values and beliefs, which define the philosophy or atmosphere of an organisation”. In this sense, it is clear that many of the participants found the term difficult to define, but believed instilling a set of values in the pupils would ultimately contribute positively to the school’s general atmosphere. In other instances, such as with Participant 5, interviewees made strong connections to the role played by religion in the life of their school. The connection
between ethos and religion comes up repeatedly and is worth considering in line with the claim made by Coolahan et al. (2012) that ethos is often understood to mean religion when the lived experience of an ethos is a much broader lived experience for pupils.

**Ethos and School Type**

School type undoubtedly played a role in definitions of ethos offered by my research participants. While it is clear that there is no one accepted definition of the term ethos, I would argue there is a correlation between understanding of ethos and the denominational status of a school. I found that those working in a denominational setting had more fluid ideas of ethos and used terminology such as atmosphere, vibe, sense, culture and feeling much more than those from a non-denominational setting. In contrast, participants who were from a non-denominational school background offered more concise definitions of their school ethos.

Participants 2 and 3, who were both from Catholic school backgrounds, struggled the most to define ethos. Participant 3 discussed his school’s mission statement and motto as a means for explaining the atmosphere and identity of the school. When asked to what degree the mission statement and the motto took into consideration the Catholic status of the school, participant 3 replied;

> We didn’t put anything of the Catholic thing into it at all, right. And that speaks for itself. I wouldn’t have been aware of that now if you had asked me and I hadn’t this [mission statement] in front of me because it’s described in a lot of school stuff as a mixed Catholic school in the Diocese of Dublin under the
patronage of the Archbishop. That’s the official line. Now I think it’s interesting that we didn’t put that in.

This acknowledgment of an official ethos is also seen in the response from Participant 2;

It could be detrimental in a working environment for people to have to buy into that, providing that the powers that be are enforcing it. But my attitude was always well no we accommodate all and no we don’t necessarily have to go there. And that’s where there’s an element of… well kind of… to a certain extent I’m probably ignoring it.

Participant 5, who is principal of a Church of Ireland school, used similar language when asked for his understanding of ethos, however he was more assured of the connection to religion than his Catholic school counterparts;

I just found that most Church of Ireland schools have quite a similar feeling to them. It’s hard to describe, but it’s the atmosphere. I would count ethos as the atmosphere. And then obviously emphasis is put on faith.

These examples are in contrast to definitions offered by those participants from a non or multi-denominational setting. Participant 4, who is from an independent, multi-denominational setting outlined his school’s ethos as;
It means your value system, your fundamental value system that you have. And it’s your actual ethos as distinct from your theoretical ethos, so what we actually do. I think the ethos for us here is unity and I think we’re a very unified community.

Participant 4 was also forthcoming with concrete examples of things that take place in the school that are distinct from other schools, such as extra Physical Education (PE) classes and a short moment of stillness to bookend each lesson. This response was similar to those provided by participants 1 and 6, each from multi-denominational settings. Participant 6, for instance, offered this understanding of ethos;

So our ethos is very much community-focused. Well first of all on the whole, inclusion and access to education, I mean it’s vitally important.

Similar to participant 4, participant 6 was also forthcoming with examples of this ethos in action, pointing out the volume of Special Needs Assistants (SNA), children with diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the 62 different nationalities represented in the student population. Here, participant 4 is complexifying the totality of the school by conflating Special Educational Needs (SEN) with the broad diversity of religious and ethnicity in his school. This participant’s intention was to provide examples of inclusion at all levels, which is central to the ethos of his school, however there is a need to decouple SEN from the unique needs and challenges faced by children of minority ethnic backgrounds.
The sense that denominational schools tend to offer less defined interpretations of ethos, in comparison to their multi-denominational counterparts can be seen in the academic discourse surrounding this topic. Liddy et al. (2019) argue that the term characteristic spirit was first coined in the Education Act 1998 as a way to formally account for school ethos in all schools, including state-run non-denominational schools. This change in verbiage led to claims that denominational schools in Ireland, in particular Catholic schools, may be reluctant to associate too closely with a religious ethos for fear of alienating non-Catholic students (O’Flaherty et al., 2018).

