

Reinventing or Rediscovering Ethos? Teachers' Perceptions of Fostering a Lived School  
Ethos in a Voluntary Catholic Post-Primary School in Ireland

Clodagh Lennon

Marino Institute of Education

Thesis submitted in  
Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of MES

**Declaration**

*I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work.*

*Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly.*

*This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. The*

*work was done under the guidance of Dr Denis Robinson at the Marino Institute of*

*Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.*

Word count: 22874

Student ID: 10313695

Date: 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2020

---

Clodagh Lennon

### Abstract

For many years, Catholic schools have been the primary option for parents sending their children to school. In recent years, however, a breadth of new options have been established, putting added pressure on Catholic schools to find new ways to ensure that their ethos is relevant to the staff and students of today. Ethos is the “the heart and soul of a school” (Freiburg, 1991, p.1). Student engagement in ethos can have positive outcomes, as Leach (2016) explains that “engagement is understood to be positively related to academic outcomes such as retention, progression and completion” (p.23). Teachers have a pivotal role in ethos promotion and development in schools. In post-primary secondary schools, teachers are expected to uphold the ethos of the school in their day-to-day interactions with their students. This can prove challenging when balanced with striving towards academic success. This study examines teachers’ perceptions, observations and opinions on fostering a lived school ethos in a modern Catholic voluntary secondary school.

A qualitative analysis research design and an interpretivist paradigm was selected for this study. Semi-structured individual interviews took place with seven teachers from the sample school. The main findings reveal that teachers recognise positive examples of ethos promotion in their school, but they identify several areas for improvement in fostering a lived ethos in the school. There is a confusion and ignorance of Catholic teaching, anthropology and theology, which leads to many incorrect assumptions being made about Catholic ethos. These assumptions are powerful and persuasive and take away from whole school active engagement with ethos. There is a desire for change amongst some teachers, who do not appreciate the relevance of the traditional ethos. Dialogue should be encouraged and facilitated, between believer and non-believers, amongst staff and students alike, in order to develop ethos in schools. A process of education for all school stakeholders is suggested, to allow school members to discover the relevance of the school ethos, and so, go on to live it themselves.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my supervisor, Dr Denis Robinson, for his guidance, support, encouragement and kindness over the past two years and in particular, throughout the research process. I would like to thank the Principal, Board of Management and the Trustees who have supported me over the past two years. I am extremely grateful to the teachers who took part in the research and so generously gave their time and valued insights. I wish to thank my family and the Curran family, who have been an unending source of support for me, and especially my parents, who have always encouraged and guided me. I am eternally grateful for their love and support. Thank you to Ciarán for the constant supply of coffee too! Thanks to my friends who have been a great support over the past six months. A special thank you to Conor, who stands by me on every step of the way and whose love keeps me going come rain or shine.

## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Plain Language Letter

Appendix B: Consent Form

Appendix C: Schedule of Interview Questions

Appendix D: Information about Research Participants

**Abbreviations**

CCE Congregation for Catholic Education

BERA British Educational Research Association

## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Abstract.....  | ii  |
| Acknowledgements .....   | iii |
| Appendices .....   | iv  |
| Abbreviations .....  | v   |
| Table of Contents .....  | vi  |
| 1. Introduction .....  | 1   |
| 1.1 Research Question .....  | 1   |
| 1.2 Research Context and Rationale.....                                  | 1   |
| 1.3 Outline of the Thesis .....  | 3   |
| 2. Literature Review .....   | 4   |
| 2.1. Ethos .....   | 4   |
| 2.1.1 School Ethos.....  | 5   |
| 2.1.2. School Ethos and Religion .....                                   | 10  |
| 2.1.3. School Ethos in the Modern World .....                            | 11  |
| 2.1.4. School Ethos as a Fluid Concept .....                             | 13  |
| 2.1.5 Ethos and Academic Success .....                                   | 14  |
| 2.1.6. Conclusion.....   | 15  |
| 2.2. Student Engagement.....   | 15  |
| 2.2.1. Student participation and engagement.....                         | 15  |
| 2.2.2. Student Leadership .....  | 19  |
| 2.2.3. Student Voice .....   | 19  |
| 2.2.4. Extracurricular Activities and Student Groups for engagement..... | 22  |
| 2.2.5 Conclusion.....  | 22  |
| 3. Methodology.....  | 24  |
| 3.1 Introduction .....   | 24  |
| 3.2 Research Context.....  | 24  |
| 3.3 Research Paradigm .....  | 24  |
| 3.3.1 Interpretivism .....   | 25  |
| 3.3.2 Narrative inquiry .....  | 26  |
| 3.4 Qualitative Research Rationale .....                                 | 27  |
| 3.5 Interviews .....   | 28  |
| 3.6 Ethical Considerations.....  | 29  |
| 3.6.1 Researcher positionality .....                                     | 31  |
| 3.6.2 Research reliability and limitations .....                         | 32  |
| 3.7 Research Procedure .....   | 33  |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 3.7.1 Sample .....  | 34 |
| 3.7.2 Interview procedure .....                                     | 34 |
| 3.7.3 Anonymity .....   | 35 |
| 3.7.4 Storage of data .....   | 35 |
| 3.8 Analysis of Data .....  | 35 |
| 3.9 Conclusion .....  | 38 |
| 4. Presentation of Findings and Analysis .....                      | 39 |
| 4.1 Fostering a Lived Ethos Today.....                              | 39 |
| 4.1.1 Theme 1: The experience of a lived school ethos .....         | 39 |
| 4.1.1.1 Holistic education and the importance of relationship. .... | 39 |
| 4.1.1.2 Ethos and academics.....                                    | 41 |
| 4.1.1.3 Communicating and celebrating ethos. ....                   | 41 |
| 4.1.1.4 Normalising ethos.....                                      | 42 |
| 4.1.2 Theme 2: Ethos Leadership. ....                               | 43 |
| 4.1.2.1 Teachers living ethos daily. ....                           | 43 |
| 4.1.2.2 School leaders.....   | 44 |
| 4.1.3. Theme 3: Inclusive student engagement. ....                  | 45 |
| 4.1.3.1 Inclusion. ....   | 45 |
| 4.1.3.2 Student education. ....                                     | 46 |
| 4.2 Areas for Ethos Development .....                               | 46 |
| 4.2.1 Theme 1: Adapting ethos to a modern world. ....               | 46 |
| 4.2.1.1 Balancing ethos with academics.....                         | 47 |
| 4.2.1.2 Prioritising communication of ethos. ....                   | 48 |
| 4.2.1.3 Recognising ethos day to day. ....                          | 50 |
| 4.2.1.4 Traditional Catholic values.....                            | 50 |
| 4.2.1.5 A need for evolution in ethos. ....                         | 52 |
| 4.2.2 Theme 2: Ethos leadership. ....                               | 54 |
| 4.2.2.1 Burden of ethos leadership on religion teachers.....        | 54 |
| 4.2.2.2 Teacher knowledge.....                                      | 55 |
| 4.2.2.3 Disconnect between students and teachers.....               | 57 |
| 4.2.2.4 Prioritising ethos from the top down. ....                  | 57 |
| 4.2.3. Theme 3: Inclusive student engagement. ....                  | 58 |
| 4.2.3.1 Tolerance and tokenism.....                                 | 59 |
| 4.2.3.2 Developing student education. ....                          | 60 |
| 4.2.3.3. Development of a genuine student voice.....                | 61 |
| 4.2.3.4 Student-led ethos. ....                                     | 62 |
| 4.3 Conclusion .....  | 62 |



|  |    |
|--|----|
| 5. Findings and Recommendations.....                             | 64 |
| 5.1 Research Aims and Relevance .....                            | 64 |
| 5.2 Findings and Recommendations of the Study .....              | 64 |
| 5.2.1 Contrast in findings. ....                                 | 64 |
| 5.2.2 Reluctance to engage with Catholic ethos.....              | 65 |
| 5.2.3 Fostering the Catholic side of school ethos .....          | 67 |
| 5.2.4 Reinvention or reimagining? .....                          | 68 |
| 5.2.5 Beginning with the teachers .....                          | 70 |
| 5.2.6 Whole school approach .....                                | 70 |
| 5.2.7 Concluding statement following the research findings ..... | 71 |
| 5.3 Limitations.....   | 71 |
| 5.4 Recommendations for further research .....                   | 72 |
| 5.5 Conclusion .....   | 73 |
| References .....   | 74 |
| Appendices .....   | 80 |

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Research Question**

The education system in Ireland is going through a period of constant change and development. As Mullally (2019) states, “the prevailing climate in Ireland over the past two decades of rapid change and diversification has resulted in many positive changes as well as challenges to Catholic schools” (p.4). In this context, Catholic schools must balance their academic aims with their holistic mission and traditional school ethos. Schools must also take into account the changing cultural background of their student bodies and provide a welcoming and inclusive safe place for all students. The aim of this research is to examine teachers’ perceptions of fostering a lived ethos in a Catholic voluntary secondary school today. Teachers are at the coalface of ethos promotion in schools and so it is envisaged that the information and perspectives which they provide will create an informative impression of the state of Catholic school ethos today. The study looks to find out how teachers in one voluntary Catholic secondary school are dealing with issues around inclusion, balancing academic and holistic goals, developing student ethos engagement, and how they envisage fostering a relevant, lived ethos in their school in these changing times. Individual interviews were selected to allow the time and space for an in-depth discussion and these interviews will be qualitatively analysed.

### **1.2 Research Context and Rationale**

Catholic education has dominated the Irish educational landscape since the inception of formal state schooling. Over the past few decades, other trustees, such as ETBs and Educate Together have begun to expand across the country. Secular schooling has become a popular option for those who do not identify with the Catholic faith. However, Catholic schools are still in the majority and are popular countrywide. In these changing times, it is vital that Catholic schools play their part to diversify and adapt and develop a relevant school ethos for

modern staff and students. For this reason, this research study takes place at an important time in the development of Catholic education. It is a pivotal time period in the progression of Catholic schools, as they must compete with other educational providers to maintain their student numbers and promote an inclusive ethos at a time where perhaps, it is more relevant than ever. While the 2016 Census shows that Ireland is still a predominantly Catholic country, there has been a sharp decline in the number of people who identify as Catholic on the Census, from 84.2% in 2011 to 78.3% in 2016. The percentage of population with no religion is now 9.8%. The context of the Irish education system has changed and so “Ireland now faces the challenge of accommodating and integrating diverse beliefs (both religious and non-religious), cultures and languages into its education system” (Griffin, 2019, p.58). However, Catholic schools are already catering for many nationalities. Griffin highlights that the widest spread of nationalities was in Catholic schools, rather than any other type of school, according to an ESRI study carried out in 2012 (p.59). This displays “the continuing inclusive nature of Catholic schools and their commitment to provide for all” (p.59).

Griffin writes that “Catholic secondary schools are still in demand by Irish parents for their children” and that “enrolments in Catholic secondary schools have increased, albeit in small numbers...and some Catholic schools are oversubscribed” (p.61). Catholic schools therefore have a duty to provide for these children to the best of their ability. The Catholic school ethos is what sets these schools apart from all other patronages. One of the serious challenges which Catholic schools face is the “ability to provide adequate support for teachers that will enable them to continue to remain committed to the apostolate of Catholic education” (McVeigh, 2013, p.282). Teachers play a pivotal role in ethos promotion in schools and “are ultimately responsible for transmitting inclusive values and contributing to an ethos which champions and celebrates the richness of cultural and social diversity” (Donnelly, 2004, p.265).

For this reason, this study will focus on teachers' perceptions of fostering a lived ethos in the school

### **1.3 Outline of the Thesis**

This chapter has outlined the context of Catholic education in Ireland today, along with the rationale for the study. The aims of the research were also discussed. Chapter 2 details the review of literature, drawing on research on ethos, school ethos and student engagement. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology for data collection and analysis. Limitations, ethical considerations and researcher positionality are also discussed. The final chapter discusses the research findings and recommendations, as well as recommendations for further areas of research.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter begins with a discussion of literature based on ethos. School ethos will be examined, as well as religious ethos in schools. Subsequently, a selection of literature which critiques the role of ethos in modern times will be considered. The second section of the chapter will delve into student participation, outlining key findings relating to student engagement, voice and involvement in extracurricular groups.

### 2.1. Ethos

Ethos, although a widely employed term, escapes strict definition, although myriad definitions and descriptions have been proposed. Williams (2000) explains how “our current understanding of the term ‘ethos’ still reflects strongly the Greek genesis of the word as character or disposition” (p. 74). Hogan (1984) reminds us that “in Book II of his *Ethics* Aristotle points out that, fundamentally, what constitutes an ethos arises spontaneously from natural habit, i.e. from what has become habitual, or second nature, in one’s daily dealings with one’s associates” (p.700). This view is held by many scholars, as will be discussed in the next section. Kezar (2007) describes ethos as “the fundamental character or spirit of a culture” which “connects individuals to a group; it expresses a particular group’s values and ideology in a way that creates an emotional connection” (p.13). McGuinness (2000) summarises that “ethos... is manifested in the values we treasure and promote” (p. 246). However, ethos goes beyond simply providing a value system, indeed Kezar proposes that “an ethos may be thought of as the life-giving source of an institution that touches the heart and engages the mind” (p.14). Williams (2000) explains that “the explicit aspect of school ethos is captured in the French for ethos – *la philosophie de l’école*. The still fashionable term ‘hidden curriculum’ also captures something of what is meant by ethos” (p. 75). He concluded that “although impalpable, ethos is nonetheless something real” (p.76).

The term 'ethos' is often used interchangeably with terms such as 'character' and 'atmosphere'. McLaughlin (2005), whilst highlighting its importance also stresses the difficulty involved in evaluating the influence of ethos, as it "is closely akin to, and often described in terms of, related notions such as 'ambience', 'atmosphere', 'climate' 'culture', 'ethical environment' and the like" (p.309). In education, ethos is widely considered a vital factor, as McLaughlin states "the educative importance of ethos is... widely acknowledged" (p.306). Donnelly (2000) agrees that ethos "remains a term which is very resistant to satisfactory definition and, thus, effective empirical explorations" despite "such high levels of interest" (p.134). She proposes two interpretations of ethos. Firstly, a positivist understanding of ethos as "something which prescribes social reality" and "an objective phenomenon, existing independently of the people and social events in an organisation" (p.135). An anti-positivist theory proposes ethos as "something which is more informal emerging from social interaction and process" (p.136). In this sense, ethos emerges from interactions between individuals and groups, and is not necessarily the prescribed ethos of the organisation; "it is not independent from the organisation but inherently bound up within it" (p.136). This lived ethos may not necessarily adhere to that which the organisation claims to have, but is a more organic and less static concept.

### **2.1.1 School Ethos**

It is evident that ethos is an intrinsic part of our schooling system. Pike (2010) reinforces its importance in education, proposing that "education and schooling concerns the inculcation of values and virtues as well as technical proficiency or academic success" (p. 763). Freiburg (1991) defines school ethos as "the heart and soul of a school" (p.1). According to Drumm (2012), the ethos of a school "should inform all aspects of the life of a school" (p.192). Glenn (1994) describes the ethos of a school as "that coherent set of beliefs about education,

relationships, and the meaning of human life that underlies the character of some schools”, and notes that “perhaps in most schools both ethos and distinctive character are simply missing, never having been thought through or considered necessary” (p.78). Coolahan (2000) similarly states:

The ethos and culture of a school are the motor, the driving force of what happens in the school. The quality of life of the whole school community is intimately affected by the nature of the ethos and culture which prevail (p.113).

Hyland (2000) sees school ethos as a “live, vibrant thing” which can be “clearly identified in the practices of a school” (p.22).

Traditionally in Ireland there has been a predominately Catholic ethos in both primary and secondary schools. The understanding and promotion of this Catholic ethos has changed significantly over the past century. Hogan (1984) explains three models of ethos as he sees it in the Irish education system. Traditionally, teachers in Catholic schools were expected to uphold a Catholic lifestyle both inside and outside of school, and school management authorities would look unkindly on any infringements of this. Hogan describes this kind of ethos as ‘custodial’, where “the authorities of the school or educational system value themselves largely as custodians of a set of standards, which are to be preserved, defended and transmitted through the agency of schools and colleges” (p.695). This is similar to Donnelly’s positivist understanding of ethos mentioned above, as the prescribed ethos of a school. Hogan explains that an ethos of “accommodation” had become more prevalent in the late twentieth century, as schools attempted to cater for a “variety of articulate interest groups in education” (p.696). Finally Hogan outlines school ethos as more of a dialogue and therefore a fluid concept in a school. This idea will be further discussed in a later section of this literature review. This ethos is “the natural outcome of *what actually goes on* in school or college from day to day, perhaps regardless of what kind of standard the school is formally thought to represent” (p.697). This understanding corresponds with Donnelly’s anti-positivist

interpretation of ethos, as that which emerges from interactions amongst members of the school community. Indeed, Murray (2000) proposes that a school can only claim to have a true ethos when “any such aspiration is achieved in a way that the resulting *modus vivendi* becomes totally unremarkable, natural and integral” (p.16). This lived ethos is more commonplace and championed in today’s society.

The Education Act of 1998 in Ireland changed the use of the word ‘ethos’ to ‘characteristic spirit’ in relation to schools. According to the Act, schools and patrons have a responsibility to uphold the school’s characteristic spirit in the life of the school, with regards to the development of their pupils and the curriculum which is available. The government also has a responsibility to support the characteristic spirit of individual schools when prescribing curricula. Hyland (2000) discusses how the White Paper written by the Government of Ireland in 1995 proposes that each school has a “tangible quality” which is defined by its physical structure and how it is organised. He writes that the paper acknowledges ethos as the “critical, intangible character” which “encompasses collective attitudes, beliefs, values, traditions, aspirations and goals” (p.22). It highlights that ethos is not an imposed structure but rather an organic element of the school which develops through the day to day life of the school (p.22). However, Graham (2011) proposes that “a positive school ethos requires education authorities to recognise, consider and plan for ethos and the role of ethos in their arrangements for schooling” (p.14). He concedes that “the term is mostly taken for granted with little evidence of explanation or critical reflection” (p.14). Mullally (2019) highlights the importance of addressing “our own identity as Catholic schools and how we approach the responsibilities we have towards the faith development of Catholic students” (p.6)

Glenn (1994) sees a school’s ethos as what sets it apart from other schools, not by categorising schools as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but as what makes schools distinct from each other. He refers to Lightfoot (1983) and explains her understanding of ethos as “a constant presence



which presumably must be discovered by new teachers and pupils over time through living the life of the school” (p.75). Similarly, Murray (2000) proposes that “the concept of school ethos is, by its nature, school-specific” (p.16). Glenn defines school ethos as “that coherent set of beliefs about education, relationships, and the meaning of human life that underlines the character of some schools” (p.78). He proposes that the distinct ethos of a school can be expressed to parents and other stakeholders in a statement which explains their school ethos and how it plans to fulfil this ethos (p.79). This is the prescribed ethos of a school. However, as Murray (2000) writes, simply articulating the prescribed school values has little to do with the actual ethos of the school (p.17). Both Eisner (1994), and Donnelly (2000), identify a gap between the prescribed ethos and the lived ethos of a school, with Eisner finding that the pupils’ lived experiences and understanding of the school ethos differ to that which was prescribed. Donnelly distinguishes the gap between that which is lived out by the school staff and the prescribed school ethos. Boldt (2000) writes about a 1997 study carried out by Marino Institute of Education on school culture and ethos in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. As part of the study, parents, students and teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire on school culture and ethos. In these questionnaires, quite a high number of parents and pupils chose their understanding of ethos to be “what the trustees determine to be the aims, values and conduct of the school” (p.41). Boldt suggests that “many parents and pupils do not see themselves as contributors to the ethos of their schools” (p.42). Williams (2000) explains that no matter what type of ethos the school has, it cannot be imposed upon the school and the members of the school (p.81). Furthermore, “a school ethos must emerge from the genuinely held convictions and aspirations of parents and teachers and pupils” (p.81-82). Boldt similarly recommends that “school communities be encouraged to engage together in exploring, articulating and understanding better their school culture and ethos” (p.42). Barr (2000) interestingly points out that the word ethos itself is meaningless, as it needs to be qualified and

clarified. In the absence of this “we might find ourselves making the assumption that we share a common understanding while in truth having different intentions and understandings” (p.131). Indeed, Graham (2012) finds that school ethos has “retained a taken-for-granted relationship with education and schools since its introduction into the lexicon of educational discourse” (p.16).

School ethos and school culture are often confused or combined, however they are defined as two separate entities in the literature. Glenn (1994) explains that “the ethos of a school, as we use the term, is distinct from though it may – indeed should – shape the culture of a school” (p.78). He explains how ethos in action then becomes the character of the school. He uses the term character to “describe the way that participants in a school that possesses a consciously-determined ethos shape its common life and work to express that ethos through experiences that are in the broadest as well as the most precise sense educational” (p.79). Glenn proposes that “character, then, is the external expression in daily life of the ethos of a school, as climate is the expression of its culture” (p.80). In summary, Glenn suggests that there are four dimensions to a school’s distinctiveness: climate, culture, ethos and character development. Although intrinsically linked, only the first two are clearly visible in all schools, whereas the latter two are the” underlying and the visible qualities of school life and work which are arrived at deliberately in certain schools but not in others” (p. 100-101).

School ethos goes beyond academic education and can have a lasting, positive effect and influence on all members of the school community. Williams (2000) explains that “...the ethos of the school we attended can remain part of our consciousness” (p.76). Ethos can affect who we are as human beings as the ethos of a school “touches the quality of our lives and can constitutes an abiding element in the fabric of our very identity” (p.76).

### **2.1.2. School Ethos and Religion**

Ethos is not solely a religious aspect of a school, as Williams (2000) explores, “an ethos sometimes has a religious connotations but this is a contingent rather than a necessary aspect of the concept. In other words, ethos need not, in principle, imply anything religious” (p.76). However, Hemming (2011) states that although all schools have their own particular culture or climate, “faith schools are often argued to promote positive values through a distinctly religious ethos” (p.1064-1065). He explains how Britain and many other European countries have maintained an official link between church and state and so religion plays a role in state-funded faith schools (p.1063). This is also the case in the Irish context. Williams (2000) explains that what is distinctive about a Christian ethos school is:

As a matter of policy, it aims to foster in young people a commitment to the message of the Gospel. A Christian school points young people to the ultimate values and purposes of human life and introduces them to a quality of life which lies beyond the mere fact of living. (p.77)

In his comparison study between two schools from different sectors, Hemming discovered that “the Community school ethos was based around values of inclusion, diversity and respect for difference, the Catholic school ethos drew much more on a Christian ethic that viewed everyone as equal in God’s eyes” (p.1073). In Ireland, according to Hogan (1984), ethos has most commonly been associated with “the religious or other school authorities”(p. 694-695). He proposes that these school management bodies “view themselves largely as custodians of a set of standards, which are to be preserved, defended and transmitted through the agency of schools and colleges” (p.295). Donnelly (2000) explains how the “direction and tone” of Catholic schools is set out by Church teachings and this dictates the “purpose and direction” of the schools (p.136). Minister Michael Woods (2000) suggests that unfortunately at times the value of true ethos has been lost, as often school ethos has been purported to be “concerned exclusively with the preservation of a particular denominational or cultural identity” (p.125).

Williams reminds us that not everyone will accept a Christian school ethos and we must acknowledge this (p.77). Questions have been raised in society with the development of non-secular schools, as liberal theory “generally sees religion as something that should be confined to the private sphere, through the separation of church and state” (Hemming, 2011, p.1063).

The Catholic Church is clear in its teachings on education as to what is expected of a Catholic school and what distinguishes it from any other. Laying out guidelines for schools as we moved into the third millennium, the CCE (1997) proclaims that one of the key elements of the Catholic school’s educational project is “the synthesis between culture and faith”, as “knowledge set in the context of faith becomes wisdom and life vision” (14). It also notes that in recent times there has “also been a noticeable tendency to reduce education to its purely technical and practical aspects” (8). More recently, the CCE (2014) expands on this, stating:

Educating is a lot more than just instructing people... students need to be respected as integral persons and be helped to develop a multiplicity of skills that enrich the human person, such as creativity, imagination, the ability to take on responsibilities, to love the world, to cherish justice and compassion. (Section e)

Paletta and Fiorin (2016) highlight that schools are “educational communities and not merely education services, because the central focus of their mission is the care for all-round education of young people” (p.143).

### **2.1.3. School Ethos in the Modern World**

The CCE (1997) proposes that in current society, “we have a crisis of values which, in highly developed societies in particular, assumes the form, often exalted by the media, of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism”(1). They call for “courageous renewal”, as society is in danger of losing the educational value of the Catholic school and the value of experience gained over centuries (9-10). Hemming (2011), acknowledges the “shifting role that religion plays in modern liberal democracies” which requires us to come to new understandings of its

various manifestations in our modern society (p.1063). School ethos, particularly in secular schools, is one of these manifestations. Pring (2000) speaks of how school ethos “must reflect the wider community which it serves and from which it must draw strength” (p.13). Schools must adapt to and recognise the various experiences, attitudes and ideas which pupils bring to the school in order to strengthen its ethos (p.13). Murray (2000) similarly concludes that “...school ethos cannot be constructed in isolation. It can only be achieved by means of a progression through mutual awareness (of external and internal concerns), mutual understanding, sensitivity and acceptance” (p.17). Ethos cannot be isolated from the world in which it exists and it must grow and adapt to the changes surrounding it. Coolahan (2000) supports this further, explaining that “school climate and ethos are inter-connected with, and influenced by, wider educational and social developments” (p.114).

The CCE (2013) sees schools as “privileged places” for intercultural dialogue and encourages the development of intercultural dialogue groups in our schools, in order to combat the use of cultures as elements of “antagonism and conflict” (6). It proposes that as religion is “incultured”, religions should dialogue with atheistic and non-religious groups, as all are posed with the same questions about the meaning of life (8). It highlights the increased interdependence of people from all traditions and religions due to the globalisation of society and state that “in this regard, the Catholic Church feels that the need for dialogue is ever more important” (13). The Congregation suggests several methods of dialogue:

The dialogue of life, with its sharing of joys and sorrows; the dialogue of works, collaborating to promote the development of men and women; theological dialogue, when this is possible, with the study of each other’s religious heritage; and the dialogue of religious experience. (14)

It emphasises the importance of Catholic schools as locations of dialogue and intercultural education (17). Schools are required to be open to “encountering other cultures” and “supporting individuals” around this (50). The CCE (2014) repeats this resounding call to Catholic schools not to “oppose other cultures and religious faiths, but to engage in dialogue

with them” (6). Diversity of learners must be recognised, and teachers “must be open and professionally knowledgeable when they are leading classes where diversity is recognized, accepted and appreciated as an educational asset that is beneficial to everyone” (5). Those students who are in greatest difficulty should not be seen as a burden, but should “be at the centre of schools’ attention and concerns” (5).

#### **2.1.4. School Ethos as a Fluid Concept**

It is widely accepted that ethos flows from the day to day life of the school, and so will be different in different schools and also will change and progress over time, as it is experienced and lived out by school communities. Ethos is often recognised on an experiential level, rather than a cognitive one (Graham, 2011, p.266), (Allder, 1993), (McLaughlin, 2005). Ethos is not a static concept. Charles and McHugh (2000) propose that “the culture and ethos of a school changes over time and reflects the larger societal system within which it is embedded” (p.182). Both Donnelly (2000) and Graham (2011) discover that often in schools, an ethos of “inward attachment” is found, rather than the prescribed school ethos. Graham finds that ethos emerges organically, and considers evidence of “multiple ethea”, rather than one single, prescribed school ethos (p.269-270).

Teachers play an active part in promoting and sharing ethos in a school. Hogan (1984) explains an understanding of ethos as “the natural outcome of *what actually goes on* in school or college from day to day, perhaps regardless of what kind of standard the school is formally thought to represent” (p.697). Graham (2011) finds that “ethos can be changed by increasing the number of positive or negative acts of solicitude” (279). Paletta and Fiorin (2016) call for reflection on the foundation of Catholic schools, as this is not a “one-time action”, but rather the reasons for its foundation must be

continuously proposed, both because this awareness offers the possibility to build on the founding wealth and further develop its presence and mission, and because over

time the cultural and social context changes, new problems arise, and to tackle these it is not sufficient to refer to the past but must be ourselves equipped to respond to new challenges. (p.137-138)

Similarly, Coolahan (2000) speaks of the importance of the “follow-through” in ethos, where a school implements the ethos which they have subscribed to in the daily affairs of the school (p.113). Donnelly (2004) suggests that in order to develop an inclusive school ethos, teachers should “not only sympathize with the values which are promoted by the inclusive school but must also actively enact the ethos of inclusiveness through their everyday work and through their own collegial relationships” (p.265). Ethos is not a concrete set of actions which must be carried out by school members, or taught to pupils, rather it is a way of living which must be fostered amongst the whole school community in order to pass it on to students.

### **2.1.5 Ethos and Academic Success**

A number of connections have been made between a positive school ethos and academic success. Charles and McHugh (2000) state that “a positive school ethos has been related to high levels of academic achievement, good attendance records, appropriate behaviour in school and low rates of delinquency” (p. 181). A key example of this is Pike’s (2010) case study into Trinity Academy in the United Kingdom, where he examined the influence of the school’s core values on the school. Core values were promoted in the school to encourage “good behaviour and positive attitudes for the uniform pedagogy and the curriculum as well as the pastoral system” (p. 756). Within a short period of time the school had improved its academic achievements and standards and the Vice Principal for Teaching and Learning at the time considered the school’s core values “to be the ‘single greatest factor’ in achieving its success” (p.756). These core values “promoted good behaviour and positive attitudes”, however they did not only inform the teaching and curriculum of the school, but also the equally important pastoral system (p.756).

### **2.1.6. Conclusion**

From the literature, it is evident that ethos is a term which is difficult to define and yet is an intrinsic part of our education system. School ethos is concerned with the promotion of values and beliefs and providing an education for each student as a whole, not just academically. Difficulties have arisen in recent years due to the gap between the professed, prescribed ethos of a school and the lived, day to day ethos which school members experience, or in some cases, do not experience. Due to the intangible nature of ethos, it is a difficult task for schools to ensure that all stakeholders feel included by their school ethos. However, it appears that the optimal way to foster a lived ethos in a school is through involving members in its development and in its promotion throughout the school, so that aspects of the ethos are expressed throughout the school tangibly and visibly and can be understood and appreciated by all. The fostering of a positive school ethos has in fact been linked to school improvement, such as in Trinity Academy, and so can contribute to the improvement of a school's academic achievements also. The Catholic school and its ethos has come under fire in recent years, however it is clear that essential to any ethos' survival is its ability to adapt and progress according to the societal changes and cultural changes surrounding it. Ethos must be fluid and adapt to the needs of the members of the school community as the school grows and progresses.

## **2.2. Student Engagement**

### **2.2.1. Student participation and engagement.**

Finn and Voelkl (1993) define student participation as "the extent to which a youngster regularly participates in classroom and school activities" (p.249). Mager and Nowak (2011) define student participation as "student involvement in collective decision-making at the school or class level that included dialogue between students and other decision-makers" (p.40). They claim that "the effects of student participation can be positive, neutral or negative" (p.40). They



also propose that “participatory behaviour may also come to include involvement in subject-related clubs or community activities and in the social, extracurricular, and athletic sectors of school life in addition to, or at times in place of, extensive participation in academic work” (p.250). Voelkl (1995) proposes that “a student who feels comfortable in the classroom and when interacting with teachers may strive harder in schoolwork, become more involved in class activities, and realize greater educational gains” (p.127). Participation can lead to student identification and a greater sense of belonging in the school as well as students recognising the importance of their involvement in school life (p.250).

Engagement is closely linked to student participation and can be similarly difficult to define. Baron and Corbin (2012) state that “there is little agreement as to what engagement is or how we might measure it” (p.763). Finn and Voelkl (1993) see engagement as “a sufficiently important construct to be considered as an outcome in its own right” (p.250). Student engagement is generally perceived as a positive outcome. Axelson and Flick (2011) propose that student engagement refers to “how involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other” (p.38). Lopez (2011) states that “engaged students are highly involved with and enthusiastic about school. These students arrive at school prepared and eager to learn; they're likely to promote learning readiness in those around them” (p.72). Leach (2016) explains how “engagement is understood to be positively related to academic outcomes such as retention, progression and completion” (p.23). Gunuc and Kuzu (2015) highlight its importance as they struggle to see how an education system which lacked student engagement could lead to positive outcomes (p.587). Indeed, Zeidin, Gauley, Barringer and Chapa (2018) explain that “adolescents have a developmental need to fully engage within the structures of their everyday lives” (p.358). Lopez (2011) explains how students who lack engagement are just “going through the motions” at school and are not reaching their potential (p.72).