**Change Over Time**

Recent events in Irish history and the chronology of my participants’ engagement with ethos came up a number of times in the interviews. For some participants who had been working in either a teaching or leadership capacity for over 30 years, the question of ethos was undeniably interwoven with time. Two of the key topics that arose from the acknowledgement of Ireland’s change over time were the public’s change in attitude towards the Catholic Church and the changing demographics of the Irish population. According to those interviewed, it seems that both of these factors have contributed to questions and concerns surrounding the suitability of the Catholic Church’s involvement in the running of state schools. This is acknowledged by participant 2 when he says;

> As regards to ethos I think really the church has to change. The ethos has to adapt to become more, what’s the word, more accommodating I think. But you know how slowly that happens.
For some of the participants the abuse scandals of the Catholic Church, which first came to public prominence in the 1990s, and the subsequent mishandling of reports of abuse were a notable turning point in the attitudes of the Irish people to the Catholic Church. The knock-on effect of this turning point was undoubtedly felt in Catholic-run schools. Participant 3 recalls how the church began to pull back on their involvement with his school around this time;

And with the child abuse thing they started pulling back and eventually got off the boards completely. But they even stopped visiting the school and they’d only come in around confirmation time.

Participant 1 was the principal of an ET school following a long teaching career in a Catholic school. She noted the change in ethos within a Catholic school setting;

You see because I taught for so long in Catholic schools the ethos was very very strong when I started work. Em… you could see the ethos changing over the years I taught. So an educate together school and a Catholic school when I started teaching would have had huge differences.

The assertion that the Catholic Church abuse scandals are a contributing factor to the public’s increasing distrust of the Church is acknowledged in Coolahan et al.’s (2012) report when the authors highlight how the abuse of those in institutions run by religious groups and the
mishandling of reports made on this abuse, have contributed to a decline of Church status among the Irish public.

Participant 1 goes on to highlight the difference in how a Catholic school versus an ET school may have included students of other faiths and nationalities;

In my school I think children of other faiths and other races other cultures… there was more of an effort being made to include them. Before that they definitely weren’t. It was like, you know, it’s a Catholic school everybody goes to mass, everybody goes to confession.

Other participants echoed this sentiment, highlighting ethical, linguistic and religious inclusion in light of Ireland’s changing social landscape as a defining factor of their ethos. This can be seen in participant 6’s response when he outlines how important inclusion is to the ethos of the CNS where he is principal;

We have 62 different nationalities in our school. We have more than 20 different religious groups. EAL [English as an Additional Language] would be a massive thing like we have 83% of our kids that, although the majority of them would be born in Ireland and identify as Irish, the majority of their parents were born elsewhere and not always from English-speaking countries so English would be a big challenge for us.
The idea that Ireland has experienced significant social change over time which has, in turn, impacted on Irish schools in terms of ethos and the drive to become more inclusive comes up throughout the literature. Research by Jenkins and Masterson (2013) highlights how traditional Irish classrooms may be struggling to adequately respond to a growing change in racial, cultural and religious demographics. Theorists in the field of education and policy have pointed to Ireland’s intercultural response to this change which includes “an education which respects, celebrates and recognises diversity in all areas of human life” and which “promotes equality and human rights [and] challenges unfair discrimination” (NCCA, 2005). Coolahan et al. (2012) also draw our attention to an increase in multiculturalism and globalisation which has aided in bringing the role of schools in accommodating all people into question.

The Role of School Principals

The role played by principals in establishing and maintaining any type of ethos in their school is something which came up throughout my research. I found that some of those interviewed, namely those from multi-denominational school settings, had a clear understanding of their school’s official ethos, while others, namely those from a Catholic school background, expressed a more fluid interpretation of the term. Another theme to emerge from my research was a unifying assertion that principals have a key role to play in identifying a culture or vision for their school.