Parsons, Nuland and Parsons (2014) claim that now researchers are aware that student engagement is “more complex than just observable behaviours” (p.24). Similarly, Leach (2014) admits that student engagement is not a simple concept” and that the “relationship between teacher and students is crucial” (p.25). It is evident that teachers play a pivotal role in student engagement and participation. Axelson and Flick (2010) explain that the educational institutional has been assigned an increasingly large amount of responsibility to create student engagement (p.41). They suggest that we move past the question of ‘who is responsible’ and try to understand what the factors are which affect student engagement in their learning processes (p.42). Lizzio, Dempster and Neumann (2011) state that “the implications of student–teacher relationships may reach beyond the immediate classroom environment to broader social engagement” (p.87). Voekl (1995) claims that “teachers who encourage students' work, listen to and show interest in students, and demonstrate care and respect for students may foster greater interest and participation in those students” (p.130). Parsons et al. (2014) propose that “teachers can heighten student engagement if they understand its importance, know the types of tasks that encourage it, and have tools for assessing it” (p.24). They also suggest that teachers should aim to provide engaging activities in lessons as “broadly conceived engagement is closely associated with achievement” (p.24). Lopez (2011) finds that “teachers who are engaged in their work tend to have students who are engaged in learning” (p.72). Lizzio et al. (2011) explain that how a student identifies with a group or organisation can affect their level of engagement and motivation (p.89). They propose that for a student to desire to contribute to the development or improvement of a group, they must feel an element of care and engagement within it (p.89).

Axelson and Flick (2011) depict three types of engagement - behavioural, emotional, and cognitive – and explain that there is a lack of investigation or studies into how the three interrelate (p.41). Behavioural engagement is possibly the easiest to observe and define, as it

is visible to any observer of the student(s) in question. Zeidin et al. (2018) explain cognitive engagement as “a student’s personal investment in a learning activity, including the willingness to exert effort to understand complex ideas or to master difficult skills” (p.359). Cognitive engagement can be boosted by the development and encouragement of student voice (p.361). Zeidin et al. (2018) define emotional engagement as “a student’s identification and emotional ties with school, as witnessed through perceptions of closeness, belonging, and community” (p.359). Parsons et al. (2014) state that “teachers can create engaging classroom contexts by showing students that they care about them and by maintaining a positive social environment”, as “a student’s engagement is influenced by the specific context and situation” (p.24-25). They explain that students will become engaged with activities that are relevant to them and that reflect real world experiences (p.25). Zeidin et al. (2018) propose that “students need to know that they are not alone and that they matter. It is this donation of empathy, predictability and challenge that allows students to be engaged agents of their own learning” (p.369). Lizzio et al. (2011) explain that students’ identification with the school can be enhanced by how closely an activity fits with the school’s culture and value system (p.90). Parsons et al. (2014) propose that “engaging tasks give students *choices*, where they can experience some control over their learning” (p.25). They continue that “student engagement is malleable, and teachers have the ability to design contexts and tasks that encourage or discourage student engagement” (p.25). Occasionally, Axelson and Flick (2011) state, “engagement may simply be the by-product of a learning environment that suits the student” (p.42). It is important to note that student engagement will decline with age, reaching a “nadir” in secondary education, and so this can prove a more challenging period for student engagement in schools (Zeidin et al., 2018, p. 359).

### **2.2.2. Student Leadership**

In their study of a student leadership programme, Williams and Polinsky (1959) define a good leader as “as one with a sense of responsibility and a true insight into the effects of a course of action for good or evil” (p.547). A study of school leadership development for girls in Australia found that “students may benefit from the study of different approaches to leadership and their evolution over time” (Archard, 2012, p.25). Archard finds that we must educate our students in leadership behaviour and emotional intelligence in order to prepare students for leadership roles (p.219). In their account of two leadership programmes in schools, Ellis, Small-McGinley and Fabrizio (2001) stated that one of the teachers involved recommended that “teachers identify shared goals and values with students and talk together with them about proceeding toward those goals” (p.219). A student leadership programme can provide leadership opportunities to students, and opportunities to speak in front of a group and prepare for a group, it can help develop self-confidence and it can foster the holistic side of a school, as students involved can build a strong and positive rapport with the teachers and management of the school (Williams & Polinsky, 1959, p.549). Archard found that as a result of her study, “it was acknowledged by staff that the need to be diverse and flexible, to understand self in a global context and to be technologically competent were important aspects of leadership development in schools” (p.40)

### **2.2.3. Student Voice**

Newman and Thomas (2008) propose that “children are competent and active members of society, who can and should have a say in aspects of social life that concern them” (p.238). In particular, they highlight that “recent research has indicated the benefits of consulting students on their education” (p.239). Graham (2012), in his study of the student voice and ethos, emphasises that

increasing our knowledge and understanding of students' lived experiences of school and seeking further clarification as to what constitutes positive acts of solicitude within the context of school seem potentially fruitful in terms of furthering our knowledge and understanding of ethos for school improvement (p. 352).

DeFur and Korinek (2010) propose that "We believe that middle and high schools must create systems and structures in which all students can have a voice and contribute to the governance and community of secondary education" (p.15). Fielding (2012) highlights the democratic importance of fostering student voice (p.63). Frost and Holden (2008) explain that "a growing body of academic research testifies to the importance of student voice in school improvement" (p.84). Elias (2010) proffers that "students need social support from peers and teachers and they benefit from seeing their schools as caring and fair, places where families and parents are welcomed and where educational success has value" (p.23). However, many schools are still proving reluctant to offer students a voice when it comes to the governance of the school (Bron, Emerson & Kákonyi, 2018, p.311).

Mitra and Gross (2009) explain a simple model of the student voice. They explain the concept as being pyramid shaped, with "being heard" written on the first, bottom section. This is the most commonly occurring example of student voice. The middle of the pyramid is described as "collaborating with adults". The final level, the smallest level, is reserved for "Building capacity for leadership" (p.523-524). 'Being heard' is the section where students are listened to by school personnel. In 'collaborating', students work with the adults in the school to achieve changes, for example collecting data and implementing solutions. 'Building capacity for leadership' is the final section of the pyramid, and the smallest. This is the most in-depth form of student voice and also, the least common. Elias (2010) states that these activities can sometimes "address deep cultural divides and be transformational in their impact" (p.26). Elias (2010) suggests that "students should have chances to set some of their own goals, monitor their own progress, have choices in how they show evidence of what they have learned,

and share their learning with others”(p.24). This ideal has filtered down into educational policy in the Republic of Ireland with the formation of the new Junior Cycle. This aims for students to become active agents in their own learning and responsible learners.

The development of student voice can lead to many positive outcomes. DeFur and Korinek (2010) believe that “any system, school, or teacher who is willing to honestly listen to students and use their input can improve educational outcomes” (p.15). Elias (2010) proposes that “fundamentally, lasting learning is the result of co-creation in caring contexts, and that is what the pedagogy of student voice provides” (p.27). Mitra (2004) argues that increasing student voice can help to create “meaningful experiences that help to meet the developmental needs of youth - and particularly for those students who otherwise would not find meaning in their school experiences”(p.681). Mitra and Gross (2009) believe that student voice can provide a new way of seeing issues that had previously been “ignored or misunderstood” (p.535). These initiatives can also “broaden the scope of who has a voice in schools and can even lead to students participation in developing school reform efforts” (p.538). Importantly, DeFur and Korinek (2010) found that all students, regardless of stage in education, wanted these opportunities to have their voice heard and talk about their schools, and they were happy to know that their voices were being heard (p.16). In their study on student participation McCluskey et al. (2013) discovered that students have an interest in “avenues for consultation, opportunities for involvement in decision-making, engagement with school and their frequent frustrations with current systems” (p.292). They note that students feel like their voices were heard more when they were in primary school (p.294-295). Interestingly, this corresponds with Zeidin et al. (2018) who suggest that student engagement declines when they reach secondary education (p. 359).

#### **2.2.4. Extracurricular Activities and Student Groups for engagement**

Much of the literature surrounding extracurricular activities of school students surrounds the perceived benefits of student engagement with groups or activities outside the classroom. Feldman and Matjasko (2005) propose that it is believed that “extracurricular activities offer a means to express and explore one's identity, generate social and human capital, and offer a challenging setting outside of academics” (p.161). They observe that it is through engagement in these activities that students best get to know their peers and adults, through the development of personal bonds and mutual trust and commitment (p.162). Covay and Carbonaro (2010), in their study of primary age children, identify extracurricular activities as “a site for students to practice and develop their noncognitive skills”, which may not be afforded within the classroom curriculum (p.41). Frith and Clark (1984) claim that the primary responsibility of an educator is to “create a learning environment in which students can grow into well-rounded citizens” for all their pupils (p.327). The CCE (2013) supports this ideal, suggesting that teachers “do not limit their responsibilities to the merely didactic” (63). They highlight the rounded education which teachers provide, in formal and informal ways. In a study conducted by Im, Hughes, Cao and Kwok (2016), it was found that “participation in extracurricular activities in middle school promotes positive school identities, behavioural engagement in the classroom, and letter grades” (p.1370). Feldman and Matjasko (2005) similarly concluded that “activity participation has many positive influences on adolescent development and young adult outcomes”, however they call for a more refined study into the impact of extracurricular activities (p.202).

#### **2.2.5 Conclusion.**

The literature is clear in linking relationship to student engagement. The student teacher relationship is pivotal in school life. Positive relationships can contribute to students

performing to the best of their ability and engaging behaviourally and cognitively with school life. Student leadership and student voice should form an important part of the school setting. These factors can contribute to positive relationships between students and other school members and can increase student engagement with school life. Another important way to build relationships in schools is through extracurricular activities. These activities can help to build engagement and a sense of identity amongst students. Each of these categories can be linked back to the findings on ethos. Student involvement and engagement is essential to fostering a lived school ethos. Student engagement with ethos, and the positive relationships fostered through ethos, can lead to greater academic achievement and a heightened sense of identity in the school. Student voice must contribute to ethos development in schools and opportunities provided for student leadership.



### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the research design for this research project and discusses the ethical considerations of the study. The chapter considers the research limitations and research integrity and will conclude with an outline of how the data was analysed and stored. The purpose of the research was to understand teachers' perceptions of a lived ethos in a Catholic Voluntary secondary school in Ireland. It was decided to take a qualitative research approach to the research, which would produce qualitative data relating to teachers' experiences. Qualitative methodology would produce rich, insightful data which expressed how individual teachers felt about ethos in the school.

#### **3.2 Research Context**

The research study is set in a large, urban mixed post-primary school with a diverse student body and a white, settled staff body. The school is a voluntary Catholic school, undergoing efforts to preserve and foster the Catholic ethos whilst welcoming members of the school body who do not identify with the Catholic faith. This study aims to discover teachers' perspectives of the lived ethos in the school with the aim of discovering some areas for improvement and suggestions for the same.

#### **3.3 Research Paradigm**

When deciding on an appropriate research paradigm for this qualitative study, a number of worldviews in research were considered: constructivism, critical theory, positivism, postpositivism, and interpretivism. Dunmoyer (2008) outlines several key paradigms of social science research and explains that a paradigm is "a set of assumptions and perceptual orientations shared by members of a research community" (p.591). Paradigms inform how

researchers view both the phenomena of their particular studies and the research methods which they should employ to study these phenomena (p.591).

### 3.3.1 Interpretivism

Lincoln and Guba, as discussed by Dunmoyer (2008), propose that “knowledge is constructed, not discovered” (p.3). Their view is that as people live and work in different places and therefore have a different ontological outlook; “the world consists of multiple realities rather than a single, unitary reality” (p.592). Dunmoyer concludes that

It follows, then, that social scientists' task is not to discover what is true—for from this new perspective, there is no single, absolute truth to discover—but to describe, as accurately as possible, how different people in different contexts have constructed reality and what these people take to be true. (p.592)

Interpretivism stems from the traditions of hermeneutics and phenomenology (Schwandt, 1998, p.223). It celebrates the “permanence and priority of the real world of first-person, subjective experience”, however, interpretivists seek to objectify it (p.223). Interpretivism struggles to “draw a line between the object of investigation and the investigator” (p.224). It is “based on a philosophical framework that promotes plural perspectives in evaluations relying on qualitative approaches and natural settings” (Hurworth, 2005, p.2). Hurworth (2005) summarises interpretivism as being about

contextualized meaning involving a belief that reality is socially constructed, filled with multiple meanings and interpretations, and that emotions are involved... There is no separation between the evaluator and those evaluated, and the underlying principles are based on openness and dialogue. (p.210)

Paley (2008) states that

the various inquiry paradigms—positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, constructivism, the participatory-cooperative paradigm, and so on—can all be mapped onto qualitative research, each with its distinctive ontology, epistemology, methodology, and values and each manifested in a particular way of conducting qualitative studies. (p.649)

For this research study, an interpretivist approach was deemed most appropriate for several reasons. Schwandt (1998) states that proponents of interpretivist or constructivist persuasions “share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (p. 221). This is essentially the aim of my study, whereby I will aim to understand the reality of ethos in the school through the point of view of teachers in the school. Blaikie (2004) explains that “social regularities can be understood, perhaps explained, by constructing models of typical meanings used by typical social actors engaged in typical courses of action in typical situations” (p.509). I will aim to include teachers from across a selection of disciplines so that the sample studied will represent the typical sample of teachers in a secondary school. Greene (1992) outlines the benefit of interpretivist research for the practitioner as it “means foregoing aspirations to *get it right* and embracing instead ideals of *making it meaningful*” (p.39). I am not aiming to obtain any particular viewpoint through the study, rather my goal is to get a meaningful representation of how teachers view the lived ethos in their school. Greene explains that “epistemologically and practically, interpretivist knowledge is, in its very essence, an understanding of the meaning we create from dynamic transaction between ourselves and our worlds” (p.40). Although the knowledge which can be construed from interpretative inquiry may be limited, it is the “joint creation of the inquirer and the inquired-about in a given context at a given time” (p.42). The data will be produced through dialogue between myself and the interviewees in what I hope is a naturalistic setting of colleague-to-colleague discussion.

### **3.3.2 Narrative inquiry**

This research is constructed around narrative inquiry. Through the method of interview, I will be listening to teachers’ stories of their experiences of ethos in the school and these stories become the data to be studied. Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou (2011) explain

how “we are able to investigate not just how stories are structured and the ways in which they work, but also who produces them and by what means; the mechanisms by which they are consumed; and how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted” through narrative inquiry (p.2). This study will use thematic analysis. The understanding of narrative research varies greatly, including in social research, where “‘narrative’ also refers to a diversity — of topics of study, methods of investigation and analysis, and theoretical orientations”, however, this study will be concerned only with interviews (p.3). When conducting narrative research, it is essential that the context of the research is considered and it “cannot be stripped, nor can it be separated from questions of meaning” (p.16). Squire et al. (2011) highlight the importance of the researcher’s influence on the research, stating that “we as narrative researchers are crucially a part of the data we collect, our presence is imprinted upon all that we do” (p.17). For that reason, we must consider our own part in the research and our positionality, along with the influence this will have on the study.

### **3.4 Qualitative Research Rationale**

Qualitative research involves studying data that are text based rather than numeric in representation (Mathison, 2011, p.345). This data can result from interviews, observations and documents and can be analysed from a variety of perspectives (p.2). Qualitative analysis has traditionally been considered an “interpretative art rather than a science, and hence a process that does not lend itself easily to simple articulation” (Campbell, McNamara & Gilroy, 2011, p.125). In recent years there has been more discussion around qualitative analysis methods and so its use has been increasing (p.125). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) propose that “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p 3). Campbell et al. (2011) caution that “although qualitative data analysis involves you using your knowledge and

understanding of the world derived from experience or reading, it is important to be aware of any personal biases or preconceptions that may affect your data collection or analysis” (p.126).

It is important to acknowledge that a qualitative approach is often criticised for being “‘too subjective’ or too much based on feelings and personal responses” (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, p.20). However, this approach best suits this particular research study. In this study I am not aiming to test a theory, but rather to examine the experiences and opinions of teachers in a school which promotes a Catholic ethos. I am not searching for statistics but rather striving to learn from the shared experiences of the teachers in the study.