Participant 1 made reference to the importance of “a person’s personality and whether you enforce things”. Similarly, participant 2 highlighted one of his roles as principal as being “in a position to be able to kind of create and maintain a nice atmosphere” in the school. Participant 6 asserted that fundamentally, all principals have a shared vision;
I think every school, in terms of your vision and your mission statement and what you hope to achieve, I mean fundamentally they’re all the same really. It’s all about the kids. We want what’s best for them.

The assertion that all schools have the same underlying mission to do what is best for the pupils in their care is worth examining; in the context of Irish schools, there has not always been a focus on the wellbeing of the child. There are, unfortunately, many cases and examples of schools that were not taking adequate care of their pupils and in fact abusing them in unimaginable ways. The claim that every school’s vision is ultimately about the good of the children is one which is rooted in modern interpretations of education in Ireland, and could be interpreted as dismissive of the past. It also implies that there is a shared, clear understanding of what is happening in schools in terms of their ethos or vision; the literature explored in this dissertation highlights that there is a distinct lack of understanding around this subject. As such, claims like this show that clarification is needed on every level of the school ethos discussion.

The important role of school principals in implementing an ethos, however, is echoed by participant 1, who claimed that ethos “depends on the principal and very much is led by the principal”. Interestingly, participant 4 who is from a multi-denominational school setting with an independent patron body suggested that a value system of some kind is crucial to the wellbeing of the school community and when left up to individual principals to create, maintain and enforce, could manifest in a positive or negative way;
It’s the individual principal’s vision that would create something like that. And that’s really interesting because it could be great, but it could be awful. I think you’d have to have an ethos of some sort.

The influence held by school principals is explored in much of the literature surrounding the topic of school ethos. Research by Faas et al. (2018), for example, identified principals as being among the main agents for positive change in schools, placing an emphasis on those in positions of leadership in affecting any type of change at all. The literature also acknowledges the tensions that can arise between a principal’s own vision and the official state-sanctioned expectations placed on schools (Devine, 2013), as well as the importance of recognising the acute and deep-seated impact principals have on school life and student experience (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Conclusion

Participants’ interpretation of ethos varied significantly, with many drawing upon words such as atmosphere, sense and culture to describe their understanding of the term. Despite this, a comparison could be drawn between those participants who were from a denominational setting, namely Catholic and Church of Ireland schools, and a multi-denominational setting which in this case included a CNS and an ET school. Another finding of significance was the undeniable link between school ethos and a changing social landscape, particularly in relation increasing secularisation, ethnic and religious diversity. Those participants who have been working in the field of education in Ireland for a long time were keen to highlight the changes they have witnessed in Irish society, which in turn impacted on their experiences as educators. A unifying
factor to emerge however was the important role played by principals in establishing and maintaining an ethos or vision for their school. To varying degrees, this required thought and action on their behalf and was primarily concerned with the wellbeing of the pupils in attendance at their school.
Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this chapter aims to provide a summary of key findings from this research project, along with highlighting some of the recommendations coming from the research.

Summary of Findings

In exploring how a targeted selection of principals understand the meaning of ethos and the role it plays in the life of their school, I found there to be a wide variety of understanding and interpretation. This dissertation highlights the variety of responses acquired from participants, many of whom drew upon vague language to describe their understanding of ethos. In other cases, however, ideas of ethos were more concise and related back to a particular set of ideals and principles.

All subsequent findings must be considered in light of this key finding, as the participants’ interpretation of ethos undoubtedly effected how they engaged with ethos in the life of their own school. A clear thread could be seen, for example, connecting those participants who described a clear understanding of ethos and the multi-denominational status of their school. Conversely, those coming from a Catholic background ultimately struggled the most to define ethos and drew upon a variety of anecdotal examples and vague terminology in their responses.

Other findings from the research were concerned with the increase in secularism, ethnic and religious diversity in Ireland. It was noted on multiple occasions that Ireland has undergone much change in recent years, which undoubtedly had led to mixed feelings on the involvement of the Catholic Church in the public education system. For some participants, Ireland’s changing demographics had led to a call for a new, more accommodating Irish schooling system. For other
participants, the public’s changing attitude to the Catholic Church could be traced back to the abuse scandals of the 1990s, which had a ripple effect on Catholic schools.