### **3.5 Interviews**

A research interview is a professional conversation that has “structure and purpose” (Kvale, 1996, p.6). Breen (2006) states that “one-to-one interviews ought to probe individual experiences, encouraging self-reflection on issues that could be distorted if social pressure were placed on the individual” (p.466). Individual interviews are particularly suitable when the researcher wishes to learn about the interviewees’ experiences, and they allow the subject time and space to examine these experiences and share their interpretation of them (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p.267). Indeed, Rubin and Rubin (2005) propose that qualitative interviewing enables us to “understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate” (p.3). An interview is not limited to collecting data. Cohen et al. (2018) propose that the interview “is life itself; its human embeddedness is inescapable” (p.506). An interview is a process, a living conversation between professionals.

There are myriad advantages to an interview as a form of research data collection. Cohen et al. (2018) discuss the ability to collect multi-sensory data which may be “verbal, non-verbal, seen, spoken, heard and, indeed with online interviews, written” (p.506). Order can be controlled within the interview without stifling spontaneity and the interview can press for

depth in interviewees' responses (p.506). However, it is important to note that an interview is not a natural conversation. It is a constructed and planned event which the researcher has set up and designed (p.507).

A semi-structured interview allows the "space" to discuss the topic freely and without potential bias of leading questions, allowing the interviewer and interviewee to negotiate and expand on points made, leading to a greater depth of data produced (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989, p.83). Within the context of research on ethos, this method is most suitable. Donnelly (2000) suggests that "given the intricate and complex nature of ethos it seemed more logical to use a method which allowed the researcher to get as close to the subjects as possible" when talking about her own studies on ethos (p.138). Semi-structured interviews provide the "opportunity for dialogue" which "allows the interviewer to probe and clarify and to check that they have understood correctly what is being said" (Atkins & Wallace, 2015, p.86).

The interview questions were composed in accordance with themes which emerged in the literature reviewed for this study. General themes were identified through the process of carrying out the literature review for the study. Following this, questions were composed which responded to and expanded on the identified themes and ideas which emerged. These questions were mostly open ended and allowed for the opportunity to probe deeper into the topic being discussed.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) propose that ethics in research "concerns what researchers ought and ought not to do in their research and research behaviour" (p.111). Educational researchers have a responsibility to take into account the effects of the research on participants and it is unethical for any researcher to be incompetent in the area of research (p.112-113). The protection of collected data is also of paramount importance, as Cohen et al.

state “it is essential that safeguards be established to protect research information from misuse or abuse” (p.116). The BERA Guidelines for Educational Research (2018) was consulted for guidance for the ethical considerations of this research study.

BERA state that it is expected that researchers will obtain participants’ voluntary informed consent at the start of the study. For a study to be valid, the consent given by participants must be informed. The researcher should ensure that the participant is aware that they may withdraw consent, for any reason and at any time, without giving a reason (2018, p.9). Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants were approached on the basis of their subject area and level of experience in the school, in order to ensure that a broad representation was given in the sample. Participants were provided with a plain language letter (see Appendix A) which outlined why their participation was necessary, what they would be asked to do in the study, what the data produced would be used for and how it would be stored and for how long. To ensure transparency, the purpose and aims of the study were clearly explained. The letter explained that the participants’ involvement would remain anonymous, and that any details relating to their interviews would be referred to using a pseudonym. It is not envisaged that the study would pose any significant risk to the participants and any risk involved would be of a social or reputational nature. The participants were asked to sign and return a consent form (see Appendix B) which was provided with the plain language letter. These were distributed and returned electronically via email, due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time. These were returned prior to the scheduled interviews.

As defined by Watts (2012), research integrity is “honesty and probity within the conduct of qualitative research, and it underpins ethical practice in all of the activities that comprise data collection and analysis’ (p.441). The author highlights that

The synthesis and analysis of personal experience for public consumption that characterises much qualitative research carries with it a particular obligation for researchers to adopt an ethics of care approach to ensure that respondents are not subject to exploitation and positioned only in terms of their utilitarian value (p.442).

It was of paramount importance that the participants in this study were comfortable that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they had a right to withdraw at any time. Assurance of anonymity was essential also.

This research was granted ethical clearance by the Marino Ethics in Research Committee. Permission was sought and granted from the Board of Management of the school in order to commence the study within the school. Although the school is anonymised in the study, it is easily deducible as I have recognised that I am a teacher in this particular study, which poses a potential conflict of interests. Whilst the data must be dealt with in a careful way, it is still the researcher's responsibility to report on the data honestly and accurately, even if there is a potential negative reflection on the subject of the research. Cohen et al. (2018) suggest that "the participants' sensibilities need also to be taken into account when the researcher comes to write up and disseminate the research" (p.140). However, it is important to note that "the research is only one interpretation of the findings, and the researcher has to make this clear" (p. 140).

### **3.6.1 Researcher positionality**

Denzin (2001) proposes that "the qualitative researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer" but rather, the researcher is "historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied" (p. 3). It is important to acknowledge that all aspects of this research project are influenced by my positionality as researcher. As researcher, I must recognise the inherent privilege of my position as a settled, heterosexual, white, Catholic ciswoman, which places me in the dominant culture of Ireland. I am a member of the Ethos Committee in school and so it is clear to see that I value the importance of ethos in the school. I also teach Religious Education to two year groups in the school and endeavour to promote the ethos through these classes and in my other subjects and day to day dealings in the school. I recognize my potential



bias in relation to the topic of this research study. This is also evident to other members of staff and it is important to acknowledge that this may influence their discussion with me, as researcher, around ethos. I hope that my awareness of this potential bias will allow me to strive to allow the data produced to speak for itself, without undue influence.

There are many benefits to being an ‘insider’ as a researcher, such as the ease of access to the sample and the opportunity to encourage positive change in my workplace (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, p.49-50). However, the difficulties this position can cause may include the difficulty of defining one’s role as researcher or professional in different situations, claiming full objectivity when you are in a naturally subjective position, tension which may arise as a consequence of the study or the results and outcomes of the research (p.50-51).

### **3.6.2 Research reliability and limitations**

It is important to acknowledge that “whether close or distant, the relationship with the researcher affects what participants say” (McGinn, 2012, p.769). As I am conducting this research among colleagues, there is the likelihood that the participants may exercise some caution throughout their interviews, and this may affect their level of disclosure. To combat this, I have assured the participants of the use and storage of the data produced and also of their anonymity in the final thesis. I have also created a schedule of interview questions (see Appendix C), in order to maintain continuity across all interviews and to assist in triangulation of the data produced.

As this is a small-scale research project, it is acknowledged that triangulation cannot be carried out through a mixed-method approach and so the findings would need to be tested on a wider scale and using a mixed-methodology. It is hoped that by using a sample of teachers who are representative of a wide range of profiles, the data produced may be more reliable and representative of the whole teaching body. The original design of this research project entailed

both questionnaires and interviews, which would have allowed for clearer triangulation, however, due to the access limitations and time constraints caused by the COVID-19 restrictions, this approach became unviable. COVID-19 restrictions in Ireland at the time of the study meant that all schools were closed from the middle of March, and all teaching was completed online. This led to difficulties in contacting teachers and increased time constraints on all teachers as they learned to move their teaching from the classroom to the computer. For this reason, interviews were delayed and questionnaires were deemed to be unfeasible in the reduced timeframe.

It is important to note that the results of this study are representative of only one mixed, voluntary secondary school. For wider conclusions to be drawn the study would be required to be repeated across a greater number of schools and school contexts.

### **3.7 Research Procedure**

Due to constraints caused by the global pandemic of Covid-19 in 2020 this research project had to be adapted from its original form. Initially, the project was designed to engage a group of students in ethos leadership within a school and to study the formation and outcomes of this group. A research proposal for this study was sent to the MERC (Marino Ethics in Research Committee) in November 2019, prior to the commencement of the study. Ethical clearance was granted, and permission sought from the Board of Management of the school I teach in to implement the study. Following discussions with my supervisor, it was agreed to adapt the project after the commencement of the March school closures. Access to students was limited after February and it was impossible to continue with the formation and activities of the ethos leadership group.

It was decided that the same theme, of lived ethos in schools, would be examined, but through researching teachers' perspectives by interview. An adapted research proposal letter

was sent to MERC in April to ensure that the study was still in receipt of ethical clearance. A written submission was then made to the school's Board of Management and permission to conduct research within the school was granted and communicated by the school principal.

### **3.7.1 Sample**

I approached a purposive sample of teachers to inquire if they would be interested in taking part in the study. I chose these teachers as they represented a wide range of age groups, levels of experience in teaching and in this particular school, and subject backgrounds. Out of nine teachers whom I approached, seven were happy to take part in the study and this was deemed to be an adequate sample. Each teacher who took part in the study was provided with a plain language letter (Appendix A) which explained the research aims and the procedures involved in this study. They were asked to complete a consent form (Appendix B) and return this to me via email. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions these communications had to be made through email, as meeting members of another household was prohibited, and schools were closed.

### **3.7.2 Interview procedure**

The interviews took place over Zoom internet video-calling. During the time periods within which the interviews took place, meeting a member of another household was still prohibited due to Covid-19 restrictions and so the only viable option for interviews was an online video call which could be recorded. I arranged a time for the call which was suitable for the interviewee and sent a link to join the call to the interviewee's email address. The call was recorded using the QuickTime recording function on my laptop. It was made clear in consent forms that this would be the procedure. The recorded interview was then transcribed into a Word document for analysis.

### **3.7.3 Anonymity**

In so far as is possible, this study has been designed to maintain the anonymity of the participants. Neither the school nor the teachers will be identified by name in any part of the research project. There is a risk that the school itself could be identifiable through my name, as it is the school in which I am currently employed, however, this is not envisaged to be a major issue as the circulation of the thesis itself will be minimal. Interviewees have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities and identifying characteristics are minimal in the data analysis. It is envisaged that this is a low-risk study, and any risk posed is envisaged to be of a social and/or reputational nature.

### **3.7.4 Storage of data**

The recordings and transcripts of the interviews were transferred to an encrypted USB storage device and permanently deleted from my laptop. The digital data is being stored on the encrypted device until after the receipt of confirmed results of my Master's degree. At this point the data will be permanently deleted.

## **3.8 Analysis of Data**

The data from the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016) assert that thematic analysis “offers a method for identifying patterns (‘themes’) in a dataset, and for describing and interpreting the meaning and importance of those” (p.192). The authors claim that thematic analysis also provides “a tool that offers the potential for nuanced, complex, interpretative analysis” (p.191). Thematic analysis was chosen for qualitative analysis of this research study as it can “provide analyses of people’s experiences in relation to an issue, or the factors and processes that underlie and influence particular phenomena” (p.195). This was deemed particularly suitable as the aim of the research was to

examine teachers' experiences and perspectives of the lived ethos of the study school. I followed Braun et al.'s approach to thematic analysis when analysing the data produced from the interviews, which I will summarise here. They suggest a minimum sample size of six interviews, therefore the study's sample of seven interviews was suitable.

Braun et al. propose a model of thematic analysis with six stages. They claim that thematic analysis "usually involves a recursive, reflexive process of moving forwards (and sometimes backwards) through data familiarization, coding, theme development, revision, naming, and writing up" (p.197). The first phase of thematic analysis is familiarisation with the sample data (p.198). Data should be read analytically and in a "curious and questioning way" (p.198). At this stage, I read the data with an open mind, albeit educated by the literature review, allowing common themes or subjects to form in my mind as I read. The second stage, coding, is a formal, systematic approach to reading the data (p.198). The authors assert that systematic and rigorous coding can build solid foundations for the development of themes in the next stage (p.199). At this stage in the margin of the interview hardcopies I noted a code for each theme in the margin of the interview hardcopy According to this model, the "practical process of coding involves closely reading the data, and 'tagging' with a code each piece that has some relevance to your research question" (p.199). Coding is flexible and organic, and it is up to the researcher to decide whether a new piece fits in with an already-identified code or if it should be assigned a new code. Codes can also be adapted or tweaked as the researcher analyses further data (p.199). As I read through different interviews sometimes data would relate back to a theme which had emerged in a previous interview. At other points new themes would emerge and so I would assign a new code to that data.

The third to fifth stages involve the analytical stage of the model. Theme development is the third stage, which consists of "clustering codes to identify 'higher level' patterns" (p.200). These may cover a number of ideas in one theme. Coding takes place at a very specific

level, whereas ‘higher level’ patterns move beyond the specific in order to uncover meaning and comment on the importance of the themes (p.200). The process of reviewing then begins; the fourth stage. This begins with the coded data and moves on to the whole, original dataset. Essentially, this process is a ‘check’; firstly, to ensure that the analysis fits well with the data, and secondly, a chance to ensure that “the story you’re telling is compelling and coherent way of addressing your research question” (p.201). It is essential to consider the original purpose of the research at this point. At this point in the research I clustered codes which I believed formed an overarching theme. I then reread the interview data in order to ensure that the themes which I had extracted formed an accurate representation of the data set as a whole. The fifth stage is revision, which can range from “minor tweaks” to “a complete restart of the analysis” (p.202). I made some minor revisions to the titles of subthemes at this stage and ensured that they were grouped into accurate main themes. Braun et al. suggest considering the following questions at this stage:

1. Does each theme have a central organizing concept so that all the data and codes cohere around a single key analytic point?
2. Is the central organizing concept of each theme distinct?
3. What are the relationships, interconnections and boundaries between the themes?
4. Do the themes together tell a coherent and compelling story of the data, that addresses your research question? (p.203).

The authors highlight the importance of considering the analysis as an “overall story”, which gives a coherent account of the data to the reader (p.203). Themes are then defined and named. The final stage of the thematic analysis model is the writing up of the results. This consists of “compiling, developing, and editing existing analytic writing, and situating it within an overall report” (p.204). The data for this study was analysed according to this model and presented in chapter four.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter I have outlined the rationale for my choice of research design and the paradigm through which it was developed. I have outlined the procedure surrounding the interviews and the benefits of conducting interviews and the study of the qualitative data produced. Ethical consideration has been given to each part of this research study. I acknowledge my potential bias as researcher as I am a teacher in the school in which the study is based. This may also influence the participants' engagement with the study as there is a pre-existing relationship of colleague-to-colleague in each case. The research procedure, including requesting ethical approval, receiving permission to carry out the study in the school, developing interview questions and carrying out interviews, analysing the data and storage of data, has been outlined in detail in this chapter.

Cresswell (2014) asserts that researchers must “protect their research participants; develop a trust with them; promote the integrity of research; guard against misconduct and impropriety that might reflect on their organizations or institutions; and cope with new, challenging problems” (p. 132). This has been to the forefront of my considerations when designing the research procedure and considering the ethical considerations and implications of the study.

#### **4. Presentation of Findings and Analysis**

This chapter presents and analyses the key findings of the research study which emerged through the qualitative analysis of the research interviews. It addresses the overarching objective of this research, to explore the participating teachers' perceptions of a lived school ethos within a particular Catholic post primary school in Ireland. For info on participants please see Appendix D. This section is divided into the main themes and subthemes which emerged from the interview analysis.

##### **4.1 Fostering a Lived Ethos Today**

This section will discuss the aspects of ethos which participants felt are working well and the positive features of the school ethos.

###### **4.1.1 Theme 1: The experience of a lived school ethos**

Participants recognised the positive aspects of the current ethos. This section will discuss the areas of ethos which the interviewees felt are working well.

###### ***4.1.1.1 Holistic education and the importance of relationship.***

Participants were asked to describe the ethos of their school in their own words. All seven teachers spoke about the holistic side of the ethos which is promoted and the benefits of this ethos. Amy suggested that if we strip back the ethos of the school, the focus is really on developing students to be the best person that they can be. She goes on to say that this will never date. Likewise, Karina asserts that the school ethos focuses on “doing your best to bring out the best in the young people and to give them every chance”. Orla describes the Christian values of the ethos as valuable for everybody.



Ryan goes on to highlight the importance of these values long term. He suggests that this holistic school ethos will stand to the students in their life after school.

Like it's great getting the results but if you're not a well-rounded person, then it's not going to help you in the long run. So I think they need it for the future, like when they get into the workplace. (Ryan)

Aoife suggests that, although it also comes from home, schools play a part in "making a child good". The interviewees believe that the school ethos can have a positive, long-lasting effect on the students. This idea that ethos can have lasting effects on the students corresponds with Williams' (2000) assertion that ethos "touches the quality of our lives and can constitute an abiding element in the fabric of our very identity" (p.76).

The importance of relationship to the school ethos was emphasised throughout the interviews. Participants used language such as "familial", "welcoming" and "positive relationships". Karina summarised the welcoming, familial side of the school ethos as "it's all about us all getting along as a community. And that includes everyone. It's not just the high achievers or the sporting greats. It's about the whole school, the whole melting pot that we have."

Staff interviewed believe that creating a sense of family and belonging is at the heart of their ethos and that they endeavour to create a welcoming community in their school. This relates directly to the emotional engagement described by Axelson and Flick (2011) and Parsons, Nuland and Parsons (2014). Parsons et al. (2014) state that "teachers can create engaging classroom contexts by showing students that they care about them and by maintaining a positive social environment" (p.24). Although the familial aspect of the school ethos is prescribed by the school charter, it is evident that teachers take this on board and act on it because they believe in its benefit to the students.

#### ***4.1.1.2 Ethos and academics.***

The participants of the study were asked about their thoughts on the connection between ethos and academic achievement. The central theme which emerged from the data is that most teachers interviewed perceive that a positive lived ethos can contribute to students' academic achievement. Karina and Amy proposed that a happy, supported student will have a better chance at academic success and is motivated to work hard, to the best of their ability. Mary gives the following example of support and encouragement in the classroom:

So if I have assigned a piece of English work, and I think, and I know from the student over a month or a couple of years, they have more to them than the piece that they've produced. Well, I give a bit of constructive criticism. I give them direction and, on some of those occasions, I get them to reconstruct, rewrite, re-edit the piece. Yeah I think in those moments it's a lived ethos. I want that human being in that moment and over those couple of days to do the very best that they are capable of. (Mary)

The idea that ethos can have a positive impact on students' academic achievement is in line with Charles and McHugh (2000), who find that "a positive school ethos has been related to high levels of academic achievement, good attendance records, appropriate behaviour in school and low rates of delinquency" (p. 181). Students who are comfortable and feel supported are seen to have a better chance to achieve their potential.

#### ***4.1.1.3 Communicating and celebrating ethos.***

There is much discussion amongst the interviewees about a perceived lack of clear, outward communication of ethos, which will be discussed in 4.2. However, Ryan was keen to highlight that "we must be doing something right". He explains that evidence of the prescribed school ethos is clear to see in the actions of some of the students. Similarly, Mary sees the beauty of subtle ethos communication in the deeper moments of classroom teaching. She suggests that a real lived ethos can be captured when we, as teachers, get "side-tracked" from what is prescribed by the curriculum and instead "capture their [the students'] imagination and

the beauty of their thoughts and their thinking and where they're at in life". These moments are so important at communicating the school's ethos to the students, as teachers allow the time for the "real true flourishing of the human spirit". This vision of ethos in action corresponds with Donnelly's (2000) anti-positivist theory of ethos as being "something which is more informal emerging from social interaction and process" (p.136). The participants see that at times the school is successful in living out the ethos in the spontaneous interactions of their work.

#### ***4.1.1.4 Normalising ethos.***

It is evident from speaking with the participants that ethos is part of the normal day-to-day life of the school. Mary highlights the importance of this: "The implicit; how we are in our classrooms, how we are on our corridors. I think it comes back to that. How are we in relationship?". Mary also suggests that ethos is normalised by the iconography and physical presence around the school. She claims "that's osmosis as well. Like you don't walk down a corridor and say, oh my goodness, there's an eight foot crucifix in the canteen. But if it was taken away you might notice it."

Karina sees the ethos "in every single thing we do in the school, if you look for it, you can match it to every part of our ethos". Ethos is normalised in the everyday actions and attitudes of some teachers and students. Again, this reflects Donnelly's (2000) anti-positivist theory of ethos. Similarly, the presence of the school ethos in the actions of school members reflects Hogan's (1984) view that school ethos is "the natural outcome of *what actually goes on* in school or college from day to day, perhaps regardless of what kind of standard the school is formally thought to represent" (p.697). The teachers see the ethos as emerging from moments in daily school life, wherein ethos becomes part of the 'norm'.

### **4.1.2 Theme 2: Ethos Leadership.**

The second key theme which emerged from the research was that of ethos leadership in schools. Participants identified teachers as having a vital role in the promotion of ethos day-to-day in the classroom and in other daily activities and interactions, and acknowledge the role of school management.

#### ***4.1.2.1 Teachers living ethos daily.***

A general consensus across all teachers interviewed was that teachers are at the heart of ethos leadership. There appears to be a strong awareness of this, although teachers also acknowledge that more could be done. Mary proposes that fostering a lived ethos is the role of every single teacher, as teachers are called to do their utmost for every student and “bring our students on a journey of real flourishing”. Similarly, Karina asserts the importance of a whole school message around ethos and not just “tokenism in R.E. class”. She emphasises that teachers need to talk about ethos and the Catholic heart of the school, and that it must be a “joined up approach” from all teachers. Amy proposes that as teachers are a “constant” in the cyclical life of a school, they should, and do, know the most about ethos. Orla sees teachers as being ethos “role models” and “probably the most significant people in relation to ethos”.

Ryan explains what this ethos leadership can look like in the classroom. He asserts that as teachers, we have to “show it in our actions first of all, because I think that’s the thing they pick up on the most”. He also believes that teachers need to then point out these “ethos actions” to the students, to educate and provide concrete examples of what the school’s lived ethos looks like. Ryan acknowledges that teachers in general could also highlight the ethos in action more. Nik also gives an example of modelling ethos daily, by applying the concept of tolerance:

So whether or not a student shares my views, or I share their views, they share the school’s views, or a combination of the above, to me is irrelevant. And I do my level best to view them as a person and treat them as such. (Nik)

The participants of the study place the teacher at the centre of ethos promotion and leadership. They acknowledge the pivotal role teachers have as role models to their students. This view of the teacher at the heart of ethos promotion corresponds with the CCE's (2013) suggestion that teachers "do not limit their responsibilities to the merely didactic" (63). However, the participants in the study highlight fostering the lived school ethos as one of the key responsibilities which teachers should undertake in their role in a Catholic school.

#### ***4.1.2.2 School leaders.***

The participants of the study recognise the strong contributions leaders, the Board of Management and Trustees have made to ethos. In particular, Orla highlights the continuing support for staff ethos development with an annual staff ethos development trip, which takes four staff members away each year for five days of learning about the origins of the school ethos. She also praises the willingness of leaders to engage in management ethos development weekends and how ideas are brought back to the school Ethos Committee from these trips. Orla also highlights the enduring support for daily ethos moments like the morning prayer over the intercom. However, she feels that the school is "just caught up with academics and that kind of stuff and discipline", and that more of an emphasis on living the school ethos is essential for it to survive and for the students to benefit most from being a student of the school.

This view of school leaders reflects Hogan's (1984) description of ethos as 'custodial', as "the authorities of the school or educational system value themselves largely as custodians of a set of standards, which are to be preserved, defended and transmitted through the agency of schools and colleges" (p.695). Leaders of the school go beyond the limitations of being merely "custodians" and actively encourage engagement with ethos. However, there is still room for ethos development to become more of a priority and time dedicated to allowing the school ethos to grow and mould to the new cycle of students coming into the school annually.

### **4.1.3. Theme 3: Inclusive student engagement.**

The participants acknowledged the strong efforts made to include all students. In this section, the current efforts for inclusion will be highlighted. All teachers interviewed recognised the breadth of cultures, faiths and backgrounds in the school's student body and the need for inclusive student engagement as a result of this.

#### ***4.1.3.1 Inclusion.***

The participants of the study highlighted aspects of school life which, for them, demonstrated the inclusive nature of the school's ethos. The majority of the examples given related to extra-curricular activities. Mary highlighted the annual carol service and commended the music teacher for this truly inclusive event, which welcomes all students to take part, regardless of musical ability, and creates a wonderfully inclusive evening for students, staff, parents and guests. Mary states that she does not know of "one other thing in the school that has ever achieved that". Orla sees the inclusive school ethos in action in extracurricular activities also, in particular amongst the sports teams. She proposes that this inclusive nature creates a sense of pride in their school identity amongst the students involved. Karina commends the school chaplains, a lay teacher and a priest, for their inclusive nature and welcoming attitudes to all students, no matter what their belief system is.

The sentiments expressed by the interviewees align with Lizzio, Dempster and Neumann (2011), who assert that students' identification with the school can be enhanced by how closely an activity fits with the school's culture and value system (p.90). The participants believe that a lived school ethos in extracurricular activities contributes to students' sense of identity and belonging.

#### ***4.1.3.2 Student education.***

Teachers in the study highlighted areas of student education around ethos which were working well to engage and include students. In particular, Mary highlighted a recent tradition of holding an annual ethos workshop day for Transition Year students, which students from the sister schools would also attend. Throughout the day, Mary sees a true lived ethos in the actions and discussions of the groups. The students are often asked to identify the presence of ethos in their schools and the sharing of concrete examples across the sister schools. This provides a rich education on ethos for the students involved. She highlights that the workshops are fluid, and vary from year to year according to the needs of the students involved and the needs of the schools in that particular year. The school is making positive steps towards engaging their students in education about ethos. The school recognises, as Parsons et al. (2014) state, that “teachers can heighten student engagement if they understand its importance, know the types of tasks that encourage it, and have tools for assessing it” (p.24).

## **4.2 Areas for Ethos Development**

This section will explore the areas of ethos within which interviewees felt there was a need for development.

### **4.2.1 Theme 1: Adapting ethos to a modern world.**

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that all participants agreed that ethos must move with the times and adapt to fit in with modern society and in order to foster a true lived ethos. The teachers interviewed suggested and recognised changes which need to occur to create a modern school ethos.

#### *4.2.1.1 Balancing ethos with academics.*

Following his own personal research, Nik argues that there is a dichotomy between faith schools and non-faith schools with regards to where the emphasis on academic lies, asserting that “typically speaking in non-faith schools, because of the attempt to balance the development of students as citizens and, uh, preparing them for the workplace, students in faith schools tend to perform less well academically”. However, Nik also highlights that students could be seen to leave faith schools with better civic development. Nik’s findings are in contradiction to Charles and McHugh (2000), who state that “a positive school ethos has been related to high levels of academic achievement, good attendance records, appropriate behaviour in school and low rates of delinquency” (p. 181).

Although Orla agrees with the idea that ethos can contribute positively to academic achievement, she proposes that these two areas need to be dealt with “on a bit more of an even keel”. She highlights the importance of caring for the whole person, and for a student to be their best self, we must look after their “head, heart and spirit”.

Worry that the emphasis on academics has begun to take away from the ethos of the school was expressed by several of the participants. Karina voiced concerns that the emphasis on high academic standards was leading to the school “losing sight” of the prescribed ethos. She asserts, “it’s possibly gotten a bit skewed, that it’s, the emphasis is more on the academic development as opposed to the whole person”. This concern was shared by Mary in her comments on the emphasis on academics.

Where it [academics] seems to take over any other communicated value, that saddens me massively, because if there’s such a focus on academia and we forget about that beautiful human underneath all of that, well then we can’t be absolutely inclusive.  
(Mary)



Ryan highlights that this shift in emphasis has come from a desire to adhere to the prescribed ethos, part of which highlights academic excellence. He identifies the need to think about the “more rounded person” when dealing with students.

There is concern amongst the majority of the teachers interviewed that the emphasis on academics can sometimes overshadow the holistic aims of the school ethos. Their concern reflects the importance of remembering that schools are “educational communities and not merely education services, because the central focus of their mission is the care for all-round education of young people” expressed by Paletta and Fiorin (2016, p.143).

#### ***4.2.1.2 Prioritising communication of ethos.***

The participants of the study felt that more could be done to promote and communicate the ethos to the students. Some of the concern arises around the adaptation of the ethos to the modern era. Interviewees describe an over-emphasis on the established ethos, a shift in the presence of ethos, a physical loss of the previous school building and huge changes in staff and the presence of the clergy in recent times. Orla also sees that the school doesn't “wear the Catholic sleeve enough” and that some of the efforts to promote the ethos are not touching deep enough and doesn't inspire staff and students to take pride in their ethos. She promotes the idea of prioritising ethos at the beginning of the year with the students, and identifying what the characteristics of the ethos are with the students themselves.

Karina suggests that the ethos not only has to be present, but it must be communicated to and understood by the students, so that they “know what they're a part of and not just passengers”. She explains that a lot of the ethos promotion is not done explicitly, and that is what is needed in these challenging times. Amy proposes that now, as we go through challenging times of change, there is a need to “be using that word [ethos], and we need to be point out that that's our ethos”. Likewise, Ryan identifies the importance of constant reminders

of ethos and of its promotion in assemblies, not just as a “once-off”, suggesting random acts of kindness and recognition of achievements on the intercom as examples.

Karina highlights the importance of looking at the language surrounding the school ethos and investigating whether it is relevant to and understood by the students. The language of the school ethos may need to be revisited in order to make it accessible to the students of today. Similarly, Amy suggests that there is a need for reflection on ethos, “if we give people time to reflect on it, so many of them would realise that they actually live that ethos in school and in their whole lives anyway”.

There is significant agreement amongst the teachers interviewed that the communication of ethos needs development. Teachers suggest that the promotion of a lived ethos should be explicit. Almost all teachers interviewed agreed that in order to celebrate the ethos fully, students will need more knowledge about the ethos. It is suggested that the celebration of ethos is not something that should be shied away from and that the school should promote a pride in the ethos amongst staff and students. Work will need to be done to ensure this is truly meaningful and not “cosmetic”. Although teachers acknowledged the tradition of an ethos which was fostered quietly, and often behind the scenes, it is evident that change is needed in modern school settings. This is echoed in the ideas of Paletta and Fiorin (2016) who encourage continuous reflection on why the Catholic school was founded, as “over time the cultural and social context changes, new problems arise, and to tackle these it is not sufficient to refer to the past but must be ourselves equipped to respond to new challenges” (p.137-138). A different approach may be needed to cater for the changing social and cultural background of the school.

#### ***4.2.1.3 Recognising ethos day to day.***

Whilst teachers have highlighted ways in which the school ethos is normalised, it is also evident that this approach can be developed further. Ryan suggests pointing out moments in the classroom where the ethos is in action, in order to help the students understand what it entails. In the same way, Karina asserts that whilst the ethos is in action everywhere in the school, it is only easy to see if you are aware of it and looking for it. Moments which show ethos in action may need to be highlighted to the students as concrete examples which they can learn from. Mary emphasises the fluid nature of the school ethos, as a “living document” which shouldn’t be “snazzy and prescriptive” but instead become part of living life in the school. The teachers interviewed see the importance of normalising ethos in their everyday actions and recognise the need to educate their students to distinguish the lived ethos of the school in their surroundings. These findings correspond with Eisner (1994) and Donnelly (2000), who identify a gap between the prescribed ethos and the lived ethos of a school. The interviewees suggest that, at times, students and staff find it difficult to recognise the prescribed ethos in their day-to-day lives.

#### ***4.2.1.4 Traditional Catholic values.***

A sense of discomfort surrounding the issue of traditional Catholic values and the lived school ethos was prevalent in many of the interviews. This is an area which all teachers interviewed recognised as needing deeper consideration. Several interviewees acknowledged that there is a wealth of importance and care in the traditional Catholic ethos which should not be lost. However, a dichotomy arose among teachers’ opinions when the Catholic belief system is brought into question.

Aoife recalls not knowing where the boundary lay when it comes to discussing challenging or controversial issues with students.

I would be more comfortable personally teaching in an environment where I wasn't, hyper aware, maybe of the fact that there's, not even voicing my own opinions, but that I can't discuss certain things with students perhaps. And that's never been said to me, I should say, it's never been said to me, but I would imagine that there are certain things with the Catholic ethos in school that should not really be approached with some students. Maybe that's not true at all. (Aoife)

Although Aoife felt a discomfort around discussing certain issues from the perspective of the Catholic faith, she is clear to assert that it was never overtly communicated to her that certain subjects were not to be discussed. She was making an assumption based on her understanding of the Catholic ethos, as she states “I suppose the connotation I have with ethos, and I don't know if that's for everyone, is religion”. She sees that issues such as homosexuality and transgender can be “ignored or put to one side” and asserts that the school will have to deal with these more openly in the future.