An area of mutual agreement across all participants was the important role played by school principals in promoting a school ethos, however the involvement was acknowledged to varying degrees. For some, it was the duty of the principal to create and maintain an ethos which included a motto and a mission statement. For others, it was the role of the principal to enforce and promote an ethos which was inherited from an agreed-upon set of guidelines and principles. All agreed, however, that they had a crucial role to play in making the ethos of a school real and felt.

**Limitations**

All participants were targeted and selected based on their status as school principals. Three participants were former principals, and three were current principals. The status of their school was of extreme importance, as a variety of school types were sought in order to explore a number of influencing factors. Due to the difficult-to-reach nature of my sample requirements, however, it was challenging to obtain all the participants I had initially hoped for. It should also be noted that due to the outbreak of Covid-19, which led to an unprecedented global pandemic and the sudden closure of all primary schools, I was unable to complete a seventh interview. This was an unfortunate loss as I was hoping to obtain some further insight and opinion on the workings of AFP due to the varied ethos-types which can be facilitated under the one patron body.
Observations and Recommendations

This research project is concerned with documenting and exploring how Irish school principals understand and view ethos. Through qualitative research methods the principals and ex-principals interviewed were enabled to share their opinions and viewpoints on the topic, which led to some interesting key findings and observations.

When considering the key findings outlined above, it is of the upmost importance to question the reason for such a variety of understandings on this important topic. Although there is a rich bank of literature available on the subject, it is widely accepted that the term ethos itself is used interchangeably with other terms and often misunderstood. A clearer definition of the term and the requirements placed upon schools and school principals would undoubtedly provide a much-needed level of clarification on the subject. In this sense, I would recommend on-going research into the subject of ethos in Irish primary schools; it would be of the upmost benefit for this research to be conducted on a longitudinal scale, as many of the participants pointed to change over time as an area of consideration. Furthermore, reflections from a larger sample of principals in Ireland would bring more viewpoints and considerations to bear and would benefit the on-going discourse on this topic. A larger sample of principals would provide more detail and insight into the topic, as well as interviews with other members of the school community such as class teachers and parents. From this, there could emerge a more solid understanding on this important topic, which in turn could allow for the development of evolving views on school ethos in Ireland.

From this research, I argue there is a need for a very clear set of guiding principles for the development and maintenance of ethos in Irish primary schools, as well as a specific plan to ensure the ethos of each school clear and implementable to all members of staff. This research
contributes to the wealth of literature available on the subject of ethos in Irish primary schools, and it is my hope that asking these questions at this particular time in Irish history will add to this important national conversation.
Reference List


Williams, K. (2000). Understanding ethos: A philosophical and literary exploration. In C. Furlong & L. Monahan (Eds.), *School culture and ethos: Cracking the code*. (pp. 73-82). Dublin, Ireland: Marino Institute of Education
Dear Principal,

My name is Gráinne Harnett and I am a final year student in the Marino Institute of Education completing a Professional Master of Education (PME) programme. I am writing to ask for your help with a qualitative study that investigates the concept of ethos within the primary school setting. The research project involves learning more about how ideas of ethos are taken into consideration by those in positions of leadership in a school environment, namely school principals. I hope that the findings of the study will help to inform thinking around ethos, its interconnectedness to patronage, and its effect on school culture and atmosphere.

There is just one part to the study: a semi-structured interview through which I hope to elicit opinions, insights and experience into your view on ethos. The interview has two parts. In the first, I will ask some general questions about your background and teaching. In the second part, I will ask you to respond to questions around your understanding of ethos, and your experience with regards to ethos. In total, the interview will take between 30 and 40 minutes.

You are under no obligation to partake in this research project. If you do choose to take part, you can withdraw your data at any stage. I hope you will be willing to participate because your
responses are important and a valued part of the study. Your participation will remain strictly confidential. Your name will not be attached to any of the data you provide. You are welcome to discontinue participation in the study at any time, should you wish to do so. The risks of participation in the study are very low. While every effort will be made to ensure your identity is protected, there is a chance, for example, that someone who reads the published dissertation may recognise your opinion. However, the transcribed interview notes will be kept in a secure location on an encrypted device without your name attached to it. The notes will be retained only for the purposes of the current study. Once the study is completed, the notes will be destroyed in 13 months’ time on the basis of the schedule outlined in the Institute’s data retention schedule.