Similarly, Amy asserts that the traditional Catholic values of the school can “leave out groups of people” unconsciously. She explains the importance of recognising a Catholic ethos as welcoming to all and the need to move away from traditional limitations to inclusion.

So I hope that we are able to realise very soon that we're not being bad Christians if we celebrate LGBT day in school or if we put a flag up. In fact that means we are good Christians. I think we need to just bring it back to being good people and being really welcoming. (Amy)

Ryan discusses the preconceptions of some people when approaching the Catholic ethos, saying that for some, “straight away it's like, oh, that's religion, I'm not religious, I can't really do something like that”. However, he highlights the importance of acknowledging that the Catholic religion and a Catholic school ethos are not the same thing, and that there is “much more nourishment and fruitfulness there”. Ryan claims that the Catholic school ethos will suit the modern world we live in if people are “open to it, and as long as they're not just thinking, oh, Catholic ethos, they're not inclusive”. He summarises, “for the kids, as long as they're open to hearing ethos, then I think it will help them in the modern world”.

It is evident that some of the teachers interviewed were unsure as to how to deal with the issue of Catholic school ethos in an increasingly secular context. For some, their understanding of ethos has been clouded by an assumption that the school ethos is purely concerned with the Catholic faith, which they do not feel comfortable with. Minister Michael Woods (2000) echoes this sentiment, suggesting that at times the value of true ethos is lost, as school ethos can be purported to be “concerned exclusively with the preservation of a particular denominational or cultural identity” (p.125). Other teachers appear to be concerned with the perceived limitations that a Catholic ethos puts on them as educators. However, it is important to recognise that the Church itself, through the CCE (1997) recognises that in today’s world “we have a crisis of values which, in highly developed societies in particular, assumes the form, often exalted by the media, of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism”(1). They encourage “courageous renewal” in schools, due to the risk of losing the educational value of the Catholic school (9-10). This recognition of the need for change and development in schools by the Catholic Church does not appear to be common knowledge amongst some teachers.

#### ***4.2.1.5 A need for evolution in ethos.***

The participants of the study each agreed that there was a need for the school ethos to evolve and adapt to the modern surroundings of today’s school. The current context of the global Covid 19 pandemic has only increased this need and desire for change, according to Orla. She thinks that the experience of living through a pandemic might “waken people up” and help them to “value the really important things in life”. Orla sees this time as a real opportunity for the school to share and foster the school ethos amongst all stakeholders. Karina’s comments correspond with this sentiment, asserting that students today “really have it stacked up against them” and so they need the “bedrock” of ethos even more for support.

Interviewees were asked if they believed that the school ethos is relevant to today's world. In general, the participants believed that although the school ethos should be an important part of school life today, there is a need for development to make it relevant and accessible for current students. Mary proposes that any school ethos is relevant to any period, once it is based on a premise of ethics. However, she also concludes that there is a need to move with society and the thinking of people in order to make the ethos relevant.

Looking at the changing school landscape, Mary noted that research was carried out last year which discovered that amongst 750 students there were approximately 49 nationalities in the school. This calls for change in how the school welcomes and caters for students of all backgrounds and cultures. Amy agrees with this sentiment, highlighting that at times there is a disconnect in the communication of ethos, as there is a need for the ethos to be "reinvented" and for teachers to communicate it to the students in a way that they will understand. Aoife suggests that this "reinvention" will call for compromise on both sides, as some students may not wish to keep the religious aspect. While it is important to maintain this key aspect of the school ethos, Aoife maintains that there is "definitely room for improvement there on ethos".

Nik suggests that ethos "is relevant in today's world in the same way that Shakespeare is relevant in today's world". Therefore, he suggests that ethos needs to be reinvented, but in such a way that the core tradition is still there. He observes that when working to develop the ethos, it is important not to aim towards a "fixed standard or fixed outcome" as ethos is a "live, interactive, ongoing thing". Nik asserts that students should play a key part in reinventing and reimagining what the ethos of a school is.

The changing cultural and religious landscape of the school is marked as a key influence on the need for change in ethos. This need for change is recognised by Pring (2000), who proposes that school ethos "must reflect the wider community which it serves and from which

it must draw strength” (p.13). In a similar vein, the CCE (2013) states that “the Catholic Church feels that the need for dialogue is ever more important” (13).

#### **4.2.2 Theme 2: Ethos leadership.**

Teachers interviewed in this study recognised the efforts made to lead ethos development. However, it was widely acknowledged by the participants that the changes in modern society called for development in ethos leadership. The subthemes which emerged during these discussions are examined in this section, in relation to areas and ideas for ethos leadership development.

##### ***4.2.2.1 Burden of ethos leadership on religion teachers.***

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that there was a concern amongst the participants that ethos leadership was often left to the religion teachers, or that teachers of other subjects felt that the responsibility for fostering a lived school ethos lay with religion teachers. Although it is important to recognise that religion teachers do play a pivotal role in ethos development, there is a danger of the true meaning of a lived school ethos being lost if it is only prioritised by one group.

Karina explains that as part of the religion course the background of the school ethos is explicitly taught to students. There is also a tradition of having one school day per year dedicated to the school ethos, during which every teacher is asked to run through some of the key points of the ethos with their students. However, she proposes that there needs to be a more “joined-up message” which comes from all departments throughout the year. Karina explains that an issue arises when some teachers may not take an interest in ethos and don’t purposefully do anything to promote it. However, she states that often these teachers are promoting the ethos in how they conduct themselves and how they treat their students. Ryan

suggests that at times teachers will “tune out” of discussions around ethos, as they believe that it is not relevant to them, or they see a staff member as “spouting about ethos again”. He proposes that an outside facilitator might be better received by some teachers. Orla asserts that “the word Catholic school is not hammered home enough” and that ethos must be prioritised from the top down, to avoid the burden being solely placed on the religion teachers.

It appears that some teachers are held back from engaging with school ethos due to their assumption that ethos is purely about religion. This is somewhat surprising, given Hogan’s (1984) theory of an ethos of “accommodation” which has become more prevalent since the late twentieth century, as schools attempted to cater for a “variety of articulate interest groups in education” (p.696). Teachers need support and education around ethos to help them to recognise the breadth of school ethos, and this need for education will be discussed in the next subtheme.

#### *4.2.2.2 Teacher knowledge.*

Some teachers interviewed agreed that before working to improve student knowledge of ethos, it was essential to focus on teachers’ knowledge of ethos. Amy suggests that the school needs to “work on the teachers first and then we need to go to the students”. She proposes that an important step in teachers education is showing teachers that the ethos can be relevant to them, even if they are not practising Catholics or if they do not have a Catholic faith:

Maybe they don’t have the Catholic values attached, but they absolutely believe in academic excellence, or the holistic development of the students. And that’s their thing. That’s what they take from the ethos. That’s their interpretation and then they can bring that to their classroom. (Amy)

She highlights the importance of bringing this approach to staff whose focus is academic achievement, who may think that ethos is something separate to them. Again, the idea of a



whole school approach is highlighted as a vital part of ethos development. Amy has concerns about the teachers “who are carrying the ethos on their back, and it’s actually heavy, and it’s weighing them down and not having a benefit on anybody else in the school”. She asserts that if you cannot see the ethos in the teachers, it is unlikely that you will see it in the students.

Orla, however, points out that sometimes it is easier to “cling on and promote the academics” and it “takes courage to say that we are Catholic, that’s important”. She highlights that there can be both fear and ignorance around the tradition of the order who are the patrons of the school and that the staff need education and support in this area.

Ryan believes that the staff would benefit from concrete examples of ethos in action as education on the school ethos. He also suggests the idea of holding a “diversity dialogue” between staff:

You could have somebody that maybe doesn’t think too much of our ethos and you could have someone that thinks a lot of it and when they start actually talking to each other about why they think it, that would probably help as well. (Ryan)

Interviewees highlight the importance of sharing the ethos with every member of staff, no matter their belief system, and helping staff to understand that there is something for everyone in the prescribed school ethos, if they will take the time to interpret it. It is important to note the ideas of Hyland (2000), who sees school ethos as a “live, vibrant thing” which can be “clearly identified in the practices of a school” (p.22). This suggests that ethos is fluid, and open to interpretation by every new generation of teachers. Barr (2000) suggests that the word ethos needs to be qualified and clarified or an organisation runs the risk of “making the assumption that we share a common understanding while in truth having different intentions and understandings” (p.131). This calls for clear communication and discussion around ethos on a regular basis.

#### ***4.2.2.3 Disconnect between students and teachers.***

Linked to the previous theme of teacher knowledge is the disconnect between teachers and students when it comes to ethos. Amy sees this disconnect existing as a result of all teachers not “singing off the same hymn sheet”. She acknowledges that there is a vulnerability when it comes to ethos and that difficulties arise when teachers see ethos as being part of the role of only some teachers. She proposes that this creates difficulties for students when recognising ethos around them as “the kids are not able to identify it because they don’t realise that that’s our ethos. They just think that that’s what that teacher was like, or that’s how they deal with things.”

The differing approaches to ethos from teachers can lead to confusion and uncertainty amongst students. The pivotal role of teachers is highlighted again when Amy states that “we can’t get it to the students without the teachers”. Similarly, Ryan observes that some of the students don’t fully live the ethos and some don’t believe or feel that everybody in the school is accepting of them. A whole school approach is necessary to bridge this divide between students and teachers, beginning with involving all teachers in the lived ethos. The distance that students feel from the school ethos, as Amy describes, reflects the difference between the prescribed school ethos and the actual school ethos described by Murray (2000, p.17). This may also be felt by the teachers, creating a difficulty around communicating the school ethos.

#### ***4.2.2.4 Prioritising ethos from the top down.***

The participants in the study have identified a need to prioritise ethos development from management level down. Both Karina and Orla propose that ethos is not prioritised enough by leadership, and that now that the academic side of the school is well established there is a need to revisit ethos. Orla states that “an academic school with discipline is good, but you have to sell the other elements of it too”. Karina suggests that there is an overreliance on the rituals

associated with the school ethos traditionally but ethos is not engaged with enough at a deeper level. Some interviewees expressed the opinion that in order to foster a true lived ethos, all stakeholders in the school must be involved, including senior management, trustees, parents, staff and students.

There is a need to involve all school stakeholders in this process of developing ethos. This need is similarly expressed by Williams (2000) who highlights that the school ethos cannot simply be imposed upon the school and the members of the school, as “a school ethos must emerge from the genuinely held convictions and aspirations of parents and teachers and pupils” (p.81-82). Boldt (2000) proposes that “school communities be encouraged to engage together in exploring, articulating and understanding better their school culture and ethos” (p.42).

Progressive ethos development is a challenge for leaders in schools. Mullally (2019) advises that

before we can comfortably host students of other beliefs and their needs, it is helpful to address our own identity as Catholic schools and how we approach the responsibilities we have towards the faith development of Catholic students. This is a worthwhile process to undertake with boards of management, staff and parents, while support is offered by the different trust bodies through their Charter Statements and Ethos Development personnel. (p.6)

The importance of maintaining the identifiably Catholic ethos, while working towards inclusion of all students is a sentiment echoed by the participants in the study.

#### **4.2.3. Theme 3: Inclusive student engagement.**

The teachers interviewed identified some areas for improvement around promoting a truly inclusive ethos and improving student engagement with ethos. These will be discussed in the following subthemes.

#### *4.2.3.1 Tolerance and tokenism.*

The idea of tolerance of others rather than welcoming others arose when the participants were asked about the school's inclusive ethos. While the participants believe that the school set out to be inclusive of students of all faiths and none, of all backgrounds and cultures, there is a prevailing sentiment that there is still work to do in this area. Amy proposes that in theory the school ethos is inclusive, but in practice it is more "tolerant" than "welcoming". Karina questions whether the inclusive nature of the school is made clear to everyone. Nik's thoughts agree with this, saying that the school is "tolerant of students of all faiths and none, which is an important semantic distinction from including them". Having spoken to students who may not fit in to the "straight cisgender white Catholic" identity which would traditionally have been dominant in the school, Ryan finds that these students "do feel that they're not accepted and they do feel that others are more accepted than themselves". He maintains that the school ethos does allow for true inclusion, however it is a challenging task which will take a lot of work. Aoife also notes the presence of students who are "falling through the cracks" and asserts that a teacher's job is "much more than just education". She sees "room for improvement" in inclusion. Mary points out that the difficulty is not that the school is "unwilling or not open to it" but rather that "it's about ignorance, that we may not be sure of what we're doing". Nik suggests that a fear of eroding the school's traditional values through engagement and dialogue about difference may be holding the school back.

Some practical ideas were suggested by the interviewees on developing a true inclusive ethos. Mary suggests looking at being inclusive in the school's sacred space, and recognising important times of the year for faiths other than Catholicism. Nik highlights acceptance of daily rituals and school canteen foods as other areas which could become more inclusive. Nik suggests that while the school promotes good role models through its teachers, these are "by and large, generalised white, middle class professionals", which is an area that needs to be

looked at, though one which is experienced across the board in the teaching profession in Ireland. Ryan cautions against “tokenism” when dealing with issues of inclusion, that “visual signs” such as poster campaigns and a Diversity Day are positive, but there is a need for follow through amongst the whole staff.

The ideals expressed by the interviewees reflect Mullally’s (2019) assertion that “the Catholic school, animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and love, is an inclusive space where every student is welcomed and belongs” (p.8). The participants support the inclusion of and respect for students of all faiths and Mullally also emphasises this importance that “all students in a Catholic school are encouraged to grow in their own faith or conviction, whether it is Catholic or not, and provided it is not harmful or disrespectful of Others” (p.11).

#### ***4.2.3.2 Developing student education.***

Although several positive aspects of ongoing student ethos education were discussed in 4.2.3.2, some of the teachers interviewed identified areas for improvement in this area. Teachers recognise the need for students to know more about the ethos of the school and to understand where it comes from. Amy maintains that when it comes to ethos “we have to show the kids if we want them to be able to identify it themselves”. Karina suggests that teachers working on developing a truly inclusive school ethos should look to the students themselves for help:

Take it to a group of kids that would have some sort of interest in it, but a diverse group, have some atheists, someone from another faith, some non-practicing Catholics, some practicing Catholics and just see what they made of it or whether they can put a kind of modern spin on it. (Karina)

Karina highlights that involving the students is the best option available to teachers, as “there’s no point in us trying to put ourselves in their shoes all the time when we could just put it to

them and maybe they would have some fresh ideas around ethos”. This could increase student engagement, as Parsons et al. (2014) propose that “engaging tasks give students *choices*, where they can experience some control over their learning” (p.25).

#### ***4.2.3.3. Development of a genuine student voice.***

All teachers who partook in this study agreed that student voice has an important place in schools. Some of the participants acknowledged the presence of a student council, however teachers expressed concern that that student voice may not be listened to and engaged in decision making processes. Participants highlighted myriad reasons why student voice should have a valued place. Aoife concluded that “it’s their school and we’re there as facilitators”. The students deserve their chance to influence the school they are in for the short cycle of five or six years. Both Amy and Mary asserted that student voice is central to the school ethos and therefore it should be central to the progression in the school. This could help the students grow, as well as the school itself, as Ryan sees that real change could be affected in the school through engagement with student voice. Orla suggests that this would give students confidence and pride in their identity as a student. Nik states that there is a need for “sincere, authentic dialogue between students and staff”, and that student leadership would be “instrumental in representing the actual views of students and the actual change which is required”.

The move to recognise student voice as an important part of school development aligns with Graham (2012), who found that by listening to and learning from students’ lived experiences of school we can further our knowledge and understanding of ethos for school improvement (p.352).

#### ***4.2.3.4 Student-led ethos.***

All teachers interviewed supported the idea of a student ethos leadership group. The participants highlighted the benefits of peer learning, and how this could normalise ethos for students. Amy imagines that the strong presence of a student ethos group will “make ethos normal” and show that “it’s just a way of life”. Interviewees propose that students are more likely to engage with ethos and learn about it when it comes from their peers, rather than solely from teachers and that students will “do a far better job than we will ever do” when it comes to reimagining and communicating ethos to their peers.

Orla states that a student ethos group would need a clearly defined role and focus in order for it to work. She suggests that the group could have an ethos angle, a leadership angle and a faith dimension, in order to support the development of the school ethos. Nik cautions that care must be taken not to “put the cart before the horse”. He sees ethos as something which should be done “with them, for them”. In essence, he highlights the importance of the ethos coming from the students themselves, rather than the student ethos group promoting the traditional prescribed ethos of the school. Nik asserts the importance of student engagement in the reimagining of school ethos for the modern world.

The participants’ support for the formation of a student ethos leadership group echoes Ellis et al. (2001), who found that student leadership programmes not only provide students with opportunities for growth, but also can foster the holistic side of a school, as the students who take part can develop a strong, positive rapport with the teachers and management of the school (p.549).

### **4.3 Conclusion**

This chapter presented and analysed the themes and subthemes which emerged from the interview data. The interview participants were keen to acknowledge and recognise the

work that has gone on, by both leadership and teachers, to foster a lived ethos. However, in the changing setting of today's modern world, the interviewees identified areas for development and progression in ethos. There was a great enthusiasm expressed by the teachers interviewed for the ethos of the school and it is encouraging that the teachers are not short of ideas on how to foster a lived school ethos. Key findings and recommendations will be discussed in the next chapter.



## **5. Findings and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Research Aims and Relevance**

This study set out to examine teachers' perspectives of fostering a lived ethos in a voluntary Catholic secondary school, and it has identified areas of strength in ethos and areas for development of fostering a lived ethos in the school. The study sought to identify good practice amongst teachers in living out a school ethos and the difficulties which they face in promoting a traditional, Catholic school ethos in today's modern world. This subject is of great importance in an increasingly secular world. From a traditionally religious dominated landscape of schooling, Ireland has moved to provide a wider breadth of options for parents and students regarding trusteeship. Catholic schools now have to find ways to promote their ethos whilst still respecting and welcoming a more diverse body of students. Teachers are living through this experience every day, and so, their perceptions and opinions are essential when formulating ideas on how to foster a lived school ethos for our times.

### **5.2 Findings and Recommendations of the Study**

Seven teachers from one voluntary secondary school in Ireland were interviewed about their perceptions of a lived school ethos. The analysis of these interviews is presented in chapter four. This chapter allows us the opportunity to benefit from these findings and develop insight and recommendations which may give guidance to schools and allow them to also benefit from this research.

#### **5.2.1 Contrast in findings.**

There was a marked contrast between teachers' visions of what is working in the school to foster a lived ethos and the work which teachers believe needs to be done to develop and foster a relevant lived ethos. The teachers interviewed each commended some of the work

which is going on in the school, however, the overall sense was that a clearly understood or united effort from the whole school body was lacking. Examples showed many day-to-day ethos actions promoting the holistic side of students' education; however, participants were concerned that these actions were not supported by the whole school body. Teachers in the study school observe some examples of promoting a lived school ethos, nevertheless, there must be a unified effort by the many, not the few, in order for this ethos to develop, adapt and become more relevant.

### **5.2.2 Reluctance to engage with Catholic ethos.**

Three main findings were observed around a reluctance to engage with Catholic ethos:

- There is confusion and ignorance of Catholic teaching, anthropology and theology, and many assumptions are made about the perceived lack of provision for inclusivity and welcoming of diverse student bodies. For teachers and other school members to engage with the Catholic ethos of a school they must first be comfortable with the ethos themselves. Guidance around the modern education guidelines along with traditional Church teachings will help to inform ignorance and reassure confusion around inclusion in Catholic schools. Ideally, through this process, all school leaders, teachers and students will feel more confident to engage with Catholic ethos, whether believers or non-believers, once they are appropriately informed. Bridging this gap of knowledge could lead to an increased appreciation of the relevance of Catholic ethos to today's world and allay any concerns or discomfort school members may have.
- Assumptions can be made that Catholic schools are continuing the traditional attitudes, thinking and experience of an earlier understanding of Irish Catholic education and

there is a reluctance to accept that Catholic education has indeed moved with the times and progressed. These assumptions are persuasive and powerful and can come from all school members. Incorrect assumptions hold back members of the school body from fully engaging with ethos and embracing the school's core values. Assumptions are often made around issues of inclusion in schools. All school stakeholders should be made aware of the clear guidance for inclusion in education from the Catholic Church, set out in documents such as *Instrumentum Laboris* and other proceedings from the Catholic Congregation for Education. Again, students, parents and staff should be educated in order to raise awareness of the relevance of Catholic teaching to their lives and to challenge these assumptions.

- It appears that there is reluctance to engage with the Catholic faith and values dimension of ethos which may hold back some teachers from fully coming on board with the school ethos. Teachers are sometimes of the opinion that Catholic ethos is 'someone else's job' amongst the staff in the school under study. At times there is an unwillingness to engage openly with the Catholic values of the school ethos, which holds back ethos development from being truly meaningful and transformative. This can also be seen amongst students, who feel that the ethos doesn't apply to them, as they do not fit the stereotypical traditional Irish student. Dialogue should be encouraged, in order to work through a misunderstanding of or resistance to the ethos. Dialogue between believers and non-believers, along with people who are comfortable with the Catholic ethos and those who are not, is essential in order to progress and build a whole-school ethos.

### 5.2.3 Fostering the Catholic side of school ethos

There were two key findings on the difficulties which arise when efforts are made to promote and develop the Catholic elements of the school ethos:

- It was highlighted that there is a need for the whole school to look at the aspects of the Catholic school ethos which they can relate to, understand and support. While this is a good starting point, it is important that the focus of the school ethos should not be lost entirely, and a more humanist than Catholic ethos emerge instead. It was also suggested that some students may favour this more humanist approach to ethos. This can happen because there is a lack of knowledge of the foundations of Catholic ethos and, as mentioned above, of current Catholic Church education guidelines. Veering towards a humanist ethos in an effort to please all school members runs the risk of diluting the core values of the school and losing the richness of the Catholic ethos upon which it was founded. As discussed previously, education and dialogue could be used to explain the relevance of a Catholic ethos to today's world.
- The difficulty to move beyond these tensions surrounding Catholic ethos poses a challenge for schools. This tension stems from a lack of knowledge and often leads to passive engagement with ethos in schools. Teachers report a physical presence of ethos (statues, posters, etc.) and active engagement from some school members; however, a whole school lived ethos cannot be achieved with active engagement from a minority and passive engagement from the majority. Although there were no reports of teachers going against the school ethos openly, one teacher who felt uncomfortable with their perceived limitations of a Catholic ethos has since left the school, suggesting a deep-running discomfort and lack of confidence surrounding teaching within the Catholic

ethos. It is essential to note that when the teachers was interviewed, they highlighted that these limitations were based on assumptions and had never actually been communicated to the teacher by the school leadership. This causes concern and suggests a need for research into the unease and discomfort felt by some teachers who are teaching in Catholic schools but may not feel supported, educated or prepared to do so.

#### **5.2.4 Reinvention or reimagining?**

It is evident in the research that school ethos requires work and development in order for all school members to realise its relevance to schools today. The following findings elaborate on this:

- Some of the teachers interviewed used language such as “reinventing” ethos and “adapting” ethos, in order to make the school ethos more meaningful for today’s pupils. Although the teachers identified this need for change to create a contemporary ethos in the school, I would propose that the more appropriate language to use would be rediscovering and reimagining. The use of words associated with complete change suggest that there is something wrong with the original ethos of the school. The issues expressed in the interviews reflect how the ethos was understood and expressed. Therefore, they do not call for explicit change in the core values of the school. Indeed, this desire for change could take away from the foundation values of the school, to its detriment. A watered-down version of a traditional Catholic ethos is not necessary for the ethos to survive in modern times. Instead, I would suggest a process of ethos education and development. All members of the school should have the opportunity to

become aware of the wealth of values in a Catholic ethos, what they mean, the impact they have on teaching, relationships and the care we show our students.

- Having a “buffet” system of picking and choosing parts of the ethos to bring along with the progression of the school runs the risk of undermining the essential identity of the school and the core values which are the mission of the school founders. Instead, a development of a deeper understanding of ethos is called for. Staff need support in promoting the ethos to students and confidence in applying and living the ethos in the classroom. For this reason, I would propose that the education around ethos needs to begin with staff insight and education. Staff should be afforded the opportunity to discuss the school ethos and reach a greater understanding of the core values of the school and how they are relevant today. It is essential that time is allowed for this staff development in order to begin to reimagine the school ethos for the staff and students of today. When staff feel supported and confident in the school ethos, they can move to foster a lived ethos amongst the students. Students too deserve this opportunity to discuss the ethos and discover the relevance of the core values to their world.
- There are some positive examples of student education already happening in the school of the study. Orla briefly outlines her plans to create a new student charter for the school ethos, which are already underway. She is hoping to simplify the meaning of the prescribed school ethos with “four or five words” which come from the students and summarise the essence of ethos. This student involvement not only educates the students involved but also gives them a sense of ownership of their school ethos. The interviewees were supportive of the establishment of a student ethos leadership group. This should allow for active student engagement with the school ethos through the

development of peer learning. It could also foster a sense of welcoming amongst the students. When the students become more knowledgeable about all aspects of their school ethos and see their peers engaging with it day to day, a lived ethos can begin to flourish and develop. It is essential that this group would have clear goals and roles outlined at its inception. It is important to note that when this group is set up, the work of ethos promotion should not be left as purely their responsibility. A lived school ethos is a shared responsibility and will require continuous engagement, dialogue and support from all stakeholders in the school.

### **5.2.5 Beginning with the teachers**

At the outset of this research, I envisaged that the need for development in fostering a lived ethos in the school would involve strategies to educate and involve students. However, throughout the research, it became clear that in order to build a lived ethos amongst the students, we must first begin with staff engagement, education and ethos development. It is evident to me that teachers must be placed at the forefront of ethos development in order to begin to build a whole school approach to ethos. Discomfort and ignorance hold back some teachers from engagement with school ethos, in particular with the Catholic values of the school. If teachers are not fully on board with the ethos, it is unreasonable to expect the student body to be fully involved in a lived ethos.

### **5.2.6 Whole school approach**

Although the importance of teachers cannot be understated in ethos development, this research highlights that a whole school approach to ethos is essential in order to foster a lived school ethos. All school members play an important role in ethos and careful consideration should be given in schools on how to engage all in dialogue and development. Students will

struggle to live a school ethos without the support of teachers and likewise teachers will struggle without the support of management. However, there would not be a lived ethos without the active engagement of students. The work which teachers complete on reimagining and rediscovering core values can be mirrored in the work of the students on ethos development. Nobody should be left behind, and co-operation should be encouraged in order to embrace all religions, backgrounds and cultures, across both staff and students. Ethos development and promotion is a shared mission across the whole school.

### **5.2.7 Concluding statement following the research findings**

Many issues have been raised in the analysis of the research, and I would love to have the time and space to delve into these findings in more detail and create a more comprehensive list of recommendations. Although concerned with interviewing teachers, the study has created a broader picture of the work which could be done in schools, amongst both staff and students, in order to foster a relevant lived Catholic ethos. The limitations of the study will be acknowledged in the next section, followed by a brief outline of recommendations for further research in this area.

### **5.3 Limitations**

This study offered an analysis of teachers' perceptions of fostering a lived school ethos in one voluntary Catholic secondary school in Ireland. This is a small-scale research study, which takes a sample of seven teachers from one school. The findings are therefore limited to the perceptions of a low number of teachers in only one school. However, as the participants were chosen to represent a wide body of teachers (as discussed in chapter three), these findings can be seen to represent the general sentiments of teachers in the school. The study was confined to only one school, however, as the school is a traditional, voluntary Catholic



secondary school, it can be seen to be a similar setting to the majority of secondary schools in Ireland. It is recommended that more wide-scale research be carried out to obtain a true representation of all teachers in this area of schooling in Ireland.

#### **5.4 Recommendations for further research**

It is recommended that this study be repeated across a broad spectrum of secondary schools in order to come to a more comprehensive understanding about teachers' perceptions of lived school ethos in Ireland. When developing a modern school ethos, it is clear that there are certain 'non-negotiables' which must be carried through from the prescribed school ethos. In the study school, these would focus on the holistic nature of education in the school and the encouragement of academic excellence, as well as a clear sense of identity as a Catholic school and as a school under the patronage of a particular religious order. In a wider sense, it would be interesting to investigate if there is a common set of ethos 'non-negotiables' which schools can focus on when developing their ethos in to suit the current climate.

The student ethos leadership group is widely supported by the teachers interviewed. It would be of benefit to trial this group and investigate its effectiveness, with the aim of creating a blueprint for other schools to follow in student ethos leadership. With this student engagement, it will be important to "have tools for assessing it" (Parsons et al, 2014, p.24). Indeed, research could be carried out to investigate how to assess ethos engagement in schools, with the goal of helping schools and guiding them in their journey to foster a lived ethos.

The topic of fostering a lived, modern, Catholic school ethos in the current climate can be a contentious and challenging subject. Examining teachers' perceptions of a lived ethos could be the starting point to forming a wider view of Catholic ethos in Ireland. It is evident that if schools do not engage with this topic, or do not receive support, there is a danger of a

humanist ethos taking precedence over a Catholic ethos. All stakeholders in schools need to be involved in this process and should be involved in any research in this area.

### **5.5 Conclusion**

When the ethos of a school is not fostered, lived out and embraced as a fluid concept which adapts to changing times and people, the ethos becomes an archaic notion which applied to the foundation of the school but has become out-of-touch and irrelevant to the students and staff of today. Ethos calls us to constantly engage with the mission and the heart of the school and at the core of everything we do as educators are our students. Students change from year to year and from age to age, as do teachers, and so it is vital to constantly review, revise and develop the school ethos so that it engages our students and helps them to flourish while they are in our care. The fluid nature of ethos cannot be understated, and ethos must be prioritised for development in schools, or they run the risk of losing it altogether. It is important that schools find ways to show that the Catholic school ethos is relevant, inclusive and welcoming, and that it is possible to foster students' Catholic faith whilst still welcoming all students and contributing to the development of other faiths. A process of enlightenment is preferable over reinvention of ethos. Education on ethos for all school members should form a key part of this process and a whole school approach is essential. Schools need support and clear guidance on how to bring their ethos through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The misinformation and preconceptions of ethos must be challenged in schools and a process of schoolwide ethos engagement begun, in order to rediscover and foster a lived school ethos and a clear sense of identity within Catholic schools.

## References

- Allder, M. (1993) The Meaning of ‘School Ethos’. *Westminster Studies in Education*, 16(1) 59-69. DOI: 10.1080/0140672930160109
- Archard, N. (2012) Student leadership development in Australian and New Zealand secondary girls’ schools: a staff perspective. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 15(1), 23-47, DOI: 10.1080/13603124.2011.605472
- Atkins, L., & Wallace, S. (2012) *Research Methods in Education: Qualitative research in education*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Axelson, R. D. & Flick, A. (2010). Defining Student Engagement. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 43(1), 38–43. doi:10.1080/00091383.2011.533096
- Baron, P. & Corbin, L. (2012) Student engagement: rhetoric and reality, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(6), 759-772. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2012.655711
- Barr, I. (2000) Planning for Ethos. In Furlong, C & Monaghan, L. (Eds.), *School Culture & Ethos: Cracking the Code* (p. 129 - 140). Dublin: Marino Institute of Education
- Blaikie, N. (2004) Interpretivism. In Lewis-Beck, M.S., Bryman, A., & Futing Liao, T. (Eds), *Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods*, 509-510. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Boldt, S. (2000) A Vantage Point of Values – Findings from the School Culture and Etgos Survey Questionnaires. In C. Furlong & L. Monaghan (Eds.), *School Culture & Ethos: Cracking the Code* (p. 29-58). Dublin: Marino Institute of Education
- Braun, V., Clarke, V. & Weate, P. (2016). Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research. In B. Smith & A. C. Sparkes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise*, 191-205. London: Routledge.
- Breen, R.L. (2006) A Practical Guide to Focus-Group Research, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 30(3), 463-475. doi: 10.1080/03098260600927575
- British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, fourth edition, London. Retrieved from: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>
- Bron, J., Emerson, N. & Kákonyi, L. (2018) Diverse Student Voice Approaches Across Europe. *European Journal of Education*, 53(3), 310–324. doi:10.1111/ejed.12285
- Campbell, A., McNamara, O., & Gilroy, P. (2011) *Practitioner Research and Professional Development in Education*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Charles, E. and McHugh, D. (2000) ‘A whole school approach to culture and ethos’, in Furlong, C. and Monahan, L. (Eds), *School Culture and Ethos: Cracking the Code* (179-188). Dublin, Marino Institute of Education
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2018) *Research Methods in Education*. Abingdon: Routledge. Kindle Edition.