There are no risks or direct benefits in participating in the interview. You will be asked to sign forms (below) indicating agreement to participate in the study. Below are my details, and the details of my dissertation supervisor Dr. Rory McDaid, should you have any further inquiries:

Gráinne Harnett
Email XXX
Phone XXX

Dr. Rory McDaid
Email XXX
Phone XXX

Your participation in this project is sincerely appreciated. I understand that your time is valuable and will endeavor to make myself available at a time that is suitable to you.

Yours faithfully,

________________________

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.
Statement of Consent:

Please read the questions below and indicate whether or not you would be willing to participate in the study as described. Please circle to indicate your response.

Do you consent to be interviewed based on the information above?  

Yes  No

Do you consent to have the interview audiotaped?  

Yes  No

Signature:____________________________________  
Date: __________________

Signature of Investigator:________________________  
Date: __________________
Appendix II: Interview Schedule

Interviewer will briefly reiterate the focus of the study:

The purpose of this study is to gain an insight into the role played by school ethos on the day to day running of the school. I wish to investigate what ethos means to those in positions of leadership, if the official ethos of a school directly impacts on the ‘vision’ held by school principals, and if this is taken into consideration when making important decisions for the school and its community of learners and educators. This investigation will take into consideration the scope of interpretation around definitions of ethos, its interconnectedness to patronage, and its possible effect on school culture and atmosphere.

Questions:

1. What do you enjoy most about your role as principal?
2. Where did you teach before your role as principal?
3. Have you always taught in a Catholic / Church of Ireland / Gaelscoil / Educate Together / CNS school?
4. What does the term school ethos mean to you?
   a. Do you think ethos impacts on the school day? For example, does it impact in the teaching of Religious Education, the running of the school day, the student-teacher relationship, staff relationships?
5. Could you talk to me about the ethos of this school?
   a. How does this impact on daily school life, for example are prayers part of the school day? Do you teach Religious Education lessons using a specific programme? Is the ethos discussed with new staff members, or discussed on a regular basis with current staff?
6. What role does ethos play in the making of important decisions such as school policy changes, curriculum decisions and engaging with external providers?
   a. What role do those on the Board of Management play in these decisions?
7. What role does ethos play in the hiring and the internal promotion of teaching staff?
a. Where do problems arise with the implementation of the school ethos? For example, do you actively seek buy-in from teaching staff?

8. How do you see the role of ethos in the future of Irish primary schools?
   a. Would you like to see any changes in the Irish primary school system in terms of ethos?
Appendix III: Amended Interview Schedule

Interviewer will briefly reiterate the focus of the study:

The purpose of this study is to gain an insight into the role played by school ethos on the day to day running of the school. I wish to investigate what ethos means to those in positions of leadership, if the official ethos of a school directly impacts on the ‘vision’ held by school principals, and if this is taken into consideration when making important decisions for the school and its community of learners and educators. This investigation will take into consideration the scope of interpretation around definitions of ethos, its interconnectedness to patronage, and its possible effect on school culture and atmosphere.

Questions:

1. What do you enjoy most about your role as principal?
2. Where did you teach before your role as principal?
3. Have you always taught in a Catholic / Church of Ireland / Gaelscoil / ET/ CNS school?
4. What does the term school ethos mean to you?
5. Could you talk to me about the ethos of this school?
   a. How does this impact on daily school life, for example are prayers part of the school day? Do you teach Religious Education lessons using a specific programme? Is the ethos discussed with new staff members, or discussed on a regular basis with current staff?
6. What role does ethos play in the making of important decisions such as school policy changes, curriculum decisions and engaging with external providers?
   a. What role do those on the Board of Management play in these decisions?
7. What role does ethos play in the hiring and the internal promotion of teaching staff?
8. How do you see the role of ethos in the future of Irish primary schools?