- Congregation for Catholic Education. (1997) *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the New Millennium*. Vatican City: Congregation for Catholic Education
- Congregation for Catholic Education. (2013) *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*, Vatican City: Congregation for Catholic Education
- Congregation for Catholic Education. (2014) *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion (Instrumentum Laboris)*, Vatican City: Congregation for Catholic Education
- Coolahan, J. (2000) School Ethos and Culture Within a Changing Education System. In C. Furlong & L. Monaghan (Eds.), *School Culture & Ethos: Cracking the Code* (p. 113-124). Dublin: Marino Institute of Education
- Covay, E., & Carbonaro, W. (2010). After the Bell. *Sociology of Education*, 83(1), 20–45. doi:10.1177/0038040709356565
- Cresswell, J.W. (2014) *Research design : qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches - 4th ed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- DeFur, S., & Korinek, L. (2010). Listening to Student Voices. *The Clearing House*, 83(1), 15-19. Retrieved July 28, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/20697888](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20697888)
- Denzin, N.K. (2001). *Interpretive Interactionism Second Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds) (2011). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Department of Education. (1995). *Charting our Education Future – White Paper on Education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Donnelly, C. (2000). In pursuit of school ethos. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 48(2), 134-154. doi: 10.1111/1467-8527.t01-1-00138
- Donnelly, C. (2004). Constructing the ethos of tolerance and respect in an integrated school: the role of teachers. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 263-278. doi: 10.1080/0141192042000195254
- Drumm, M. (2012). The Future of Catholic Education in a Pluralist Ireland. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 101(402), 186–192. Retrieved July 28, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/23333114](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23333114)
- Dunmoyer, R. (2008). Paradigm. In Given, L. M. (Ed) *The SAGE encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods*, 591-595. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Eisner, E. (1994) *Ethos and education perspectives. A series of papers on values and education*. Dundee: Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum.
- Elias, M.J. (2010) School Climate that Promotes Student Voice, *Principal Leadership*, 11(1), 22-27. Retrived August 2, 2020, from [http://files.nassp.org/igx\\_temp/PLSept10\\_elias.pdf](http://files.nassp.org/igx_temp/PLSept10_elias.pdf)

- Ellis, J., Small-McGinley, J. & De Fabrizio, L. (2001) Descriptions of Two Student Leadership Programs, *Counterpoints*, 12, 213-219. doi:10.2307/45178320
- Feldman, A. F., & Matjasko, J. L. (2005). The Role of School-Based Extracurricular Activities in Adolescent Development: A Comprehensive Review and Future Directions. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(2), 159–210. doi:10.3102/00346543075002159
- Fielding, M. (2012) Beyond Student Voice: Patterns of Partnership and the Demands of Deep Democracy, *Revista de Educación*, 359(3), 45-65. doi:10-4438/1988-592X-RE-2012-359-195
- Finn, J. D. & Voelkl, K. E. (1993). School Characteristics Related to Student Engagement. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 62(3), 249. doi:10.2307/2295464
- Freiburg, H.J. (1999). Introduction. In Freiburg, H.J. (ed) *School Climate: Measuring, Improving and Sustaining Healthy Learning Environments*. London: Falmer, 1-10.
- Frith, G. H., & Clark, R. (1984). Extracurricular Activities: Academic Incentives or Nonessential Functions? *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 57(7), 325–327. doi:10.1080/00098655.1984.10113879
- Frost, R. & Holden, G. (2008). Student Voice and Future Schools: Building Partnerships for Student Participation, *Improving Schools*, 11(1), 83-95. doi: 10.1177/1365480207086832
- Glenn, C.L. (1994). School Distinctiveness. *The Journal of Education*, 176(2), 73-103. doi:10.1177/002205749417600209
- Government of Ireland. (1998). *The Education Act 1998*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Graham, A. (2012) School Ethos: An Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis of Secondary School Students' Experiences. (Doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland). Retrieved from [https://digitool.abdn.ac.uk/webclient/StreamGate?folder\\_id=0&dvs=1595935266834~59](https://digitool.abdn.ac.uk/webclient/StreamGate?folder_id=0&dvs=1595935266834~59)
- Graham, A. (2012). Revisiting school ethos: the student voice. *School Leadership & Management*, 32(4), 341-354. doi:10.1080/13632434.2012.708330
- Greene, J.C. (1992). The Practitioner's Perspective. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 22(1), 39-45. doi:10.2307/1180093
- Griffin, M. (2019) Catholic Schools in Ireland Today – a Changing Sector in a Time of Change. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 108(429), 55-63. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.35939/studiesirishrev.108.429.0055>
- Gunuc, S., & Kuzu, A. (2014). Student engagement scale: development, reliability and validity. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 40(4), 587–610. doi:10.1080/02602938.2014.938019
- Hemming, P.J. (2011). The place of religion in public life: School ethos as a lens on society. *Sociology*, 45(6) 1061-1077. doi:10.1177/0038038511416148

- Hitchcock, G. and Hughes, D. (1989) *Research and the Teacher: A Qualitative Introduction to School-Based Research*. London; Routledge.
- Hogan, P. (1984). The question of ethos in schools. *The Furrow*, 35(11), 693-703. Retrieved July 28, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/27677961](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27677961)
- Hurworth, R. (2005). Interpretivism. In Mathison, S. (Ed), *Encyclopedia of evaluation*, 210. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Hyland, Á. (2000). School Culture and Ethos – The Republic of Ireland Experience. In C. Furlong & L. Monaghan (Eds.), *School Culture & Ethos: Cracking the Code* (p. 21-28). Dublin: Marino Institute of Education
- Im, M. H., Hughes, J. N., Cao, Q., & Kwok, O. (2016). Effects of Extracurricular Participation During Middle School on Academic Motivation and Achievement at Grade 9. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(5), 1343–1375. doi:10.3102/0002831216667479
- Kezar, A. (2007). Creating and sustaining a campus ethos encouraging student engagement. *About Campus*, January-February, 13-18. doi:10.1002/abc.190
- Kvale, S. (1996) *InterViews*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Leach, L. (2014). Enhancing student engagement in one institution. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 40(1), 23–47. doi:10.1080/0309877x.2013.869565
- Lightfoot, S. L. (1983). *The good high school: Portraits of character and culture*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lizzio, A., Dempster, N. & Neumann, R. (2011) Pathways to formal and informal student leadership: the influence of peer and teacher–student relationships and level of school identification on students’ motivations. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 14(1), 85-102. doi: 10.1080/13603124.2010.482674
- Lopez, S. J. (2011). The Highs and Lows of Student Engagement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 93(2), 72–73. doi:10.1177/003172171109300217
- Mager, U. and Nowak, P. (2012). Effects of student participation in decision making at school. A systematic review and synthesis of empirical research. *Educational Research Review*, 7, 38-61. doi:10.1016/j.edurev.2011.11.001
- Mathison, S. (2005). *Encyclopedia of evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- McCluskey, G., Brown, J., Munn, P., Lloyd, G., Hamilton, L., Sharp, S., & Macleod, G. (2012). “Take more time to actually listen”: students’ reflections on participation and negotiation in school. *British Educational Research Journal*, 1–15. doi:10.1080/01411926.2012.659720
- McGinn, M.K., (2008) Researcher-Participant Relationships. In Given, L. M. (Ed) *The SAGE encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods*, 768-771. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- McGuinness, S. (2000). Conference Insights – Issues for the Future. In C. Furlong & L. Monaghan (Eds.), *School Culture & Ethos: Cracking the Code* (p. 243 - 250). Dublin: Marino Institute of Education

- McLaughlin, T. (2005). The educative importance of ethos. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53(3), 306-325. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8527.2005.00297.x
- McVeigh, N. (2013) Catholic Education: an Internal Challenge. *The Furrow*, 64(5), 282-29. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24635622>
- Mitra, D. L. (2004). The Significance of Students: Can Increasing “Student Voice” in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development? *Teachers College Record*, 106(4), 651–688. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9620.2004.00354.x
- Mitra, D.L. & Gross, S.J. (2009) Increasing Student Voice in High School Reform: Building Partnerships, Improving Outcomes. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 37(4), 522-543. doi: 10.1177/1741143209334577
- Mullally, A. (2019) *Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students of Different Beliefs in Catholic Secondary Schools*. Dublin: Joint Managerial Board
- Murray, D. (2000) School Ethos – The Northern Ireland Experience. In C. Furlong & L. Monaghan (Eds.), *School Culture & Ethos: Cracking the Code* (p. 15-20). Dublin: Marino Institute of Education
- Newman, M. and Thomas, P. (2008). Student participation in school design: one school's approach to student engagement in the BSF process. *CoDesign International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts*, 4(4), 237-251. doi:10.1080/15710880802524938
- Paletta, A. & Fiorin, I. (2016) The challenges of Catholic education: evidence from the responses to the Instrumentum Laboris ‘Educating today and tomorrow’, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 8 (2), 136-154, doi:10.1080/19422539.2016.1206397
- Paley, J. (2008) Positivism. In Given, L. M. (Ed) *The SAGE encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods*, 647-650. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Parsons, S. A., Nuland, L. R., & Parsons, A. W. (2014). The ABCs of Student Engagement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95(8), 23–27. doi:10.1177/003172171409500806
- Pike, M. (2010) Transaction and transformation at Trinity: private sponsorship, core values and Christian ethos at England’s most improved academy. *Oxford Review of Education*, 36 (6), 749-765. doi:10.1080/03054985.2010.510625
- Pring, R. (2000). School Culture and Ethos: Towards an Understanding. In C. Furlong & L. Monaghan (Eds.), *School Culture & Ethos: Cracking the Code* (p. 1-14). Dublin: Marino Institute of Education
- Rubin, H. J. & Rubin, I. S. (2005). Listening, hearing, and sharing social experiences. In Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. *Qualitative interviewing (2nd ed.): The art of hearing data*, 1-18. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Schwandt, T.A. (1998). Constructivist, Interpretivist Approaches to Human Inquiry. In Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. (Eds.), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, 221-259. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc

- Squire, C., Andrews, M. & Tamboukou, M. (2008). Introduction: what is narrative research?. In Andrews, M., Squire, C., & Tamboukou, M. *Doing narrative research*, 1-21. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Voelkl, K. E. (1995). School Warmth, Student Participation, and Achievement. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 63(2) 127-139. doi:10.1080/00220973.1995.9943817
- Watts, J.H. (2008) In Given, L. M. (Ed) *The SAGE encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods*, 441-442. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Williams, K. (2000) Understanding Ethos – A Philosophical and Literary Exploration. In C. Furlong & L. Monaghan (Eds.), *School Culture & Ethos: Cracking the Code* (p. 73-82). Dublin: Marino Institute of Education
- Williams, W. W., & Polinsky, A. S. (1959). Student Leadership Program at River Dell Regional Schools. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 33(9), 547–549. doi:10.1080/00098655.1959.11476627
- Woods, M. (2000). School Culture and Ethos – The Way Forward. In C. Furlong & L. Monaghan (Eds.), *School Culture & Ethos: Cracking the Code* (p. 125-128). Dublin: Marino Institute of Education
- Zeldin, S., Gauley, J. S., Barringer, A., & Chapa, B. (2018). How High Schools Become Empowering Communities: A Mixed-Method Explanatory Inquiry into Youth-Adult Partnership and School Engagement. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 61(3-4), 358–371. doi:10.1002/ajcp.12231



## Appendices

### Appendix A: Plain Language Letter

May 2020

Dear Teacher,

I am currently undertaking a Masters Degree in Leadership in Christian Education. I am writing to ask for your help with a research study that investigates teachers' perceptions of a lived ethos in a Catholic post-primary school. The research project involves learning more about how teachers perceive the ethos of the school, how they promote it themselves, and how they believe the ethos should be 'lived out' in the school. I hope that the findings of the study will inform teachers and school leaders about fostering a lived school ethos.

The study comprises a number of one-to-one interviews with teachers in a Catholic post-primary school. The interviews will be conducted by myself, as researcher. Due to the current global pandemic of Covid-19 and as a result of current national restrictions, the interviews will take place using the Zoom video-calling facility. The interview would last for between 40 and 60 minutes and it would be recorded using the Zoom application. During the interview, I ask you to respond to questions about your understanding of the school ethos and your perceptions of how the ethos is fostered in the school. I will also ask about your thoughts on how the ethos could be fostered in the school. You are under no obligation to answer all questions in the interview. If you come to a question you do not wish to answer, simply ask me to move to the next question. Following the conclusion of the meeting, the recording will be transcribed, and the transcription will be assigned a pseudonym.

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 and of a social or reputational nature. The recording of your interview will be kept on an encrypted USB device without your name attached to it. The recording will be retained only for the purposes of the current study. Once the study is completed, the recording will be destroyed on the basis of the schedule outlined in the Institute's data retention schedule. If you would like more information on how long the data will be retained for, please don't hesitate to contact me directly. 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.

If you agree to participate please contact me via email. If you are willing to participate, it would help me greatly to know this as soon as possible so that your participation can begin as soon as possible.

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this research. Your participation in this project is sincerely appreciated. Should you have questions regarding your participation, please contact .You may also contact my advisor for the project, Dr Denis Robinson.

*This study has been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino ethics in research committee. Should you have any questions or concerns about the ethical approval or conduct of this study, please contact [MERC@mie.ie](mailto:MERC@mie.ie)*

Yours faithfully,



Clodagh Lennon

***You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.***

## Appendix B: Consent Form

**Statement of Consent:**

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

Do you consent to participate in the study by taking part in the interview?      Yes      No

Do you consent to have the interview recorded?      Yes      No

Do you consent for the transcription of your interview to be used as a basis for the findings of this research? (Under a pseudonym)      Yes      No

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_

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

## Appendix C: Schedule of Interview Questions

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. Could you describe the school ethos in your own words?
3. What role do teachers play in promoting and sharing the school ethos in the classroom? Are there any particular actions you take to promote the ethos of the school in your class?
4. Do you think through our teaching and school community we help our students to better understand and express the school ethos? If yes, how?
5. Do you feel that the school ethos provides good role models and positive values for all students, including those of different faiths and none?
6. Is the school ethos relevant in today's modern world? (If teaching for a number of years, have you seen any change/development in the school ethos over this time?)
7. Do you believe the school ethos promotes the holistic development of each student, does it make a contribution to academic achievement, good dialogue, and inclusivity? Do you believe that the school ethos is inclusive of all students, including those of different faiths and none?
8. Have you seen the school ethos in action in extracurricular groups? If yes, how was the school ethos manifested? Did you do anything in particular to foster the school ethos through the group?
9. Is there a place in the school for student leadership and do you believe they should have the opportunity to voice their opinions? – Why do you believe this is important to facilitate?
10. Do you see any value in having a specific student ethos group to help foster the lived ethos of the school? Would you be open to a student led ethos promotion group? What role would you see them play in the school community?
11. Have you any other comment, as a teacher, to make about your experience of the school ethos

## Appendix D: Information about Participants

**Demographic Analysis – Interview Participants**

To find participants for the study I approached staff members based on finding a wide sample covering different subjects, length of time teaching, length of time teaching in St Thérèse's College. Nine teachers were approached and seven were willing to participate in the study, which was deemed an appropriate sample. An overview of the demographics from the focus group are represented here:

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Length of Service</b> | <b>Post of responsibility</b> |
|--------------------|---------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Amy                | Female        | 3 years                  | No                            |
| Ryan               | Male          | 8 years                  | No                            |
| Mary               | Female        | 20 years                 | Yes                           |
| Karina             | Female        | 5 years                  | No                            |
| Orla               | Female        | 32 years                 | Yes                           |
| Aoife              | Female        | 10 years                 | No                            |
| Nik                | Male          | 4 years                  | No                            |

**Number of participants.**

There were seven participants who were willing to be interviewed for the study.

**Gender.**

There were two male participants and five female participants. The two teachers who were approached to take part but declined are male.

**Posts of responsibility.**

There were two participants who held a Post of Responsibility at the time of the interviews.

No participants were members of senior management in the school.